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Bridging Gaps: Ten Crosscurrents in Media Studies

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Once upon a time, it was popular to declare war between opposing camps in media studies. The struggle between "critical theory" and "mass communications" or later between "cultural studies" and "political economy" in UK and US media research was one such example. In other parts of the world, those polarities were much less dominant, and today many old gaps seem to have been bridged. Several old and new issues are still contested and need to be worked through, but I do not think that this should be done in terms of gaps and divides. When a field is divided by deep clefts, a productive strategy is often to seek third positions from where to mediate the two and see how they offer models of understanding that may enrich and supplement each other, if dialectically reinterpreted from a less reductive standpoint. Today, even that may be an outdated mode of reasoning, since one may argue that there is not any longer two firm and distinct camps in media studies, but rather a dynamically interweaving set of currents that sometimes reinforce, sometimes contradict each other.

I will here outline five pair of trends that have been particularly influential and inspiring during the last decades, and that are particularly relevant to the future directions of media research. None of them is a real turn, implying any total change in all of media studies. Instead, they form double streams that may run in parallel, feed into each other, or become crosscurrents whose intersections create tensions and contradictions. Each pair is in some sense paradoxical and contradictory, pointing out key ambivalences and contradictions in the present situation. This is therefore an alternative to thinking in terms of gaps or borders. As for gaps, I do not believe there is anymore one dominant dichotomy that divides the field. It is more relevant to talk of borders and not least of hybrid borderlands, but these pairs are too complexly intertwined to even make such a term useful. Each current has been contested and is deeply ambiguous, and any precise dating is difficult since they have developed in steps that differ between countries.[i]

My point here is threefold. A first goal is to lift up ten trends that, though contestable, all deserve to be taken seriously as impulses to renew and revitalize media studies. Secondly, I will argue that great surplus insights for media studies are to be won by reading them in relation to each other, acknowledging their intersections instead of isolating them from each other. While each current may be familiar, they are rarely sufficiently juxtaposed, though there are important interrelations between these media studies discourses. Taken together, it becomes clear how much they mutually constitute each other and offer a richer understanding of the challenges that lie ahead, by posing challenging questions concerning the scope and definition of media and media studies. Third, this dialogic exercise indicates that the usual divides are increasingly less relevant in the new media landscape and intellectual scene, both being characterized by fluidity and hybridization.

Cultural and Contextual Currents

Since the 1950s, a *cultural current* has been observed in a series of scientific fields, not least in the social sciences, not least in media studies.[ii] The impact of cultural studies is one example, but there is also more widely a growing attention to the cultural public sphere that has previously been relatively neglected in mass communication research.[iii] Media forms involving entertainment and the arts are taken more seriously as contributors to communication processes that shape collective identities and public opinions. This has opened up new roads for humanities perspectives in the media studies field.

The cultural current in media studies and academia at large is part of a more general trend towards "culturalization" that has increasingly acknowledged the importance of cultural dimensions in all spheres of society, including management, regional development, politics and everyday life. A series of cultural turns have given rise to subdisciplines like cultural sociology or cultural economics, and to interdisciplinary fields like cultural studies, which has since the 1990s been dispersed and hybridised into a diversified and glocalized borderland, serving as a transnational and polyfocal interface for different approaches to issues of meaning, identity and power.[iv] It is now evident that there has not been one single cultural turn, and that there are many varieties of cultural perspectives in media studies, as elsewhere.

The culturalizing trend has grown in counterpoint with a *contextual current* in cultural research, striving to analyse the contents and meanings of media texts and genres in a wide set of contexts. This includes the intertextual contexts that will be scrutinized in next section, but in particular also the social contexts formed by the institutions and practices of production, dissemination and reception through which media texts circulate and are ascribed meaning and function in society. Meanings, identities and power relations are seen as constituted by the interaction between texts, subjects and contexts, all in the plural, rather than by any of these elements alone. This is obvious in cultural studies, where political aspects of cultural genres are emphasized, but also in other studies of media culture, where themes like cultural citizenship, communicative rights and media literacy have shed light on the social settings of texts and practices. This has strengthened a kind of social science perspective in humanities-oriented research.

In one sense, these first two currents oppose each other, since one expands the world of texts while the other restricts it. Whereas culturalization makes texts and meanings more central to media studies, contextualization is a decentring force. They tend to have different locations: the first in social sciences where practices and institutions are already established frameworks, the second in the already textually oriented humanities.

But in another sense they can equally well be seen as siblings, as they often run very well together. One example is when Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno or Jacques Derrida strove through immanent critique or textual deconstruction to make each close scrutiny of unique texts a deciphering of modern societies on a larger scale. A second example is the work of cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, which has been made impressive efforts to account for both the symbolic and the social aspects of cultural practices. His work also contributed to fill the gap between quantitative and qualitative methods, by innovatively combining the two. If culture needs to be contextualized in order to reach a deeper understanding of its signifying processes, then there is no problem in using statistical methods as one of several paths that open up in order to make the necessary detour through the distancing explanatory models required by critical hermeneutics (Ricoeur 1969/1974, 1976,

1981). In cultural studies, contextualizing textual analysis is always regarded as a key tool to reflexively situate knowledge (Ang 1996: 66ff; Gray 2002: 181ff). This should make use of a wide range of approaches, including those dealing with social practices and institutions. It is therefore a pity that UK and US media studies have long seemed so stuck in a rigid opposition between "cultural studies" and "political economy". This divide has elsewhere been much less deep, as the two perspectives have been much better integrated in for instance East Asia, Latin America and the Nordic countries (Chen 1998; Del Sarto et al. 2004; Fornäs 2007c).

Together, the cultural and contextual currents have since the 1960s offered a useful basis for convergence or at least collaboration between humanities and social sciences in media studies. This combination of currents has given media studies a central role in exploring ways to bridge methodological gaps between the two academic sectors. Culturalization made social scientists aware of the dimension of meaning-making that as a third space of intersubjectivity mediates the traditional polarities between the social and the subjective or the collective and the individual levels. It has thus heightened social scientists' awareness of the fundamental societal importance of texts. Contextualization has meanwhile forced textual analysis to take seriously the intertextual, institutional and social contexts that co-determine each interpretation, thus making at least some humanities scholars more aware of the cultural importance of contexts. The combining of these twin currents thus offers a chance to fuse textual and contextual perspectives, and thus cultural and social traditions of research. There have certainly been counter-tendencies, contestations and even backlashes, but yet both these currents are now firmly established and have an effective presence in media studies, superimposed by subsequent currents.

Digital and Intermedial Currents

With the advent of computers and the Internet came a *digital current*, blooming from the 1980s onwards. New ICT media have had difficulties finding their optimal place in the academic landscape. Media and communication studies have sometimes tended to reduce them to either extensions or competitors of traditional mass media (press, radio and television), leaving room for technical departments or ad hoc institutions. Potentially, the digital current has considerable repercussions on media studies. The intersection of humanities and social sciences with technological research is one such new interface. Digitalization has questioned media studies' inherited focus on journalism-based mass media, thereby adding momentum to the cultural turn by demanding greater attention to a range of other media forms such as books, photography, phonography and cinema. The invitation to an expanded media concept is a key challenge but not quite easy to deal with, since a McLuhan-inspired generalization of the media concept to include all human forms of symbolic mediation threatens to overflow all boundaries and deprive the area of any reasonable sense of distinction from other scientific areas. Other difficulties are to balance critical and utopian perspectives on new communication technologies, to estimate what is really new in so-called new media, and to see how the remediation of older communication technologies and media genres change the conditions also for the already established forms (Bolter & Grusin 1999; Jenkins 2006).

Digitalization has also nourished a fourth, multi- or rather *intermedial current*, in that the digital formats enable a convergence of media that have previously been developed in mutual separation. But this strengthened awareness of intermedial relations have grown in other media areas as well, as in interarts studies and literary intertextuality. These trends threaten to make inherited boundaries obsolete between aesthetic disciplines (literature, film, music,

arts), and forces media studies to heighten its reflexivity concerning how existing borders between media types are socially and discursively constructed and historically dynamic.

Once again, there are both parallels and tensions between the two currents in this pair. Introducing the idea of 'new media', the digital current has fuelled an intermedial current that through the idea of remediation actually tends to dissolve this very border between old and new, proposing instead to use similar interdisciplinary methods on all modes and technologies of communication, thus questioning the talk of 'new' media altogether. Some media are newer than others, but the concept of remediation highlights continuities that are always there as well. Digital network media have drawn attention to aspects of all media (even ancient ones) that have long been neglected, mainly due to the hegemony of research on the traditional mass media of press, television and radio, founded on a determining role of journalism-based corporations and industries in the formation of media research. This has hampered a more complex and broad understanding of mediated communication in general. Internet research has thus usefully renewed the field by widening the scope of media research to include previously neglected modes of mediated communication. On the other hand, a problem with some Internet studies has been that they have constructed a smooth divide between old and new media, which is untenable.

The combination of these two currents points to a need to widen and reflectively rethink a whole series of basic concepts in media studies, including the definition of media itself. This was done in the media-ethnographic 'Passages' project, which, inspired by Walter Benjamin's (1982/1999) *Arcades Project*, investigated how various media forms circulate and are used within a contemporary shopping centre, with three emphases (Fornäs et al. 2007b). (1) First, the widening forms of mediation and their mutual interdependence necessitated a broadened concept of media and a focus on the interplay between media circuits. Experts on literature, music, arts and digital interactivity analysed how media circuits are kept apart but also cross over in practices of production, distribution, consumption and use. (2) Second, the temporal process of consumption was restored in four chain links from selection and purchase to use and disposal. This made it possible to bridge gaps between production, reception and consumption analysis, where consumption research tends to focus on purchase whereas reception research tends to just see how media are used and interpreted. It was further studied how commodities interplayed with other forms such as gifts or public goods, with the city library as a key interface. (3) Third, media practices were contextualized in both time and space, which links back to the second current above, but also to those that will follow. This Passages project is an example of how the interplay between currents can be made productive.

One further methodological consequence of these two currents lies in their filling of the gap between ethnographic observation and textual analysis. It has been increasingly admitted that ethnography makes use of textual analysis as one of its tools for 'writing culture' (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Marcus & Fischer 1986). It has also been argued by hermeneutic reception theorists that textual interpretation is rooted in intersubjective interaction (Fish 1980). Yet, ethnography and textual analysis have generally been kept firmly apart. Expanding interactive technologies make it possible to fuse the two, for instance in online ethnography where researchers may interact with informants, using precisely the same channels they use, thus being a fully present participant observer, yet at the same time also being able to redefine that same work as a textual reading, since all the interchange takes place in electronically mediated form (Fornäs et al. 2002; Sundén 2003). The combining of these two currents

allows media research to mediate between continuity and change, but also between a wide and a narrow media concept.

Historical and Spatial Currents

Inspired by Marshall McLuhan (1964/1987) and Michel Foucault, Friedrich Kittler (1985/1990; 1997) and Jochen Hörisch (2001) represent a renewed *historical current* that is becoming influential in media studies (also Thompson 1995; Peters 1999). Media history has an ancient genealogy, but is now increasingly fashionable and theoretically sophisticated. This has strengthened humanities perspectives and counteracted the 'presentism' of much 'new media' research. New media history has simultaneously reinforced the digital and intermedial currents in widening the range of media research and linking media areas previously studied in mutual isolation.

In the same recent period, one may also discern a *spatial current*, emphasising the spatial settings of media production and media use, inspired by anthropological media ethnography (Hannerz 1996; McCarthy 2001; Askew & Wilk 2002; Ginsburg et al. 2002; Bird 2003; Gemzöe 2004; Couldry & McCarthy 2004; Falkheimer & Jansson 2006; Morley 2006; Fornäs 2007b). New media history has itself tended also to highlight these spatial dimensions, so that these two trends are twins. But there is also a tension involved between the methodological traditions of historical archive studies and contemporary ethnography. Here, there is a need for bridging methodological gaps that may otherwise threaten to isolate media history as an enclave for old media forms from media ethnography as a study of current practices only.

When cultivated in mutual isolation, the historical and spatial currents may clash. New genealogical research has an ambivalent relationship both to new media research and to contemporary ethnography. On one hand it is directly inspired by how digital technologies have enabled a much wider study of remediation processes, but on the other hand it is often critical against the 'presentism' of 'new media' approaches. There is also a tension between historians and ethnographers, which the Passages project strived to overcome, as its contextualization in time and space connected these two currents (Fornäs et al. 2007b). Here, the link to Benjamin was particularly fruitful, in that a historizing contextualization of media practices shed light on the implications of current transformations. This hinted at the potentialities of letting media history mix with ethnography instead of being isolated as a method to only study the past.

Taken together, these two currents allow historical genealogy and discourse analysis to meet contemporary ethnography and cultural geography in challenging ways, and to more generally combine temporal and spatial aspects of media practices.

Visual and Aural Currents

There is a rather obvious link between the spatial current and the strong *visual current*, arguing that visual culture is of increasing societal importance and needs specific attention (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996; Sturken & Cartwright 2001; Fuery & Fuery 2003). This has further amplified the culturalization of media studies as well as the intermedial convergence of research on mass media, cinema and the visual arts.

However, the strong formulation of this current may be sincerely questioned. For instance, verbal communication still retains a strong position, not least on the Internet, and verbal script media (from print to computer screens) are visual modes of communication, too. Also, aural

modes of communication, not least music but also speech, continues to be of great importance in today's mediascape (Fornäs 1997, 1995: 154ff). The visual current can be balanced with a less often discussed *aural current*, in that there have also been determined efforts to deal with film soundtracks, television and radio sound, telephones and music media of various kinds (Altman 1992; van Leeuwen 1999; Kittler et al. 2002).

Once more, these two currents can be seen as either supporting or contradicting each other. In principle, all sensual modes of communication closely interact in the digital age, but some visual culture studies have regrettably tended to systematically neglect the aural dimension and close their ears to the likewise expanding sound world that digital network media have opened up – from the CD to MP3, iPhones and karaoke. It is essential not to conflate the verbal/nonverbal distinction with the visual/aural one, and instead to fully acknowledge the multidimensional complexity of human communication faculties, including writing and images as well as music and speech. One should likewise not simplify historical trends to linear or momentary transitions, as all the sensory modes of communication are intrinsically multimodal and cannot meaningfully be measured against each other. The combining of these two currents allows a fuller understanding of the communicative interfaces of visual and aural elements, as well as of verbal and non-verbal aspects.

Material and Discursive Currents

The previous currents belong to a more general *material current*. Some scholars have argued against interpretation of meanings and for a focused attention on the materiality of media effects. The recent attention to visual and aural modes of communication connects to this current, inviting creative methods to be imported from arts and design research as well as from science and technology studies (STS). Milder versions of this position interrogate the materialities of mediation as a way of widening the scope of understanding of how meaning is constructed in communicative practices, linking back to how anthropological and ethnographic research investigate people's exchanges with things and also to the spatial current mentioned above (Gumbrecht & Pfeiffer 1994; McCarthy 2001; Sundén 2003).[v] However, in its radical formulations, inspired by shifting combinations of Michel Foucault (1969/1974), Gilles Deleuze (1993/2004), Friedrich Kittler (1997), Bruno Latour (2002, 2005) and Brian Massumi (2002), this position implies an anti-hermeneutic dethronement of meaning and signification as cornerstones of cultural research. This current is interwoven with some of the previous ones, as there are hidden affinities and continuities between French poststructuralism from Jacques Lacan to Gilles Deleuze and the cybernetic theories that serve as a foundation of much of STS and Internet research (Lafontaine 2007).

This current stands in a dialectical relation to a final, *discursive current*. In some ways, the two again contradict each other, in that radical discourse analysis tends to deconstruct material worlds (from sensual and affective bodies to technological machines) as effects of social and communicative discourses, while on the other hand materialist positions have argued against textual analysis of mediation and for a return to immediate lived experience and material effects (Tolson 1996; Grossberg 1997, 1998; McRobbie 1997). For instance, are human bodies and technical artefacts in communication practices to be seen as extratextual material actors or textual discursive constructs? However, on closer scrutiny, the two streams often run highly parallel, as for instance Judith Butler (2004) searches for ways to understand the close interaction between materiality and discourse.

One may counter the anti-hermeneutic argument by regarding materiality and meaning as indissolubly intertwined. The structuralist deconstruction of representations and narratives once gave hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur an opportunity to critically reconstruct the theory of interpretation (Ricoeur 1969/1974: 27-96; 1981: 152ff, 215ff and 280ff). He argued that 'structural comprehension is never without a degree of hermeneutic comprehension, even if the latter is not thematized' (Ricoeur 1969/1974: 56), since every structural analysis necessarily builds on – and leads to – some kind of understanding of the signifying phenomena analysed. Instead of seeing structural explanations as antithetic to hermeneutic interpretation he argued that they are actually its tools, functioning as productive detours necessary to decipher the deeper meanings of a text: 'Henceforth, the understanding of structures is no longer outside an understanding whose task would be to *think* by starting from symbols; today this understanding of structures is the necessary intermediary between symbolic naïvité and hermeneutic comprehension' (Ricoeur 1969/1974: 60f). Therefore, understanding is 'entirely *mediated* by the whole of explanatory procedures which precede it and accompany it' (Ricoeur 1981: 220).

In a similar manner, it may be argued that the various materialist analyses proposed by Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) or by Kittler's media history should be seen as means for making cultural interpretations richer and more multifaceted, rather than (as Latour and Kittler falsely believe) as contradicting hermeneutics. The same can be said of the other currents, as for instance spatial or visual research methods uncover new aspects of meaning and thus make cultural analysis stronger. A mediating late-modern critical hermeneutics makes evident that the new materialism can never escape meaning-making, but is valuable for drawing new and under-researched matter into the reach of cultural interpretation, and as an impulse to reflexively scrutinize how processes of signification and representation are constituted (Fornäs 2000).

The last pair therefore paradoxically connects back to the opening current by pointing at the continually expanding limits of meaning-making and thus of the cultural perspective as such, while at the same time highlighting its never-ending productivity. The exchange between these two interacting currents makes it possible to better understand the ongoing dialectics between materiality and meaning in human communication.

Mediations

There is thus a wide range of intersections between all these ten crosscurrents in media studies. They emphasize different dimensions of mediation: texts (cultural and contextual currents), technologies (digital and intermedial currents), situations (historical and spatial currents), modes (visual and aural currents) and embodiments (material and discursive currents). First, all of them can be contested and need to be refined, but still contribute welcome challenges to traditional media studies. Second, instead of pursuing them in isolation, their interrelations highlight key dynamics and dilemmas in the field. They sometimes contradict each other and form the basis for paradigmatic struggles, but letting them critically work on and with each other makes it possible to dialectically advance the media studies field at large.

Third, none of these currents gives rise to insuperable divides; instead they invite more open forms of thinking in terms of borderlands and bridges. The present period may be extraordinarily rich in such openings for hybridity and linkages. Not all are happy with such a state, and in fact several of the scholars behind each of the currents are eager to rebuild

excluding walls or dig dividing ditches. Others have tried to instead develop combinatory methods for which this historical moment seems particularly apt. This demands a dialogic or mediational mode of thinking reminding of how Paul Ricoeur (2004/2006) has argued for the ethical values of translation, and how Étienne Balibar (2004: 235) argues for 'the idea of the "vanishing mediator"' with 'Europe as the *interpreter of the world*, translating languages and cultures in all directions', in 'an attempt to restore the political function of intellectuals' where they 'would be border lines themselves'. Media studies has a unique chance to make use of this conjuncture of relaxed boundaries and from a position of mediation exploit the productive potentials of the dialogical combination of these challenging crosscurrents.

Endnotes

[i] These currents were first outlined in a brief presentation at the interdisciplinary workshop on 'Bridging Methodology Gaps, Building Institutional Bridges', organized by the European Science Foundation (ESF) at the University of London, UK, 10-12 December 2007.

[ii] For an overview, see Fornäs et al. (2007a). An example is Jürgen Habermas (1985/1988, 1988/1992) who repeatedly stresses the importance for modern social science of a reflexive understanding of the intersubjective, symbolic and communicative levels that mediate between subjective inner experience and objectivized institutions.

[iii] This trend is evident in almost every overview of media research developments, with Boyd-Barrett & Newbold (1995) as but one example. For further analysis of the close links between culture and communication, see Geertz (1973: 4ff), Williams (1981: 206ff), Hannerz (1992: 3ff) and Fornäs (1995: 134ff).

[iv] See the Crossroads in Cultural Studies conferences that started in Tampere 1996 and the Association for Cultural Studies ACS founded in 2002 (www.cultstud.org). Bennett (1998: 535) argues that the field of cultural studies serves as 'an interdisciplinary clearing-house', 'providing a useful interface at which the concerns of different disciplines, and of other interdisciplinary knowledges, can enter into fruitful forms of dialogue'. See also Fornäs (2007c).

[v] Fornäs (2007a) analyses money designs in media terms, thus exemplifying how attention to material artefacts may widen the scope of media analysis in unexpected directions.

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