

# MEDIA, SOCIETY, WORLD

SOCIAL THEORY AND DIGITAL MEDIA PRACTICE



NICK COULDY

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# **Media, Society, World**

Social Theory and  
Digital Media Practice

Nick Couldry

polity

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Figure 1.1 What kind of media theory?

Box 2.1 Twitter and Practice Theory

Box 3.1 *The Apprentice*, UK

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The axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but around the fixed point of our need.

*Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 1978 [1953]: 4*



# Preface

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This book is about media's contribution to social organization and to our sense of living in a world. The book's main title needs unpacking. *Society* remains the usual word for the containers of social organization within which we live, even though the boundaries of national societies no longer contain all the processes that make up our sense of living 'together' and even though some important groups (stateless people, those who migrate regularly across state boundaries to earn enough to eat) do not live simply in one 'society'. *World* refers to the environments which make sense to us as spaces for living, up to and including the scale of the planet. *Media* as a term is intended to be narrower than 'communication', but much wider than the media that have made up traditional media (newspaper, radio, television, film). By 'media', I mean to cover all institutionalized structures, forms, formats and interfaces for disseminating symbolic content. When virtually all symbolic content is *digital* and many platforms carry both mass produced content and interpersonal communication, the old research divide between 'mass media' and general 'communication' becomes blurred, but I retain the word 'media' to signal that it is the *institutionalized* forms of, and platforms for, producing, disseminating and receiving content that are this book's primary focus. Media in this sense are inescapably entangled with power relations.

In my subtitle, I signal two wrong turns in understanding the relations between media, society and world that I wish to avoid. As many writers argue,<sup>1</sup> media commentary about media is a poor guide to understanding what is going on with media, and for a number of reasons. Mass media production is directly influenced by marketing practice, particularly the push of those who want to promote new products, interfaces and platforms and claim some hold on 'the future of media'. Media commentators on media (and their sources) are often part of a technophilic elite, and so their interpretations of what's happening with media are tied up with their own strategies of distinction. Media institutions' underlying interests in sustaining their position as a 'central' social infrastructure (as the place we go to find out 'what's going on') influence the accounts that media outlets give of the difference media make to social life. To avoid the trap of following media hype, research must remain close to what people – all people, not just a technophilic elite – are doing with media. You will not therefore find much attention given in this book to early adopters: I am more interested in habits of media use across wider populations. It is only in everyday media *practice* and everyday *assumptions* about how to get things done through media, where to get information and images from, what can be circulated and how, that we get a grip on media's relations to society and world. Some of those assumptions have been changing rapidly in the past fifteen years or so.

Talking about media's relations to 'society' and 'world' means, whether explicitly or not, taking a view on what 'there is' in the social world, that is, adopting a social ontology: what types of things, relations and processes *are* there in the spaces we call 'social'? At some level, this involves drawing on *social theory*. But here we must avoid a more subtle trap: drawing on a version of social theory that constrains how we understand what is going on with media.

Three types of problem have contributed to this. First, until at least the early 1990s, most sociology and social theory neglected to say anything about media. This only began to be reversed with Anthony Giddens's work on modernity, John Thompson's work on media and modernity and Manuel Castells's work on the rise of 'the network society', which followed on, although not directly, from important work on the social adaptation and domestication of communications and other technology in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> The same blind spot,<sup>3</sup> incidentally, has characterized political theory and taken even longer to be noticed. Second, these crucial interventions in understanding how media alter the possibilities

social organization did not inspire a broader set of investigations, for example about how media change sociology's other terms of reference (class, group formation and so on). As a result, there is, as yet, no comprehensive account of how media change social ontology, and this book cannot fill that huge gap. Third, some sociologists have started to make media their priority, and particularly the technological base of media, but within a version of social theory that is unhelpful for understanding media and media's role in social life. Such work is influenced sometimes by a turn towards 'non-representational theory', or more broadly towards a rejection of any notion of social order, preferring instead an exclusive language of 'affect', 'intensities' and even 'pure immanence'. Leaving aside broader philosophical objections,<sup>4</sup> such approaches are analytically unhelpful in grasping how media represent the world, and, in particular, how they represent the social and its processes of ordering, since representing the social is one of the main things media institutions do. They are also politically unhelpful because they seem to turn their back on media's role in the production of social knowledge and media's failures to represent the increasingly unequal worlds in which we live.

In thinking about media, I will draw on, and develop, a version of social theory that takes seriously the role that representations, power over representations and how we interact with technologies and representation, play in the possibility of something like 'social order'. Social order is not a given natural state; it is constructed practically and represented symbolically, and media representations of the 'order' of social life help enact and perform that order. At the level of social theory, the book starts out in chapters 1 and 2 with *ontology* (what there is in the social and media world). I move on in chapters 3 and 4 to *divisions and categorizations* (how media divide up the social world, and also claim to bring it together). In chapters 5 and 6, I turn to *accumulation* – the gathering of social resources for building or opposing power – and the systemic complexities that arise from accumulation and competition. Chapters 7 and 8 move on to questions of *evaluation*: the needs that shape how individual groups and cultures select from the infinite variety of media and our broader frameworks for assessing whether media contribute to a life together that we can value and that is just. What binds together these themes is a concern to understand better media's contribution to our possibilities for knowledge, agency and ethics.

Three other points about this book's approach to media: first, it is not media-centric. I do not assume media are the most important things in people's lives; a problem with media studies is that it often seems to assume this. Instead, my approach is grounded in the analysis of everyday action and habit. The social grounding of media analysis is particularly important when the forms and technological basis of media outputs are changing fast. From this broader starting point, difficult questions arise: can there be a separate *media sociology* or *media studies*? Does the exponential growth of media and communication networks across borders render a sociology focused on national *societies* redundant? Has the nature of *power* itself been fundamentally transformed by the new processes? How are media changing the *phenomenology* and *ethics* of everyday life? Second, my approach is focused primarily not on the production of media outputs, interfaces and platforms but on what people do with them once produced. This book is therefore intended to *complement* the political economy research which has transformed our understanding of how media get made and circulated and of the economic forces that shape such production and circulation.<sup>5</sup> This is because my own work comes originally out of audience research. However, a simple boundary between researching media production or researching consumption is now unsustainable: political economy must consider the production work of consumers or audiences, while this book strays at times into considering logics of production. Some division of labour between 'political economy' and 'audience' research remains

necessary, given the sheer size of each domain. Third, the book is intended as a toolkit for thinking about everyday practice in relation to digital media through the lens of social theory. While chapters 1 and 2 lay some foundations (an overall perspective on current transformations in media and on the varieties of practice), readers may choose their own path through the remaining chapters, depending on the particular questions in which they are most interested.

In pursuing the many paths that led to this book, I owe a deep debt to two key mentors: David Morley, my MA and PhD supervisor, who saw some research potential in a man in his thirties on media masters; and the late Roger Silverstone, an examiner of my PhD thesis and, at the London School of Economics, the founder of Media@LSE and then the new Department of Media and Communications, exciting developments of which I was proud to be part.

Thanks to students on the option course on 'Media Rituals' that I taught at LSE between 2002 and 2005 and at Goldsmiths since 2006. Their insights and scepticism kept me on track, even as the 'common sense' about media changed hugely during the 2000s. Various colleagues and friends, in person or through their writing, have been important interlocutors as I developed these ideas: Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rod Benson, Göran Bolin, Richard Butsch, Jessica Clark, Paul Frosh, Jeremy Gilbert, Jonathan Gray, Melissa Gregg, James Hay, Dave Hesmondhalgh, Marwan Kraidy, Sonia Livingstone, Mirca Madianou, Robin Mansell, Divya McMillin, Toby Miller, Laurie Ouellette, Jack Qiu, Paddy Scannell, Johanna Sumiala, Joe Turow, Bruce Williams and Liesbet van Zoonen. Special thanks to Andreas Hepp, James Curran and Polity's anonymous reviewers for their comments on draft chapters. Thanks also to Andreas Hepp, Matt Hills, Stewart Hoover, Sebastian Kubitschko, Mia Løvheim, Scott Rodgers, Jeffrey Wimmer and my MA students, Harris MacLeod, Sujin Oh and Yingxi Ziang, for suggesting useful references.

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This book has gestated for years but actually been written in the midst of an extremely busy time. Only one person knows how difficult this has been, my wife Louise Edwards. Above all, I want to thank Louise for her love, support and belief throughout, and long before, this book's work. For her only the old Latin tag will do. *Sine qua non*: without whom, not.

Nick Could

London, September 2011

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, from various perspectives, Livingstone (1999: 61), Caldwell (2000: 15), Herring (2004),

Hijazi-Omari and Ribak (2008).

[2](#) Giddens (1990), Thompson (1995), Castells (1996), Silverstone (1994). More recently, see Beck (2000a: 12), Hardt and Negri (2000: 347–8), Urry (2000: 183).

[3](#) Jensen (2010: 105).

[4](#) I deal with aspects of this elsewhere: Couldry (2010: ch. 5).

[5](#) Important recent work includes: Bagdikian (2004), Curran and Seaton (2007), Curran, Fenton and Freedman (forthcoming), Hesmondhalgh (2007), Kraidy and Khalil (2009), Mayer (2011), McChesney (2008), Mosco (2009), Schiller (2007), Chakravarty and Zhao (2008).

## ***Introduction: Digital Media and Social Theory***

Media suffuse our sense – our various senses – of living in a world: a social world, an imaginative world, the world of global politics and confrontation. Until the end of the fifteenth century, wrote historian Fernand Braudel, the life of mankind was divided into ‘different planets’, each occupying regions of the earth’s surface, but out of effective contact with each other.<sup>1</sup> Many factors (economic, political, military) and many processes (trade, transport, measurement) contributed to the making of the world we take for granted today, but it is media that instal that world as ‘fact’ into everyday routines, and in ever-changing ways. News of US President Lincoln’s assassination took twelve days to cross the Atlantic in 1865,<sup>2</sup> but in early 2011, world audiences could spend their lunch break following a live political crisis in Arab states fuelled, in part, by transnational TV coverage and online social networks.

Half a century ago, Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton asked what were ‘the effects of the existence of media in our society’.<sup>3</sup> They had in mind a national society, and nation-states remain of crucial importance to many questions, from control over the movement of people to legal capacity and the regulation of telecommunications. But ‘society’ can no longer be confined within national boundaries. Indeed, the concept of ‘society’ – the ‘whole’ of which, as social beings, we regard ourselves as part – has in recent years been rethought: societies are no longer, as Anthony Giddens put it, ‘wholes’, but levels of relative ‘systemness’ which emerge against the background of many other flows and relationships that cross or ignore national borders.<sup>4</sup> Media’s social consequences must therefore be examined in relation to both society *and* world.

This book uses social theory to think about everyday experiences of media in the early twenty-first century. Such experience is inevitably marked by big media whose history has been so important to modernity’s shared worlds, but it is not limited to them; indeed, the increasing interface between person-to-person media and what formerly were called ‘mass’ media is possibly the most radical change now under way. Behind this huge change lies an even bigger transformation of human action. If *all* media are ‘spaces of action’ that ‘attempt ... to connect what is separated’ (Siegfried Zielinski) then the internet extends this feature. The internet’s global connectivity creates a sense of the world as, for the first time in history, ‘a single social and cultural setting’.<sup>5</sup>

Media, as a term, is ambiguous. ‘Media’ refers to institutions and infrastructures that make and distribute particular contents in forms that are more or less fixed and carry their context with them, but ‘media’ are also those contents themselves. Either way, the term links fundamentally to the institutional dimensions of communication, whether as infrastructure or content, production and circulation.<sup>6</sup> Digital media comprise merely the latest phase of media’s contribution to modernity, but the most complex of all, a complexity illustrated by the nature of the internet as a network of networks that connects all types of communication from one-to-one to many-to-many into a wider ‘space’ of communication.<sup>7</sup> Media have become flexible and interconnected enough to make our only starting point the ‘media environment’, not specific media considered in isolation.<sup>8</sup>

The internet is the institutionally sustained space of interaction and information storage developed since the early 1960s. The internet only became an everyday phenomenon through the World Wide Web protocols that link hypertext documents into a working system that were conceived first by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989, launched in 1991, but only began to enter everyday use in 1993–4. The internet's fundamental property is an end-to-end architecture neatly summarized by Clay Shirky: 'the internet is just a set of agreements about how to move data between two points,'<sup>9</sup> that is, any two points in *information* space. With the advent of mobile internet access, those points can be accessible by social actors anywhere in *physical* space. The internet's consequences for social theory are therefore radical. Online connection changes the space of social action, since it is interactive, draws on reports of interactions elsewhere and puts them to use in still further interactions. In this way, the internet creates an effectively infinite *reserve* for human action whose existence changes the possibilities of social organization in space everywhere.<sup>10</sup> Action at any site can link prospectively to actions elsewhere, drawing, in turn, on actions committed anywhere else; and all those connections are open to commentary and new connections from other points in space. As US religious scholar David Morgan notes, the photos of torture by US army personnel in Abu Ghraib prison in 2004 were one of the most extraordinary recent examples of the expanded social circulation that digital media make possible.<sup>11</sup> Performances and perceptions of the social acquire a new *elasticity*, even if the consequences that flow from this are highly conditioned still by local contexts and resources. Media today are a key part of how agents 'grasp ... environment as reality'.<sup>12</sup>

Canadian communication theorist Harold Innis once distinguished between 'space-biased' and 'time-biased' media.<sup>13</sup> The internet is certainly space-biased because it changes communication movement across space not just by extension, but in terms of complexity: the folding of internet information-space into everyday action-space requires a different understanding of what can be done where and by whom. If so, then Innis's contrasting notion of 'time-biased media' (the inscription, the papyrus) recedes into inaccessibility in a world where both space and time are transformed by the reserve of the internet.

## Metaphors of media change

Media's importance for society and world cannot be grasped as linear development.<sup>14</sup> When media are embedded in wider cultural and social processes, tensions and contradictions result. Marcel Proust, in his great novel *In Search of Lost Time*, describes his narrator's first telephone call but folds into that description the memory of many later calls:

as soon as our call has rung out ... a tiny sound, an abstract sound – the sound of distance overcome – and the voice of the dear one speaks to us ... But how far away it is! How often I have been unable to listen without anguish, as though ... I felt more clearly the illusoriness in the appearance of the most tender proximity, and at what distance we may be from the persons we love at that moment it seems that we have only to stretch out our hands to seize and hold them. A real presence, perhaps, that voice that seemed so near – in actual separation!<sup>15</sup>

In this account of private pain enacted through a communication technology, Proust captures an ambiguity inherent to media's role in everyday life – 'a real presence ... in actual separation!' – even if, now the telephone has been transformed almost beyond recognition, we no longer feel that tension the way Proust did.<sup>16</sup> Raymond Williams also had a sense of modern media's ambiguities: 'much of

the content of modern communications ... is a form of unevenly shared consciousness of persistent external events. It is what appears to happen, in these powerfully transmitted and mediated ways, in a world with which we have no other perceptible connections but which we feel is at once central and marginal to our lives.'<sup>17</sup>

There is no way back to a world before the transformations that Proust and Williams discuss: those transformations are built into our assumptions about what, and how, the world is. And yet the result of what we now call 'traditional' (mid-twentieth century) media remained puzzling long after they had become the background of daily life. One way of reading Don DeLillo's 1999 epic novel *Underworld* is as a series of meditations on television and radio's role in sustaining, and troubling, the myth of American society.<sup>18</sup>

Many further transformations have occurred since DeLillo wrote. First of all, the sheer proliferation of television and other images themselves: 'life experience has become an experience in the presence of media'. Then, the rise of continuous mobile communication on a second-to-second basis, the overlaying online of broadcast and interpersonal communications, the ability of anyone to make and distribute media contents through what Manuel Castells calls 'mass self-communication'. We are still trying to understand how these recent transformations will be integrated into everyday habit.<sup>19</sup>

Media transform the smallest details of individual actions *and* the largest spaces in which we are involved. Take search engines, now the focus of one of the world's largest businesses, yet an unknown social form fifteen years ago. Google articulates for us 'what there is': it provides us routinely via its browser with what John Tomlinson calls 'the instant and infinite availability of the world's informational resources'. The positive side of this transformation is banally familiar: we 'look things up' very often not in books or directories, but by 'googling it'. A lawyer friend tells me in passing that 'the law is now on Google'; people check their children's illness symptoms by typing them into Google; the director of the once familiar UK phone directory Yellow Pages admits that 'nobody under 25 knows who we are'.<sup>20</sup>

One particular story captures this transformation more vividly than any other. Five years ago, the scandal of a man's faked death and his fraudulent escape with his wife gripped the UK press. A decisive moment came when a *Daily Mirror* reader proved the man's 'posthumous' presence with his wife in Panama by typing 'John and Mary and Panama' into Google. Her comment was interesting: 'I'm a sceptic. Nobody can simply vanish in this day and age, there has to be something, some sign.' This enterprising Google user captured the now familiar ambiguity of the internet: as means for individual discovery, collective contact and guaranteed mutual surveillance.

But how to grasp the impact of this and other parallel changes when embedded in daily life on even a small scale? Metaphors may help. One metaphor of the difference media make to the world is, following Roger Silverstone, a 'dialectic'.<sup>22</sup> The word 'dialectic' derives from the Greek for conversation and captures how any conversation's components remain separate from, though informed by, each other. All of us – individuals and groups – contribute something to this dialectic, through our media-informed assumptions about 'what there is' and 'what can be done'; those contributions are not acts of individual choice, but shaped by largescale infrastructural changes, themselves driven by economic and other forces. A dialectical approach brings out the flexibility of how humans negotiate the differences that media make, and the traffic *between* media we have come to call 'remediation'.<sup>23</sup>

Does 'dialectic' capture the cumulative *volume* of media, and media's resulting *systemic* impact on everyday life? Perhaps for that we need another metaphor: Todd Gitlin's image of media as 'torrent'

a ‘supersaturated’ flow of visuals and text that overwhelms us daily. A few years after Gitlin wrote his image became integrated into the brand name Bit-Torrent, the software that allows large media files (TV programmes, films) to be shredded into bits and sent in countless parallel streams over the internet. But we do not grow accustomed to media’s wider ‘torrent’ because its scale and depth *go on* growing: even people’s comments about media now add to the flow through blogs, digg recommendations, YouTube mashups and tweets, all postdating Gitlin’s analysis. So the metaphor of media ‘torrent’ only takes us so far, and this without even considering the saturation of today’s consumer environment by data sources and modes of information transmission such as RFID chips.<sup>24</sup>

Here, the technical meaning of the term ‘supersaturated’ is significant. Supersaturation refers to chemistry and thermodynamics to a solution that contains more of a material dissolved within it ‘than could be dissolved by the solvent under normal circumstances’.<sup>25</sup> Supersaturation therefore names an *unstable* state, a deviation from the equilibrium state of the dissolved and solvent materials in question. This unstable state occurs only as a result of particular changes, for example, temperature change or pressure change. The supersaturation of *society* by media would mean the unstable, non-equilibrium state when social life is filled with media contents at every level owing to particular pressures (spatial – the boundaries of a particular broadcasting territory; temporal – a particular even cycle such as a global political crisis). There are limits to using even this more precise sense of the term ‘supersaturated’ to capture the density of media in contemporary societies: social life is based on interpretations, but a liquid does not ‘interpret’ the bubbles of gas inserted within it! But at least the supersaturation metaphor allows us to appreciate the phase shifts in social life when media saturation reaches a certain point: changes to the *possibilities of order* within the social. At this point, it becomes clear we need to connect with social theory.

## Towards a socially oriented media theory

I want in this book to develop some mid-range conceptual tools for understanding the differences media make in our lives: it is a work of media theory. But what *sort* of media theory?

There can be no ‘pure’ theory of media, since media are always particular, historically embedded ways of communicating information and meaning. Even the most abstract theories of communication such as Shannon and Weaver’s self-styled ‘mathematical theory of communication’, could only emerge as salient in a particular historical context, in the dawning age of computers and television when codes for converting complex information into simple common forms were invented.<sup>26</sup> What for convenience I am calling media theory involves particular choices about the data on which it draws and the types of analysis it prefers. Let me explain.

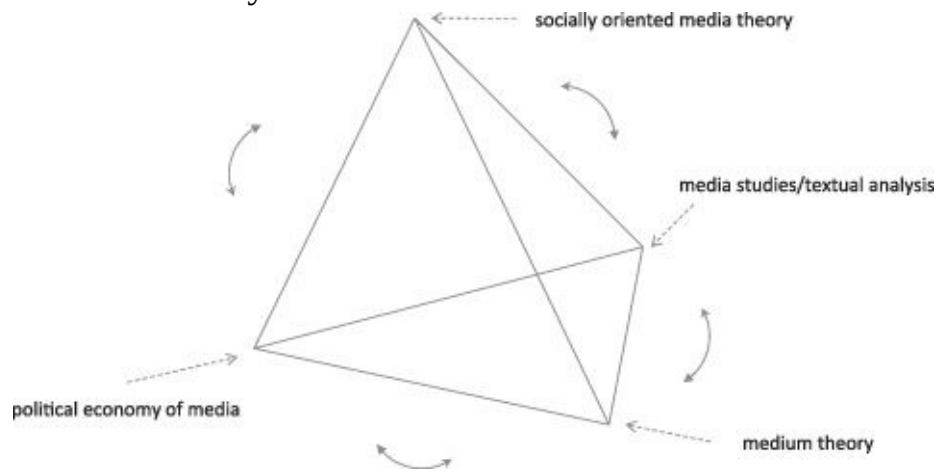
For simplicity, we might think of media research as a pyramid with four apexes. We can turn the pyramid four ways up, with the type of research we want to prioritize at the top, while others form the pyramid base. No way of turning the pyramid is ‘right’, or ‘better’, since the apexes name different priorities for research: *media texts*; the *political economy* of media production, distribution and reception; the *technical properties* of each medium; and the *social uses* to which media technologies and media contents are put.

Any of these research priorities *can* generate theory, that is, mid-range concepts to make broad sense of their field of inquiry, and each type of theory will need to draw on research (and theory) from the other points of the pyramid. But whether and how far research at any apex actually develops in theory depends on intellectual fashion and how disciplines change. In the 1970s and 1980s, gener-



theory about media content, particularly its ideological properties, was all the rage (the screen theory that dominated film studies and to a lesser degree television studies), but its influence largely faded in the 1990s. Political economy has generated important theory about the distinctive features of media and cultural production and, in its broadest versions, is concerned not just with media ownership but with power inequalities across social life.<sup>27</sup>

**Figure 1.1** What kind of media theory?



Perhaps the most celebrated form of media theory recently has been ‘medium theory’, whose most well-known exponents have been the early Canadian theorists Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis and the German theorist Friedrich Kittler, who died in October 2011. Kittler provided some brilliant insights into what media do, and specifically how particular techniques and inventions emerged as ‘media’, and so how media extended, indeed gave new form to, our senses and perceptual capacities. Some of Kittler’s insights have implications for sociology of media, but Kittler’s real interest was in understanding the distinctive ‘technical’ contribution made to our extended faculties by each medium *at the point of its emergence*. Only this explains how he could devote just a few pages at the end of *Optical Media* to the computer which, in its triumphant ‘liquidation of ... the [pre-media] imaginary’, *completed* his history of media as the extension of human senses. This focus on the technical ‘essence’ of each medium means, as Kittler himself noted, ‘to *forget* humans, language and sense’, and to dismiss a ‘trivial content-based approach to media’, or the study of ‘popular films and television programmes’. It even means dismissing sociology itself, since Kittler showed no interest in how media such as the computer are *put to use*: he offered, as John Durham Peters notes, ‘a media studies without people’, a media/medium theory with its back turned away from sociology.<sup>29</sup>

By contrast with Kittler, I offer in this book a media theory turned *towards* sociology and social theory. This fourth possibility for media theory foregrounds how media are put to use in, and how they shape, social life and how the meanings circulated through media have social consequences. This type of media theory lacks a ready name, so let me call it, slightly awkwardly, *socially oriented media theory*: that is, theory focusing on the social processes that media constitute and enable. Its disciplinary connections are primarily with sociology,<sup>30</sup> not literature, economics or the history of technology and visual communication.

Already ‘new’ media, like traditional media before them, have become ordinary contents of everyday life, a ‘taken-for-granted part of our infrastructure’.<sup>31</sup> That makes understanding the consequences of media for society and world difficult. Grasping how media shape contemporary social life requires *social* theory. If we want to unravel the complex interdependencies of the digital world, we need to recall German sociologist Norbert Elias’s work on ‘figurations’ in his class

account of the ‘civilizing process’; if curious about the local patterns of order and resource concentration emerging in production and everyday life online, then we would do well to consult French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of ‘fields’ of cultural production; if we want to ask, simply, what difference do the countless messages circulated online make to the social world, we need to draw on classical French sociologist Emile Durkheim’s account of the ready-made distinctions and hierarchies – ‘categories’ in his term – into which our representations of the world get condensed. To grasp media in their contemporary complexity, we need not just *any* social theory; we need social theory that addresses the construction, representation and contestation of the social.

A socially oriented approach to media theory is concerned fundamentally with action. Media provide an entry point for understanding the organization of human action. Our starting point is the open-endedness of practice and the embedding of practice in wider relations of power. This approach has much more in common with a critical sociology of power<sup>33</sup> than with a history of technological discovery. Socially oriented media theory, however, shares two important things with medium theory. First, it is concerned with media, that is, organized mechanisms and infrastructures for channelling communication rather than ‘communication’ in some general sense.<sup>34</sup> The other, more surprising overlap is with a less well-known representative of medium theory, Siegfried Zielinski, who, far from espousing a linear model of media development, opposes ‘the economy of adjusting and shaping [media] that is committed to the paradigm of productivity’. Zielinski’s stance impels him into a ‘*anarchaeological*’ approach to media history that celebrates heterogeneity and diversity in media past.<sup>35</sup> Translate such scepticism into the sociological challenges of understanding media’s present and you get a socially oriented media theory concerned to *deconstruct* the tremendous forces that interpret media products and systems as ‘natural’ or seamless outcomes of economic, social and political rationalization.

Any media theory or media analysis today, however, must confront some crucial uncertainties that will now, rather schematically, explore.

## The digital revolution and its uncertainties

Most commentators believe that we are in the middle of a media revolution, centring on the internet connection and transmission capacities and the countless digital media devices and infrastructures that have grown up around them. But the long history of ‘myth-making’ about technology should make us cautious.<sup>36</sup> New communications technologies in particular have generated endless myths (democratization, political harmony, world peace), most recently the myth that information, and particularly digital information, is free.<sup>37</sup>

It is worth looking back to some features that the great historian of print, Elizabeth Eisenstein, saw as characterizing ‘the print revolution’ between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe. Print involved the shift in cultural production from unique texts made by individual scribes to distinct products made for multiple readers’ convenience, and the creation of a distribution mechanism (the book market) whereby ‘identical images, maps and diagrams could be viewed *simultaneously* by scattered readers’.<sup>38</sup> As a result, the number of texts increased massively, so that a seventeenth century scholar could read more books in a few months – just by sitting in his study – than earlier scholars would have seen in a lifetime of travelling. Other implications followed: the immense new data-recording and archiving capacities of print; new notions of individual rather than collective

authorship.<sup>39</sup> This was indeed a revolution in how communication was *socially* organized, whose first precondition was the technology of the printed book, but it took place over a long time. As two other historians of print, Febvre and Martin, note, the early printers were nomads who physically transported their technology around with them: the result was an unimaginably slow (to us) diffusion of printing across Western Europe ‘over a period of 300 years’.<sup>40</sup>

Today’s media and information revolution, while it has its sceptics,<sup>41</sup> is comparable in depth to even if massively faster than, the print revolution. It has happened in less than two decades and with few geographical boundaries, overlaying previous important shifts in media infrastructure (satellite and cable TV). In Iraq in the early 1990s, the requirement that *typewriters* be registered with the authorities was still a plausible means of state censorship, and television channels were few and heavily influenced by the state; by 2009, 470 Arabic-language satellite TV channels were available in the Arab world,<sup>42</sup> and the recent spread of Web-enabled mobile phones has made state censorship still more difficult. The internet has brought a shift in information production from a limited number of discrete forms (books, pamphlets, letters, reports, lists) to information units of any form and size whatsoever (websites), provided they confirm to some basic criteria of standard text or image format and identifiable location (url).<sup>43</sup> Collections of such information units – websites, databases – are now accessible with few restrictions on what types or volumes of media can be brought together in such collections. The result has been an exponential growth in data volume and archiving capacity, new forms of both collective authorship (Wikipedia) and individual authorship (blogs, vlogs, etc.), and space, as the creator of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee, put it, for us to ‘interact on all scales’. Many commentators in the academy and industry believe that whole sectors of public and professional life are being radically transformed by the information revolution.<sup>44</sup>

Three immediate qualifications, however, are necessary. The first is that a high proportion of the digital world’s information-processing capacity is in private hands via corporate intranets and proprietary systems, and Lawrence Lessig has famously argued that the internet’s open end-to-end architecture is becoming a thing of the past.<sup>45</sup> Fears over whether ‘net neutrality’ can be preserved continue; the trade-offs between the everyday convenience of search-engine use and corporate power, Google’s resulting ability to do side-deals, for example, with US phone-provider Verizon over the openness of the wireless internet, apparently beyond the reach of the Federal Communications Commission, are troubling; Google’s market dominance is now facing legal challenges by the US Federal Trade Commission and the European Competition Commissioner.<sup>46</sup> So we cannot treat the ‘space’ of the internet as simply free and available to all.

The second qualification is that within the apparently infinite expansion of global connectivity, new hidden forms of *disconnection* are emerging. The issue of the digital divide has been prominent since the late 1990s. In some countries – the USA, Denmark, South Korea, for example – levels of internet access are so high that the online world is seemingly a universal reference point. But the US government has made no such assumption. Disconnection becomes even more acute when we look outside the West, where the percentage of annual monthly salary necessary to buy a computer varies widely; in many parts of the world, a personally owned computer remains out of the reach of all but a small minority.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, gender stratifies internet access *within* nations, for example in the Middle East, as do class and ethnicity. As US scholar Ellen Seiter puts it, ‘the children of elite and urban professionals experience new technologies in a qualitatively different way from poor children’. The ‘virtuous circle’ of easy access to computers, related skills and social support, entails a *vicious*

*circle* for those who lack those things: these inequalities are likely to extend into the world of social networking.<sup>48</sup>

Consider, third, the internet's huge geographical expansion, and the resulting shift from an English language-dominated internet to an internet where many languages have hegemony over mutually inaccessible territories of users (Arabic, Chinese, Japanese and so on). The internet may already be too large for any one research frame to grasp: there are 420 million internet users in China alone, of whom 364 million have broadband and 115 million live rurally. One key point however is indisputably disrupting any easy generalization: that nations and parts of the world vary in terms of the inhabitants' likely status as voices in the global internet. As James Curran points out, if your native or mastered second language is English, then your chances of a wide readership are many times higher than if it is Marathi. There is, in other words, no single 'world' of digital media and, to the extent that there appears to be, this is an illusion based on global rhetoric fuelled by the very inequalities that the illusion masks.<sup>49</sup>

When we consider the social consequences of digital media, predictions of a positive 'revolution' become even more complex. Having one's own personal computer is not the only route into internet use where internet access is socially coordinated. The internet revolution cannot therefore be understood exclusively via statistics on individual internet access; meanwhile cross-border movements of labour, driven by global patterns of inequality, shape both resources and needs for such social coordination. Second, there is a big difference between the basic possibilities for using technology and how it comes to be *used in practice*. As Régis Debray puts it, 'usage is more archaic than the tool ... if the medium is "new", the milieu [of its use] is "old", by definition.'<sup>50</sup> Indeed, histories of the book's long-term social consequences bring out *how many* factors combined to produce over time the reading habits standard in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Europe: institutional contexts and associations for reading; new cultural conventions; the increased leisure time of the growing bourgeoisie; even the increased availability in the home of light after sunset.<sup>51</sup> An accelerator in the 'internet revolution' has been the ability of not just content but software (in other words, infrastructure) to be distributed through the same medium. The book was a great leap forward in disseminating innovation, since it enabled the transmission of diagrams and other technical descriptions,<sup>52</sup> but today the software infrastructure on which important communication innovations rely can be globally disseminated online without any person or object having to move physically! Think of the open-editing system of Indymedia sites, invented in Australia but first used in Seattle around the protests at the 1999 WTO meetings; or the Ushahidi website template available for disaster reporting across Africa.<sup>53</sup>

To sum up: for all its excitement, the non-linear world of contemporary media transformation is marked by intense *uncertainty*. Predictions based on the so-called 'digital generation' substitute marketing hype for serious analysis, and risk the basic error of confusing life-stage behaviours with genuine historical change.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, while we undoubtedly live in an era when media outputs are converging on common platforms, claims that we inhabit something as singular as 'convergence culture' should be treated with suspicion.<sup>55</sup> Clay Shirky recently suggested that 'the bigger the opportunity offered by new tools, the less completely anyone can extrapolate the future from the previous shape of society.' It is exactly the wider interface between media and the distribution of social power that is most uncertain. Proust had it right when he commented on the fallacy of judging 'what [is] kept secret ... in the light of what [has been] revealed'.<sup>56</sup>

More specifically, any media theory today must address six types of uncertainty which, while linked to broader processes of differentiation and reflexivity within late modernity,<sup>57</sup> are best understood in terms of the specific dynamics of media institutions and technologies.

## What, who and where are media?

Contemporary digital media are in crucial ways ‘underdetermined’.<sup>58</sup> A decade and a half ago, the key elements of media research (texts, the political economy of production, the study of audiences) were in place. While the mini-revolution of audience studies raised new questions – how exactly do texts work with audiences and audiences work with texts? – those questions appeared containable. Technological innovations (home video recording, the multiplication of TV channels via satellite and cable) had not, in spite of predictions to the contrary, fundamentally altered the object of study. The audience – my own particular interest – seemed securely positioned within a largely national landscape of media offerings. And we had by the early 1980s begun to understand media’s role in sustaining nations.<sup>59</sup>

Over the next decade, media research expanded laterally. We started to appreciate the many things audiences do besides watching, reading or listening to a text, with fandom studies just one important new area; media came to be seen not as a closed circuit of production–distribution–reception, but as a larger process of ‘mediation’ stretched out across space. A slow rapprochement between media studies and media-related work in anthropology began.<sup>60</sup> The internet, World Wide Web and mobile phones pushed computer-related communication and mobile media to the forefront of research,<sup>61</sup> with uncertainties emerging over whether the centralized power of traditional media institutions would be replaced by a more dispersed space of online production and consumption.<sup>62</sup> Yet in 2005 the landscape of media research remained basically unchanged.

The years since 2005 have seen a more fundamental disruption to media and media research. Digital media convergence has accelerated hugely. Circulating your photos and videos online has become commonplace; so too has commenting on other people’s blogs, mashups and online self-presentation. The increased availability of mobile phones with fast internet access has increased (exponentially) people’s capacities to be receivers *and* circulators of media. The fast growth of social networking sites (Facebook in the UK, USA and many other countries, Orkut in Brazil and India, RenRen in China, Mixi in Japan, Cyworld in South Korea) has added an entirely new dimension. The things we call ‘media’, and the rules that govern their combinations, have hugely expanded: the *what* of media research has changed. The *Economist* was right to ask in 2006: ‘what is a media company?’<sup>63</sup>

Beware of attributing these changes to technology alone. Changes in the communication infrastructure we call ‘media’ have always resulted from the *intersections* between technological, economic, social and political forces. In the pre-digital era, ‘media’ were productions that radiated outwards from a limited number of production/distribution points and were received by members of a separate, larger ‘mass’, the ‘audience’. But this was not through technological necessity, as the early history of radio demonstrates: in the USA, the possibility of radio as a one-to-one or many-to-many medium was actively developed before and after the end of the First World War, while in France and the UK the possibility of radio operating through a decentred, inclusive, ‘community’ model of production was explored.<sup>64</sup> That such non-mass models fell away – to the point of being largely written out of media history – reflects the efforts that went into developing the commercial and political opportunities of one-to-many radio: high capital was required for national-scale media.

production/distribution, and the resulting capital-intensive mass media fitted well with the increasingly centralized organization of the modern state.<sup>65</sup>

Now a different type of transformation is under way, again not attributable to simple technological possibility. We are familiar with the idea of the 'constant TV' household. But today, even in a moderately well-equipped country like the UK, 74 per cent of the population have broadband and 50 per cent of 16- to 24-year-olds have internet-enabled phones.<sup>66</sup> As substantial internet use has become routine in many countries, new media actors have emerged: the producers of *jihadist* videos online; indeed any self-produced clips uploaded to YouTube; celebrities tweeting from their phones; demonstrators, camera-phone upheld, in a crowd. Not just the 'what' but the 'who' of media is changing, complicating what John Thompson called mass communications' 'fundamental break between the producer and the consumer'. Today, the internet gives individuals a capacity to reach large audiences that recalls the early use of phone wires by individuals to sing and play music to 'the world',<sup>67</sup> although this time both the range and infrastructural constraints are quite different. Specialist media producers/distributors invest not just in their own content but in stimulating and managing 'user-generated content', while media consumers or audience members have endless opportunities to contribute to or comment upon institutional media production, although who exactly takes up these opportunities remains uncertain. Some celebrate the interactive communities around newspaper websites, while others are more sceptical.<sup>68</sup> Some discern even more fundamental shifts: the Web's shift from 'a publishing medium' to a 'communication medium', video's shift from a centrally distributed cultural medium to 'an extension of ... interpersonalized networks'.<sup>69</sup> Could we be seeing the disaggregation of media outputs, the withering away of 'the mass media'? Or does this underestimate the interest of today's new media corporations such as Google in *sustaining* a quality media environment across which its search engines will crawl?<sup>70</sup>

The leading *commercial* media players are arguably today not programme makers, news agencies or film companies, but Google (including YouTube, which they own), Facebook and Apple. They make and sell the devices, platforms and search engines on which media interfaces rely: it is those players who *link up* the many streams of media usage into practical 'wholes'. As Tarleton Gillespie notes, 'platform' is a much-used term within industry circles to capture this linking capacity: the quest for new platforms is incessant so, writing in summer 2011, I wait to see if Microsoft's acquisition of Skype for US\$8.5 billion will enable it to join the pantheon of dominant media players.<sup>71</sup> Such transformations work at two levels. First, there is the level of *what is conveyed* across platforms and the resulting changes in *where* particular content-types are standardly consumed: Premium VO (video-on-demand), planned by leading film producers (Warner Bros, Twentieth-Century Fox), may shift film demand decisively towards home settings, while Google is simultaneously exploring the possibility of launching new film releases via YouTube, available on people's smartphones. Meanwhile, the era of 'cloud gaming' takes once-individualized media practices (gaming via a separate console) and ensures they increasingly depend on an *online* infrastructure that connects huge groups of players.<sup>72</sup> Second, there is a transformation at the level of *how the conveying is done*. We get information increasingly through embedded 'apps' that draw us into proprietary regions of the internet not reachable by simple search: this is Chris Anderson and Michael Wolff's vision that the open-access 'Web is dead'.<sup>73</sup>

We must, however, tread cautiously. Some media institutions remain constant, in spite of new delivery possibilities: radio has in part moved online, but its soundworld still forms part of the routine

background of many people's lives. Or take television: in the early 2000s, it was commonplace to proclaim the 'end of television'.<sup>74</sup> Undoubtedly, the nature of television has changed from being a box in the corner of the living room to what one writer called 'an ensemble of non-site specific screens' from being a 'push' medium available only in one form (broadcast or distributed by cable or satellite to a television set) to 'a matrix medium' that offers, in connection with other digital media platforms and contents, 'an increasingly flexible and dynamic mode of communication'.<sup>75</sup> We can no longer take for granted the single entity of 'TV', produced by separate television companies; 'television' is now a space where huge *multimedia* conglomerates compete.<sup>76</sup> Strange new entrants stray into this space: newspapers showcase their own video material on their websites (*Sun*, *New York Times*), and warehouse others' self-produced videos (*Guardian*). Yet, although the size of prime-time audiences has in many countries declined, television *continues* to be watched and in large numbers, which is why 'television is still the most widespread and influential medium in China today'.<sup>77</sup> As William Uricchio argues, television may now be returning to the 'pluriformity' that characterized television before the mass television audience.<sup>78</sup> Clearly, we cannot grasp our expanding media environment by thinking of how new media (the internet?) substitute for old media (television? radio?).

Wave upon wave of newly saturating media has flowed over inhabitants of richer countries:

- 1 the move from a limited number of terrestrial television channels to hundreds of cable and satellite channels;
- 2 increasingly fast and continuous access to the internet and World Wide Web;
- 3 media access from transportable or 'mobile' phones;
- 4 radio and the press's move online through digitalization and newspaper websites;
- 5 the massive growth in online content delivery networks for both top-down distribution and horizontal exchange of photos, film, television and music;
- 6 social networking sites such as Facebook as a new interface for linking to any of the above, simply for contacting our friends and mobilizing our supporters;
- 7 many-to-many interfaces for continuous broadcasting in time and space, such as Twitter;
- 8 media applications ('apps') for iPhones, android phones, blackberries and other mobile devices.

These recent waves of media saturation are cumulative, making the term 'saturation' inadequate. Media has the type of sedimented complexity that a landscape does. But *how* saturated by media each person's world is – how actively people *select* from the media landscape available to them – remains uncertain.<sup>79</sup>

Select from or use *what exactly*? Built on top of what Henry Jenkins notes is a still limited range of basic media,<sup>80</sup> we now experience a *media manifold*, comprising a complex web of delivery platforms behind which lies the effectively infinite reserve of the internet. The media manifold is something we can all imagine, even if its actuality is uneven, because all media are already – or are on the way to becoming – digital, convertible into information bits of basically the same type. The installation of internet access as a basic capacity of many devices (fixed and portable) means that we increasingly use a connected range of media rather than single media in isolation. Anthropologists Madianou and Miller designate this plurality 'polymedia',<sup>81</sup> but the term risks signifying a mere plurality, rather than the linked *configuration* of media that is crucial. So I will retain here the term media manifold. That manifold can seem to be everywhere and nowhere in particular: we are just embedded in it to varying degrees.

At this point, generalities about media interfaces become inadequate. Habits of use are crucial, and

habit is more than just repetition: any habit is stabilized through multiple practices that construct new ways of living, whether in the home or in everyday culture more generally. This takes us to a second area of uncertainty: use.

## What do we do with media?

Describing what people do with media used to be simple: watching a documentary programme; following a radio serial; reading weekly magazines or daily newspapers; going to the cinema to see a film; turning the pages of a book. Well-established changes complicated this basic landscape: time shifting by VCR and, more recently, by digital recorders with hard disks. Remediation within the digital media environment goes much further. True, some media bundles have always involved indeterminacy: we have never known systematically about how different people consume a newspaper (do they start with the sports pages, fashion pages or front-page news?). But uncertainties as to the size, order and context of media consumption are now *inherent to* all media consumption within the unbounded hypertext of the Web.

Once more, this destabilization is not simply a matter of technology. As Lisa Gitelman insists, media technologies' 'protocols of use' are important.<sup>82</sup> A factor in stabilizing media consumption for decades has been the sheer convenience – for use – of the information and entertainment bundles that the media industries evolved: the prime-time news bulletin, the newspaper delivered or collected every morning, the daily or weekly instalments of a soap opera. Scarcity was once a key factor in the shaping of convenience: there were a limited number of television and radio stations and newspaper-making media sources relatively scarce. But in an era of information plenty, convenience works differently: what is convenient may now be not large media packages (with dedicated advertising built into them) but the glance past online news headlines ten times a day.<sup>83</sup> The practical convergence of older habits of media consumption – the way people could assume others were doing much the same as them, when they switched on the TV or the radio (and the way producers could make parallel assumptions) – no longer holds, or at least not as simply as before. Convenience must be understood within the changing organization of work, family and leisure. New grids of habit are forming, so far only partly mapped. We start out then from the *heterogeneity* of what people now do with media: posting family photos onto Facebook for relatives in different countries, watching an old film on a film channel, surfing the weather on the other side of the planet.

Some decisive trends have occurred, for example the decline in hard-copy newspaper consumption, especially amongst younger users in the UK and USA. I turn to the economic context of this shortly, but note there are countries, for example in Scandinavia, where youth newspaper consumption remains strong, and free newspapers handed out on urban transit systems may prove a viable basis for something like a press.<sup>84</sup> With other media, things are even more complex. The acknowledged network news decline in the USA, as Amanda Lotz notes, is at most the beginnings of the long-term 'death of the network newscast', *not* the death of network news itself. The penetration of online news, even in the USA, is in any case exaggerated: as ABC World News executive Jon Banner puts it, 'our [TV] broadcast dwarfs any audience that we get on the Web, and probably will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.'<sup>85</sup> Even in the USA, time spent consuming TV news has still changed little since 1996, well before the internet's main growth, while in the UK and Germany many times more people use television as their main news source than the internet. Television news remains the main news source even in a country with high internet penetration like Denmark; so too, as a recent survey



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