

Foreword

Field Observations on Media Studies

Denis McQuail

Media studies has been a recognised field of research and teaching for more than thirty years, although it has resisted attempts at clear delineation and boundary drawing. To some extent, this resistance stems from its intrinsic character as an open field of inquiry, without the ambition to present itself as a scientific discipline. It makes no exclusive claim to its typical subject matter or to certain theoretical propositions. Its subject matter is both diverse and continually changing and there is an element of deliberate *bricolage* in the adoption of suitable concepts and theoretical ideas. The topics and manner of inquiry require a close engagement with human experience and do not privilege any particular perspective on the nature of experience.

Despite this deliberate embracing of indeterminacy, the field cannot avoid acquiring a certain profile in the eyes of those who view it, even if it does not possess any profile that is generally acknowledged from within. In addition, the field has a place in a larger historical context of media, culture and society at a given place and time and a more restricted context of other branches of study of media in various aspects. As a larger project, it is given certain meanings by observers as well as participants, according to what it seems not be as well as what it seeks to be. For the most part we rely for our understanding of what it is about on its actual pre-occupations and its works as they are presented from time to time. The forms of presentation are diverse, but not least important have been a succession of readers and anthologies, with which it has generally been well served. There has been a succession of authoritative and stimulating collections, testifying to the fertility of the soil although without providing the equivalent of a handbook of agriculture. In some respects, this reflects an intrinsic characteristic of the field - that it should not seek to construct any new paradigm to replace the dominant paradigm that it sought to dismantle. In this it is republican in spirit rather than monarchist, even if it is not completely egalitarian and celebrates its own saints and heroes. Underlying the reluctance to claim any exclusive identity is a fairly central guiding principle, one that elevates the media as they are performed, experienced and understood over other

FOREWORD

considerations. Everything that bears on the nature of this central focus is in a state of flux, depending on historical and cultural context and on the uncertain incidence of events.

The present volume is a worthy addition to this tradition of representing ongoing work and thinking in media studies, one which takes us across the boundary of a century against a background of changing culture and changing media. It brings the reader up to date with current lines of theory and new directions in research and it has been carefully structured to focus on the central issues in the field, following a common format of explication and illustration, reflecting a distinct editorial perspective. It has a mixture of elements, combining illustrative analyses of things observed with methodological and theoretical discussion. As such it provides an interesting object of contemplation for those who would like to have at least a provisional map of the field and a guide to its flora and fauna. It has always been possible to do this with the literature appearing as media studies, but arguably by now a stage of maturity has been reached that gives this more point. The aim of the following remarks is to offer one view of the nature of the field, not quite from the outside, but without claiming the specific identity of a practitioner.

One might begin with the paradigm of inquiry that has been for the most part rejected – what media studies is not or would prefer not to be. It is arguable that the field has arrived at a point comparable that where the study of ‘mass media’ once began in the early decades of the last century. At that time the unplanned cultural and social influence of a range of popular forms of communication, in print, film, sound and graphic images drew the attention of a highly disparate set of observers, with backgrounds in anthropology, sociology, education, journalism, politics, the arts. There was no dominant discipline and no dominant paradigm to give a home or guidance to the individuals so moved, although there was a shared fascination with novel features of the phenomena. These features included especially their immense popularity (at a time when the masses were feared and democracy viewed ambivalently) and their dissonant relation to established systems of aesthetic and moral judgement and to the social regulation of such activities. These two basic features were potentially related, since by the reigning standards of arts and morals, it has often seemed difficult to make sense of the overwhelming appeal of the popular arts without invoking some form of personal or social pathology. Many observers were led either towards identifying deficits of personality or environment in the ‘fans’ of ‘mass culture’ (itself by definition defective) or some problematic condition of society that provided a fertile ground for cultural weeds. In reaction, others were led to defend the mass of the people

MEDIA STUDIES

from the disdain of the high-minded and even to find cultural merit and personal rewards for the hard pressed populace, or excuses in social conditions that could always be remedied.

These very mixed responses crystallised, under a variety of influences that reflected the nature of industrial mass societies and the state of the human sciences at the time, into a search for the *effects* (as distinct from the causes) of typical features of mass media and mass culture. For the most part this search tended to focus on potentially harmful effects on individuals, in keeping with the general supposition that mass culture belonged to the unregulated and disorderly sphere of social life and with the utilitarian principle (and fact of life) that any organized inquiry required justification in terms of some social problem that might be alleviated by the findings. If not in search of solutions to problems (or explanations of failure and breakdown), research was directed at instrumental purposes of persuasion, marketing, propaganda and beneficial (for the source at least) public information. There was little space in the spectrum for inquiry that was not governed by such criteria of relevance, seeking to describe and understand the new cultural landscape, with an open mind as to explanation and valuation.

This situation was accentuated and perpetuated by the prevailing conditions of academic inquiry, with a clear split between the scientific and applied model of research and the descriptive, speculative and analytic modes of inquiry embraced by the institutional world of humanities and the arts that retained traditional criteria, having weathered the storms of modernism. It took the emergence of critical theory and the birth, or rebirth, of an appreciation of popular culture (there was more to appreciate in all senses) well after mid-century to shift the balance against the older established order shaping research into media. In any case, these few remarks serve to explain what was deficient in the older paradigm, quite apart from its very dominance, which encouraged both arrogance and selective ignorance. The rejected elements of the old paradigm were its over-emphasis on a search for effects (largely chimerical in any case), its instrumentalism and scientism, and (often) behaviourism), its superficiality in respect of what should be the main element in media study (the media themselves in all their aspects). Apropos of the search for 'effects', it can be added that this was based on a misconceived notion of communicative 'power' as something within the control of sources and actualised in 'messages', rather than the outcome of a mutual relationship between all those involved and largely outside planned direction as well as being unpredictable in outcome.

FOREWORD

There is no longer much debate about the relative merits of an old or a new paradigm (it is not to be found in this book), both having largely gone their separate ways or been hybridised, but there is no harm in recalling that there still could be one. Some of the 'key issues and debates' that are dealt with in the following chapters do inevitably reflect some of the perennial arguments of the founding period between various factions in social sciences and humanities, although there is now less debate within the field. One internal matter of debate that does raise its head concerns differences between culturalist and political economic approaches, although in this instance, it is a matter of a continued tension between the two intellectual movements that gave rise to the field in the first place, one stemming from critical theory, the other from a wish to explore specific aesthetic and cultural performance and experience in new ways.

If the once dominant paradigm was rejected as unsatisfactory, what essentially has media studies come to offer in its place or as an alternative? Here subjective perception and interpretation have to serve in place of any to give an objective account. At the centre of the newly opened field is the 'work of art' (artefact), text, or cultural product, whether film, song, television drama or other genre, selected for attention primarily on grounds of the quality of 'popularity', in turn indicated either by size, range, generality or longevity of appeal or by intensity of attraction to a relatively small group. There are no firm criteria for distinguishing or ranking such potentially deserving objects of attention although, in effect, any aspect of media output can be involved if it raises (or answers) questions of interest or opens doors for wider exploration. An object of inquiry can be considered under several perspectives, the most important dimensions being threefold: the manner of its *construction*; the 'performance' involved; and its reception. These are usually all related or relatable but each can lead independently in different directions. The first dimension of the essential text as constructed in the work or symbolic form leads into considerations of; language signification; the representation of 'reality'; questions of genre; possibly also issues of aesthetics and ethics. Taken further, the trail takes us towards systems and organization of production, publicity and marketing, including matters of finance, politics and industry structure. Somewhere along the way, at different points, there are by-ways into matters of technology and media theory.

The dimension of 'performance' refers potentially to any aspect of the enactment of the work as selected, but most generally to the relationship that develops between a person or persons at source and an actual or envisaged audience, a relationship that extends over space and time, although most salient and intense at a moment of contact. The perspective of author, performer, actor,

MEDIA STUDIES

musician, designer, etc. is what is primarily at issue, both in respect of intention and intended meaning and effect, but also related to the role being enacted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness. The self-chosen persona or self-image of the creator/actor as well as the adopted or allocated role provides a path in a given instance that also leads to questions of the social context and organization of production, linking up with issues raised by the chosen form and content. These remarks are not intended to imply any particular distinction between types of cultural production, although they have to be made at some point. In particular, the general question of performance arises more or less equally in relation to information, entertainment, religion or artistic expression, even though the 'performance' at issue is extremely various. This gives to media studies a more or less unlimited field of potential inquiry and potentially some escape from traditional categorizations and valuations that might close questions before they can be answered. Even so, this aspect of media studies probably gives more difficulty than others just because it transgresses a number of familiar assumptions, not least about what counts as 'media'.

The third dimension noted above, that of reception, deals also with relationships and meanings, especially the relationship between work and performer on the one hand and 'receiver', as defined by various categories, on the other. Most commonly the latter involves a distinction between individual persons, groups identified in some way that matters to members (whether as part of their identity and what they bring to a communication experience, or as a group of fans, with otherwise disparate or irrelevant characteristics) and media audiences that are perceived and identified as 'targets', 'markets', or a set of spectators that happens to assemble (or be encountered or engineered).

Reception is itself a broad notion encompassing elements of 'performance' on the part of receivers, with a variety of possible roles, depending on genre and circumstance and many different routines and acts that make up the business of what would be called 'media use' or 'behaviour' within the other paradigm. The question of 'meaning' is central to reception, partly because it is the nearest that media studies usually comes to the issue of 'effects' (leaving aside the fact that reception itself is the main effect). Even the traditional notion of media effects pays attention to the question of how content is 'made sense of', although usually with some preconception of what that sense actually is, derived from other sources. Cultural content and performance are not considered to be without effects, but these depend not only on the determination of the 'objective' observer, but on the understanding and also purpose on the part of a 'receiver'.

FOREWORD

The relationship element in reception embraces the issue of involvement with the source and performer, questions of reciprocity and response and relationships within an 'audience', according to distinctions briefly indicated. The process of reception is not primarily a matter of momentary choice by, or of 'impact' on, individuals, but a broader notion that takes account of subsequent reflection, conversation and interactions with other 'receivers'. This also takes inquiry along other pathways, since the potential relationships and the way they are engaged in is often secondary to established social and group circumstances and background. What is referred to above as an 'object of inquiry' in media studies, is not reducible to objects or behaviours. More relevant are larger cultural and social entities.

Much more detail and qualification could be added to this avowedly media-centric view of the field and in this compressed form it may seem more a caricature than a true representation. But it should still contain enough truth to help clarify the differences between media studies and its once dominating 'parent' (without meaning to exclude other views of that relationship). It remains to address a number of other issues arising from a perusal of the contents of this volume, with their indications of the current state and direction of the field. It should be evident why media studies does not really need to claim a specific disciplinary identity of the kind imposed by once modern systems of the academy. Even the term 'interdisciplinary' can be misleading, since this takes at face value older divisions, including their sometimes exclusive and limiting claims. Even so, the above account makes clear that almost all questions raised in the field can well lead into territory that is claimed by specific older branches of study. The field of study is so complex that it would be foolish not to benefit from the potential and perspectives of other existing frameworks of knowledge and inquiry. There is no reason to waste much time on boundary disputes and none is wasted in the collection that follows.

The matter of methods and methodology has not been referred to, although it is clear from the nature of the questions as framed above that there is an emphasis on the depth and detail of information required, requiring the application and, even more, the further development of what are called 'qualitative' methods. These have to be able to uncover meanings and patterns in diverse and interrelated types of 'information', itself a quite inadequate term in this context. The primacy of various types of 'discourse analysis' and of equally diverse kinds of 'ethnography' is very evident in work done. There is little place for quantification as a central methodological principle, as in traditional social sciences, since counting is an extremely imprecise way of recording 'quality'.

MEDIA STUDIES

The variety, range and scale of the potential subject matter of media studies is huge and untameable by reduction to numbers. On some matters the need to generalize at some points has to be faced, if only to fulfil the performance expected of the graduates of 'media studies'.

This exploratory excursion into somewhat difficult territory, guided by the contents of this book as a reminder of the many fruits of media studies, has returned with a result that may be unnecessary or unwanted, in the shape of a rough sketch map and the conclusion that there is a not so unfamiliar landscape out there. In passing, it is worth noting that the sketch that has been essayed here should not be visualized in terms of straight lines, arrows and points, with a hierarchy of features indicating or derived from a definite structure. Instead, we should picture a very complex, indeterminate and organically changing ecology of elements. There are links of causation and logical principles, but a great deal is circumstantial, unpredictable and constantly being invented, changed or reversed. Because of this and the very scope of the potential terrain, there are many uncertainties, especially about the choice and formulation of objects of study as well as about how best to study them. Progress in these matters does not depend on having some overall plan, and there is no expectation of achieving certain knowledge or completion in any sense. Even so, as with all academic fields (and more so than most), it is not easy to keep pace with change and media studies has vulnerable areas for this and other reasons. Amongst these, my own candidates would relate to three areas of particular uncertainty and challenge (by no means all neglected in this volume), namely questions to do with: issues of media essentialism; technology in many respects; citizenship and democratic politics; the boundaries, or lack of them, between the study of what can be conceived primarily as 'communication' and the related territories and matters where communication does not seem central, for instance the areas of sport, leisure, travel and material consumption. On final reflection, it has to be said that this personal view does reflect an unintentional bias towards communication as a central focus or process and perhaps a flawed or potentially misleading guide.

Denis McQuail
University of Amsterdam