

## Introduction

### One

What is the significance of media cultures today? The emergence of global forms of mass communication, as most would recognise, has reworked the experiential content of everyday life. But how important is the field of communications when compared with other fields of research? What is the relationship between the study of mass media and other aspects of social practice? How have different media of communication reshaped relations of time and space? Do media cultures reaffirm today's dominant social relations? What kinds of identities are currently being fostered by electronic communication? Who are the key thinkers of whom we should be aware in thinking about these issues? Here I hope to contribute towards our shared understanding of such questions, while broadly indicating the shape some answers might take.

This book began as an attempt to think about the relationship between mass communication and social theory. This soon brought to mind a paradox. Much of the social theory I read dealt with issues of work, sexuality, structure and **agency**, **ideology**, **commodification**, the unconscious, time and space, citizenship, **globalisation** and other aspects. But within many of these texts the media of mass communication seemed to have marginal status. Most current writing seemingly acknowledges its increasing significance within modernity before passing over into a discussion of the reshaping of the economic base or the institutional transformations in the political sphere. This seemed wrong. My own life made me aware of the importance that certain elements of media had within my leisure time, in talk amongst friends, as gifts to be exchanged, in maintaining connection with absent others, and in opening out a sense of the public. Yet I was

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also aware of a number of perspectives that treated the media as all-important. Here the influence of the media of mass communication seemed pervasive and could be blamed for the major ills of society. While at least these perspectives recognised the significance of the media, they were treated as unproblematically as they were by those who ignored their influence. Rightist and leftist thinkers alike have similarly conceptualised the media as being the cause of social breakdown and the ideological cement that glues an unjust society together. Such views might seem to have some plausibility, but are generally overly reductive and essentialist.

In this book I will develop an informed debate with those aspects of social theory that have taken the media seriously. Admittedly this largely ignores the reasons why social theory has been so slow to investigate its importance. In this my argumentative strategy has been to drive a wedge between the two positions outlined above. First, I am concerned to link the media of mass communication to other social practices contained within the public and the private. As such, the book will engage with those positions that view media practice as connected to a field of historical and spatial practice. Secondly, the media of mass communication constitute social practices in themselves that are not reducible to other formations. The act of broadcasting a radio programme, reading a magazine or watching television is a significant social practice in itself. This book, then, is also concerned with the specificity of media practices. These need to be maintained against the temptation to crush them into a generalised discourse on economics, politics or culture. But here I am aware of a further paradox. When social theory finally got round to noticing the importance of mass media the television age was the emergent cultural process. For this reason, apart from Marshall McLuhan (1994) and Jürgen Habermas (1989), most of the theoretical considerations under review neglect other media of communication. This is not a tendency I shall be able to reverse here. Arguably social theory became interested in the impact of the mass media once it became impossible to ignore. This meant that until the television age it had had only a negligible impact upon sources of social criticism. Classical nineteenth-century social theory tended to treat it as a marginal phenomenon that lacked importance beside issues of capitalism, bureaucracy and authority, and anomie. Current postmodern perspectives have sought most dramatically to reverse this emphasis. In postmodernity, the mass media are conceptualised both as technologically interrelated and as promoting a historically unstable domain of popular **intertextuality**. Television's dominance has arguably been replaced by a complex technological field of compact disc players, personal computers, magazine culture and video cassette recorders. Now, amongst the rapid technological development of media forms, it is easy to forget the permanence and continued structural priority that television and the press retain. However, these domains are currently being transformed by the impact of new technologies of communication that are ushering in a new society that is challenging older more established research paradigms.

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### Two

Why media cultures? Originally I thought of calling the book 'Social Theory and Mass Communication'. Luckily I was quickly advised by a friend of mine that this sounded desperately dull, and certainly not the kind of book she would read! This again seemed wrong given the importance of the themes covered by the text. Further, such a title, I thought, did not even serve my own purposes very well. What I intend to communicate by media cultures can be summarised in three senses. The first is the obvious point that much of modern culture is transmitted by the media of mass communication. The various media disseminate classical opera and music, tabloid stories about the private lives of politicians, the latest Hollywood gossip and news from the four corners of the globe. This has profoundly altered the phenomenological experience of living in modernity, as well as **networks** of social power. The other two points are more academically inclined. Secondly, most of the theorists I have discussed within this text build up a picture of the media out of a wider analysis of modern cultural processes. If say, we want to understand Habermas's (1989) writing on the public sphere, we might also look at his analysis of money and power. Similarly, Baudrillard's (1993a) concern with **simulation** and **implosion** is not detachable from his other-cultural concerns, and his own intellectual biography. Hence, while I concentrate upon particular theorists' interpretations of mass communication, their views are always integrated into wider cultural concerns. In doing this I have become aware of the durability of certain intellectual traditions. Academic culture is probably one of the most international of those currently in operation. The exchange of travelling theory has certainly made geographical impacts, and yet national trends remain evident. In the main this book concentrates upon contributors from Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Spain and the USA. I am aware this gives the text a Eurocentric bias. Yet the traditions of hermeneutics, post-structuralism, **critical theory** and **Marxism** evident here are not *owned* by specific nationalities. But the way in which these ideas have circulated is not as free-floating as talk of a pervasive global **culture** might suggest. For instance, despite the impact of French intellectual culture, and to a lesser extent German traditions of critical theory, British cultural studies has mostly ignored contributions that emerged originally within Canada. Baudrillard's overtly French social theory, which has made a huge impact, is perhaps responsible for reminding us of the importance of certain branches of Canadian thought in respect of Innis and McLuhan. Had I more rigorously traced through these crosscurrents, I would have produced a different book. This adds a third dimension to media cultures – there are histories of intellectual exchange of those who have theorised about the media to be written. Again this is not our concern. However, attentive readers might want to bear this in mind while reading the text. It is less with the intellectual contexts of the main contributors that I am concerned than

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with the production of ideas and discourses. But still further qualification is required. My main aim is not to present an overview of all the perspectives in social theory that currently mention mass communications. This has been done excellently elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> I also wanted to avoid presenting the material in an overly unified way that did not open out areas of critical dispute and engagement. What has emerged is a *selected* engagement with specific intellectual fields of criticism and theoretical practice. In this I have prioritised traditions of theorising and thinking that have sought to offer a critique of mass communications. But even here some currents are hardly dealt with, and others are quickly passed over. For instance, I could have offered a chapter on the Chicago school or the contributions of American Marxism. That I have not speaks of my own location in current debates on mass communication and my anchoring in a specific context. Of course such a recognition does not mean that this book has not been written with a diverse spectrum of readers in mind, and to recognise my cultural specificity need not relativise the theoretical labour that is in evidence here. Every effort has been taken to present the arguments in a way that might be able to persuade others of their rightness. I want to offer an engagement with the strands of intellectual debate that both excited and stimulated me. I also chose to concentrate upon intellectual traditions about which I thought I had something to say. For omissions I offer no apologies. This is after all not an attempt to have the final word. What I hope I have achieved is a critical space that allows different traditions to be compared, and a clear account of their interconnections and omissions. Whether I have chosen wisely and achieved this aim is for the reader to decide.

### Three

One of my most powerful childhood memories was watching the flickering black and white images of the first people on the moon. I can vaguely remember watching the television images of those vulnerable astronauts with intense excitement. The explorations into space seemed to capture the imaginations of my family and schoolfriends alike. This, along with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Gulf War and Live Aid, was probably one of the most memorable events transmitted by the mass media during my lifetime. I feel sure other readers will have their own. Yet how could social theory help me to understand the social significance of this event? Most mainstream theoretical analysis would quickly dismiss my interest in the moon landing as either unimportant, or as somehow not as *real* as my position within a family or social class. This is unacceptable. Such arguments are at best avoidance and, at worst, unimaginative and sterile. If we take some of the theoretical perspectives offered within this book we will soon realise that my schoolboy projections can be variously interpreted.

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In this text I draw a broad distinction between three paradigms of mass communication research. The first two chapters offer an investigation of both British and German research that has taken mass communications to be an important source of social power. These viewpoints are mainly concentrated with a **political economy** of mass communication, and related concerns with ideology and the **public sphere**. The debates have generally been preoccupied with the links between mass media, democracy and capitalism. The set of debates represented here by British and American Marxism and the Frankfurt school can be referred to as a *critical* approach to mass communication. The third chapter presents a discussion of more interpretative approaches in respect of the **audience's** relationship with media cultures. The aim is to open out concerns with the everyday practices in which most of us participate. The research presented here is concerned with processes of unconscious identification, power relations within the home and the semiotic production of meaning. The second paradigm can usefully be called *audience* research. These themes set the scene for the discussion of technological means of communication in Chapter 4. McLuhan's distinctive analysis has been neglected by social theorists seeking to comment on the media of mass communication. In this respect media implosion, **hybridity** and the restructuring of time and space have much to contribute. This is evident in the important discussions of Jack Goody (1977) and Anthony Giddens (1991) of oral, print and electric cultures. Chapter 5, through a discussion of Baudrillard (1993a) and Jameson (1991), takes McLuhan's concern with technological media a stage further. They map out a distinctive intellectual terrain around **postmodernism** in the effort to explain emerging cultural practices. As in the previous two sections, there is much disagreement and intellectual tension between the perspectives that are presented. Yet they are united in their representation of a fragmented, discontinuous and simulated popular culture. Chapters 4 and 5 represent research into mass communications that concentrates upon *themed media* of transmission. Finally, the second edition of this book has led to the preparation of a completely new chapter which aims to debate the significance of an **information society** and the development of new **mediums of communication**. As should become evident, this chapter represents the increasing convergence of the three paradigms of research.

The emphasis throughout is on the fact that media cultures are irredeemably plural. This necessitates the maintenance of the three research paradigms in that they all highlight different aspects of media culture. There is little point in attempting to produce a grand theory, as it would most likely be unable to account for every aspect of media practice. But, on the other hand, the fragmented particularism of certain aspects of poststructuralism often fail to see the connections between different levels of theoretical and media practice. This is to be avoided. I want to present a complex view of the field that is constantly evolving without ever being completed. If these reflections are followed, the various theoretical discourses

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represented in this book might all be able to tell me a great deal about my early concern with fuzzy spacemen.

Feminist and critical theorists, like Jessica Benjamin (1988) and Jürgen Habermas (1989), would probably draw attention to the way in which instrumental and masculine forms of reason were increasingly dominating the life-world through popular representations of the Apollo flights. The captivation of my family would be explained in terms of the dominance of certain ideological frames of reference. The space age was allowed to emerge in a world that had inadequate forms of birth control and where extreme poverty still existed. The race for the moon also legitimised the cold war and the production of weapons for mass destruction. Further, the often sexual imagery that was used to discuss the ventures into space spoke of a masculine obsession with the domination and differentiation from a feminine other. It enunciated a masculine escape from the responsibilities we collectively hold towards this planet and other human beings. On the moon there were no others, allowing for the projection of fantasies of absolute control. Finally, the popular science programmes which emerged along with the Apollo rocket launches managed to bracket off certain critical concerns with the relationship between the life-world and technical reason. Instead of technical concerns being subordinate to a communicative or feminist ethics, they came to dominate such reflections.

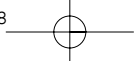
Such concerns take us only so far. The second paradigm, that of audience research, would have wanted to record who became interested in these space flights, and how. For instance, did I primarily watch the moon walks with my father, and did my sister and mother feel excluded from a masculine scientific culture? Or perhaps these concerns are wide of the mark? I'm sure I can remember these programmes being treated with a certain scepticism by all family members. Surely, they reasoned, the money could be put to better use, and why did we have to listen to all those boring scientists before we got to hear about the daily lives of the astronauts? What did they eat? How did they pass the time? When could we be sure they were safe? These questions might have pointed to popular concerns being different from the official representations fostered by the media.

Finally, the perspectives of the third paradigm bring different questions to bear. McLuhan (1994) would undoubtedly have pointed to the way in which technical media could stretch space and time to bring media representations into my living room, and to the way in which scientific culture and everyday impressions had imploded. Science was no longer the specialised concern of an elite culture but was popularly shared by everyone. Baudrillard (1983) would have pointed to the extent to which space was a simulated event. For instance, he might argue that notions of space travel are socially constructed through regimes of interpretation formed in different historical periods. He could also argue that popular representations of rocket launches were the modern-day equivalent of the pioneer spirit

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which ideologically helped the Europeans colonise native Americans. The popular idea of space also drew upon American comic books, science fiction films and 1950s radio serials. Space is intertextual and does not exist separately from popular forms. Further, Baudrillard could argue that the institution of one-way forms of communication helped impose this culture on the people. The majority of the population would, on this reading, have paid only the most distracted forms of attention to the out-of-focus pictures coming in from the moon. Jameson (1991), on the other hand, would probably agree with Baudrillard that notions of space were represented through popular codes, but without denying that they were also real events. Unlike other Marxist thinkers, he might be less concerned with the colonisation of a critical public sphere, and more with the search for a popular utopian moment. This was certainly evident in my own experience. Despite being eight years old, I can still remember the intense feelings I had of watching this historic event, and the overwhelming sense of hope and optimism that was caught up with the landing on the moon. These projections connected, at the end of the 1960s, with a general sense that science and technology could be harnessed to improve the quality of life of most of those who lived on the planet. That this has since failed to emerge leads me back to more critical currents of theorising.

This somewhat impressionistic analysis does not do justice to the complexity of the concerns evident within this text. Any serious detailed study cannot be summarised in a few nostalgic sentences about the events of 1969. However, the following discussion attempts to lay the perspectives open so that they can be applied by students, academics and lay readers alike. In doing so, it might be possible to demonstrate that social theory and mass communications has much to contribute to our understanding of the modern world. By exploring a specific set of theoretical issues I aim to show how this is so. In this sense the book is meant to have a critical as well as a democratic function. This is important given the growing importance of media cultures within most people's everyday lives. It is undoubtedly the case that the practice of media cultures in the modern world is being rapidly transformed. These changes are being driven along by a multitude of social forces which include new ownership patterns, new technology, globalisation, state policy and audience practices to name but a few. These dramatic shifts require wide ranging forms of debate both inside and outside of academic circles. Arguably the very nature of our culture is changing and this will present both current and future generations with new possibilities and dangers. In the following chapters I aim to outline the beginnings of a new project for cultural studies in this respect. This involves the need to reconnect cultural to economic and political practices in such a way that their specificity is respected. This has many precedents in the history of cultural and media studies, although it has been lost in the recent developments within postmodernism, **discourse** theory and semiotics. Here I will try to provide some of the theoretical tools that are required if we are to analyse



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adequately the changes taking place in media practice and cautiously point to ways in which this venture could be reconnected with more democratic currents and concerns. This should give the reader some of the tools necessary to do media analysis of their own, outline wider structural changes that impact on media cultures and provide a broad critical knowledge of the subject area. However the major aims of this book are to present a clearly written account of a complex field of theoretical practice and to defend the normative relevance of democratic media cultures in increasingly troubled times. If I can do this then my venture will have been worthwhile.

