# Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast

## The Imaginary World of Media Studies

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# Six Impossible Things before Breakfast

**Slide**

> The White Queen: 'Now I'll give *you* something to believe. I'm just one hundred and one, five months and a day.'
> 'I can't believe *that!*' said Alice.
> 'Can't you?' the Queen said in a pitying tone. 'Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.'
> Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said: 'one *can't* believe impossible things.'
> 'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast' (Lewis Carroll, *Through the looking-glass*, 100). **Slide**

## Introduction

Every discipline has blind spots. The kind that concerns me here is to do with its presuppositions. By definition, proponents of any intellectual approach have to treat some issues as axiomatic or as beyond question in order to get on with the business of studying whatever aspect of the world that concerns them. What determines the fate of almost all academic approaches and schools of thought is weaknesses, incoherencies and confusion over these presuppositions. As no body of theory in the humanities has yet withstood the tests of time and criticism, its history of thought consists of the corpses of arguments once imagined to be supreme, invulnerable and eternally true. Ways of addressing this Achilles' heel varies from intensive reflexive discussion in more critical disciplines to largely ignoring the problems and pointing instead to the relevance of the results of inquiry. Mostly it is just hoping they will go away or that no one will notice.[1]

Media and Communication Studies occupy an interesting position along this cline for at least three reasons. First, their object of study is so broad as to be virtually coterminous with the human and natural world. Every organism communicates internally and externally; society and culture are often defined semiotically; digital technologies depend on mathematical models of communication; and everything except divine revelation is mediated. Second, Media Studies is relatively new and a second order discipline, by which I mean that an embarrassing number of disciplines claim ownership or, at least, singular pertinence. These include: Mass Communications, Political Science, Political Economy, Economics, Sociology, Social Theory, Film Theory, Information Theory, Feminist Theory, History, Law, Psychology, Cultural Studies, Literary Studies, Rhetoric and Anthropology. Each of these comes with its own distinct presuppositions, core concepts, objects of inquiry, methods and debates. So, declarations of what Media Studies is all about tend to be territorial claims about the

[1] Originally this was a talk delivered to a research seminar series at SOAS. By request I have expanded it from a lecture to a full written piece. The accompanying slides are from the lecture version.
My recourse to impossibilities might seem a conceit. However it is not without grounds. First, the concepts of media and communication arise in response to a problem (strictly a 'problematic', see below). The question here is how they might be better stated.

> All concepts are connected to problems without which they would have no meaning and which can themselves only be isolated or understood as their solution emerges… concepts are only created as a function of problems which are thought to be badly understood or badly posed (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 16).

Nor is invoking Lewis Carroll inapposite. As Deleuze argued in great detail, the absurdities, paradoxes and impossibilities that litter the two Alice books are sophisticated commentaries on the limits of both common and good sense.

> Paradox is initially that which destroys good sense as the only direction, but it is also that which destroys common sense as the assignation of fixed identities…
> *The paradox of the absurd or of the impossible objects*. From this paradox is derived yet another: the propositions which designate contradictory objects themselves have a sense… They are of 'extra being' — pure, ideational events, unable to be realized in a state of affairs (Deleuze 1990: 3, 35).

value of one discipline over against the others. Understandably then Media Studies scholars incline, like those in Development Studies, to stress the immediate relevance of what they do as self-justification. In the words of the eponymous sit-com: 'Never mind the quality, feel the width'.

Does it actually matter? It depends. Knowledge is, in effect, always for a purpose. So, whether a discipline's shaky underpinnings are germane or not, depends on what you are trying to achieve. If the alternatives are less desirable, the extra effort in questioning existing wisdom disproportionate and the *caveat*s explicit, ignoring the potential problems may well be 'close enough for government work'. Am I not being too fussy though? In the real world, is not how the mass media work largely commonsense? Such a stance might appear backed by the authority of what Kuhn called 'normal science' (1970), provided that you do not bother to question what 'normal' or 'the real world' are.[2] If, however, you are of a questioning inclination, are interested in what is going on under the bonnet or—to switch metaphors—want to know how thin the ice is that you are skating on, then you may wish to read on.[3]

To avoid confusion, I am *not* questioning whether the arguments put forward by Media Studies are effective or important. Branches of Communication Studies underwrite a narrative that glorifies capitalism and its development, and is in no small part funded by, or otherwise in hock to, telecommunications corporations. Left-leaning media critics on the other hand have engaged in some fine forensic analysis of the hidden agendas and ideology of the former. My interest is not in the relevance, but in the presuppositions, of these arguments. It is perfectly possible to say something relevant but on grounds that are wrong or fatally flawed at the same time. **Slide**

Without further ado, let me list six fairly basic sets of questions that confront Media Studies. These are:

1. What kind of problems does Media Studies single out for examination? In Bachelard's terms, what is the 'problematic': how do we formulate the precise problems we wish to investigate? The four most common answers are probably communication, information, mediation or representation. **Slide** And what do we communicate? Usually it is some version of information.
2. What are the institutions or systems in which communication or the mass media are cardinal—or even constitutive—such that Media Studies considers it important to investigate? Broadly these include culture, society or the polity, this last being instantiated in popular formulae like the 'public sphere' or nations as 'imagined communities'.[4] A subsidiary question is: What sort

[2] Hacking's *The taming of chance* (1990) is necessary reading for anyone who deploys the term 'normal', let alone has recourse to averages or statistics. Far from being self-evident, its use has often proven suspect, if not disingenuous.
The philosopher R.G. Collingwood summed up realism:

> In low-grade or unscientific thinking we hardly know that we are making any presuppositions at all. Be- cause of their tangled condition, the thoughts which come up out of the bottom of our minds present a deceptive appearance of 'immediacy'...This theory of knowledge is called 'realism'; and 'realism' is based upon the grandest foundation a philosophy can have, namely human stupidity (Collingwood 1940: 34).

[3] History is not a kind judge of hubris or stupidity, as the life of Thomas Midgley Jr., who inflicted on the world both lead in petrol and chlorofluorocarbons, attests.
Closer to home, two fairly senior BBC television producers took the Master's course that I taught on *Rethinking Audiences* in different years. They were so shocked by the gulf between state-of-the-art academic writing about audiences and BBC senior management's assumptions that each remarked separately that the BBC could not function if management had any idea what audiences were actually up to.

[4] My aim here is not to analyze the various notions of political society, which would have to include Gramsci's civil society. I would just note that, whereas for Habermas members of society come together to deliberate common concerns, for Gramsci civil society is involved in political hegemony unless people actively strive to make it counter-hegemonic.

of epistemological status do such terms have? As they are not unproblematic entities, but essentially contested, who gets to represent them *as* what becomes part of any critical analysis worth its salt. **Slide**

3. What working concepts does Media Studies draw on to frame these problems and objects? Usually these include some mix of the following: institutions, structures, systems, texts or discourses. **Slide**
4. Who (or what) engages with whom (or what) and how? The answers vary widely according to the school of thought. They may be: senders/receivers, producers/audiences, élites/masses. How does this happen? Does it involve transmission, influence, socialization, entertainment, consumption or what? **Slide**
5. What intellectual genealogy is brought to bear? And how does this affect inquiry? As each of the disciplines that claims to address the mass media has its own distinctive histories and agendas, how does each set about investigating the media? For several reasons, I shall choose Anthropology, which enquires into the constitutive social practices of media institutions and structures using a distinctive method: ethnography.[5] **Slide**
6. How are the processes identified supposed to work? Once again, the answer depends on the intellectual genealogy and has become increasingly complex. Originally for Mass Communications, it used to be some notion of effects, persuasion or influence; whereas for Cultural Studies it was something more like texts or discourse from which readers or viewers extrapolated meaning. Each discipline frames—or sidesteps—these questions in different ways. However, what has been relatively unexplored is the role of argument. The omission is slightly bizarre, as the relative merits of rhetoric as against logic as a means of persuasion comprise a European debate that has been running for over 2,000 years. **Slide**

As this talk was originally for a SOAS audience, one further consideration is germane. What is at issue in cultural translation? The difficulties of translating simple sentences between languages which are not even radically different has long been recognized.[6] Matters become worse when we consider complex culturally distinctive products like texts, narratives and styles of argument. The idea that

[5] In ascending order of seriousness, the reasons for selecting Social/Cultural Anthropology are: 1) It is the discipline that I know best; 2) Many other disciplines concerned with the media have gradually come round to realizing that anthropological methods, notably ethnography, are useful for resolving intellectual stalemates; 3) Ethnography offers quite new ways of thinking about old problems, while its theoretical stress on practice offers a quite different way of casting familiar problems.

[6] The point was put neatly by van Humboldt in a letter to Schlegel:

> All translation seems to me simply an attempt to solve an impossible task. Every translator is doomed to be done in by one of two stumbling blocks: he will either stay too close to the original, at the cost of taste and the language of his nation, or he will adhere too closely to the characteristics peculiar to his nation, at the cost of the original. The medium between the two is not only difficult, but downright impossible… Despite the fact that translation brings cultures nearer, in each translation, there will be a definite deformation between cultures (1796).

What Quine called ‘radical translation’ (1960) raises far more serious problems. Unlike, say, cognate European languages with a shared history of translating, working between languages where there has been little, if any, cultural contact involves working between alternative possible ‘translation manuals’ with no way in principle of deciding between them. Even this refinement is inadequate if sentences and images are not easily interconvertible. According to Deleuze, Foucault had shown in exhaustive detail that the articulable (discourse) and the visible (what we see) are of different, incommensurable orders (1988a: 47-69). Closer to home, as Ernst Gombrich noted, the realist assumption that people interpret, or even see, images identically across cultures or historical periods is misplace (1960). We learn to see. As anthropologists discovered, people who have never encountered photographs or moving images have to be taught how to recognize persons and scenes in them.

these submit to universally applicable modes of 'decoding' within, far less across, societies is manifestly inadequate (e.g. Hall 1980) if not preposterous. Whether you choose to regard these questions as problems to be addressed and, if possible, overcome; or ultimately as impossibilities around which most scholars tiptoe quietly depends as much as anything on your temperament.

## Some Background

One reason that such questions hanging over Media Studies are relatively little discussed is that attention of directed towards a few long-running debates. These arguments serve to displace attention from more fundamental and intractable problems and to inoculate (in Barthes's terms, 1973: 151-2), scholars from so recognizing by substituting set-piece disputations for critical inquiry into what these arguments presuppose. The spuriously sharp dichotomies include broadly pro-industry American-style Mass Communications *versus* British left-wing sceptical Cultural Studies; quantitative *versus* qualitative approaches; or macro- *versus* micro-structures or processes.[7] Rather obviously, what sort of approach you use depends on the nature and purposes of inquiry. If you want to know, say, the audiences for peak-hour Indonesian television-viewing, you need sampling techniques. If you want to know how viewers engage with what they watch, you need quite different methods.

With so many disciplines claiming an intellectual interest in the study of media, matters become unusually tricky. Each has its own history, objects of study, core concepts, styles of argument, methods, debates and presuppositions. On the one hand, this allows for remarkable openness, play with ideas and creative confusion; on the other, it runs the risk of mistaking ambiguity for argument, drifting between definitions and plain muddle hiding behind polysyllables and scientific-sounding words like 'methodology'.[8] With so many different, but overlapping, theoretical ball games, it may be helpful to think of Media Studies as an intricate balancing act. **Slide** Failing to appreciate this is dangerous to unwary students. **Slide**

The problem may become clearer through an example. What sort of status is accorded individual human beings in different disciplines? The assumption that it is quite straightforward is common-sensical and wrong. Treating human subjects as indivisible atoms driven by self-interested rationality is a relatively recent European idea (Henriques *et al*. 1984; Rorty 1976; Taylor 1989) and co-exists or, rather, competes with several others. Among these are ideas about human subjects as inextricably social so that we are fixed within different sets of relationships, not least those with the mass media.[9] For instance, in statistics individual human beings have no significance in themselves, but only as

[7] David Morley's retort to the argument that an interest in micro-processes involves opting out of serious intellectual debates merits noting.

> In [Corner's] analysis, this new research is seen to amount largely to 'a form of sociological quietism…in which increasing emphasis on the micro-processes of viewing relations displaces…an engagement with the macrostructures of media and society' (Corner 1991:4)… I find this particular formulation problematic, in so far as it malposes the relation between macro and micro, effectively equating the former with the 'real'. Corner's analysis fails to recognize, among other things, the articulation of the divisions macro/micro, real/trivial, public/ private, masculine/feminine—which is what much of the work which he criticizes has, in various ways, been concerned with. More centrally, Corner seems to invoke a notion of the macro which is conceptualized in terms of pre-given structures, rather than (to use Giddens's phrase) 'structuration' (Giddens 1979) and which fails to see that macro-structures can only be reproduced through micro-processes. Unless one deals in a reified sense of 'structure' such an entity is, in fact, simply an analytical construct detailing the patterning of an infinite number of micro-processes and events (cf. Saussure 1974, on the status of *langue*) (1992a: 17).

[8] Invoking terms like 'methodology' exemplifies how the semi-educated try to hide their ignorance behind big words. It is not a synonym for method. Methodology means the scientific study of method, just as anthropology means the scientific study of *anthropos*, or human beings. Here 'scientific' is rigorous epistemological investigation applicable equally to the natural as the human sciences.

[9] Being social, humans widely imagine that actions and events may have relevance or significance that it is useful to appreciate. In other words, the social world is rhetorical in that it may persuade people to do (or refrain from) something.

members or instances of broader classes, which is why statistics does not work on very small populations. They are data (information that is notionally 'given') in the formulation of general trends, tendencies, probabilities and so on. **Slide**

By contrast, a modern discipline like Psychology gives great weight to a uniquely modern Western idea of the subject *as* individual, as individuated atomized beings defined by an essential interiority. **Slide** We are so ceaselessly represented and, as Althusser phrased it, interpellated[10] *as* individuals through the mass media that it becomes normal and natural to imagine ourselves so. Not only is this wildly inaccurate historically, but it also requires ignoring all the other ways in which people are treated as subjects. Further, imposing such assumptions on the rest of the world is a fine act of cultural hegemony. As a group of radical psychologists pointed out, rather than accurately reflecting the nature of the modern subject, Psychology produces it (Henriques *et al*. 1984).[11] **Slide**

Sociologists and anthropologists work with quite different ideas about human subjects. The argument is perhaps developed to its fullest in French structuralism and post-structuralism, where the stress is on how humans have been historically—and are—culturally, socially, politically and legally constituted, imagined and addressed in different societies under different circumstances. Among these, of course, are the ways that human subjects are treated as if they were unique individuals, with 'unique' but conveniently standardized desires, a marketing strategy that advertisers have exploited ingeniously.[12] At one end is the American cultural approach to humans as essentially semiotic: 'human existence is symbolically constituted, which is to say, culturally ordered… structure is the organization of conscious experience that is not itself consciously experienced' (Sahlins 1999: 1, 10). Or, as Clifford Geertz famously put it: 'Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun' (1973: 5). **Slide** At the other end were structuralists like Lévi-Strauss: 'I therefore claim to show not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact' (1970: 12). One of the best known and subtlest protagonists of such a broad approach is, of course, Foucault (e.g. 1982). **Slide** Whatever their internal differences, anthropologists and post-structuralists concur that human subjects are constituted socially—however they understand that.

[10] Althusser argued that an indispensable function of the mass media, like other ideological state apparatuses, is to position people as subjects in distinctive ways, by which we learn to recognize when, and when not, it is we who are being hailed and addressed (interpellated; 1984: 158-62). A strength of this approach is that it complicates the naïve picture of human subjects either as *tabula rasa* or as preprogrammed entities, by inquiring into the cultural and historical conditions under which we become subjects and reflexively work with such depictions.

[11] Taylor continued:

> The fact that we are human only in conversation may be recognised in earlier societies in relation to extrahuman, or non-living interlocutors… This sense of dependency has been abolished as well by the movement of interiorization, which suppressed altogether the sense that we are persons only as interlocutors; and gave us a view of the subject as capable of purely inner, monological thought; of this monological thought as preceding any conversation (Taylor 1985: 278).

[12] A useful corrective to most Anglo-Saxon rather naïve accounts of consumerism is the work of Baudrillard (e.g. 1988a, 1998b, 1998c), of whom more anon.

## Six Problems or Impossibilities

### *1. The problematic—communication, information, mediation, representation:*

*Communication*

What kind of problems does Media Studies single out for examination? To rephrase this: On what kind of problematic does Media Studies concentrate?[13] The four most obvious candidates are communication, information, mediation and representation, each of which conjures up quite different questions. While we tend to think of communication narrowly as sending and receiving messages, and broadly as what the telecommunications' industry does, to do so involves historical amnesia.[14] Etymologically, the ambiguity in the supposed contrast of broadcast and social media dates back to the Latin usage, which can signify imparting to many or else sharing (*via* community and communion). **Slide** Another mode of closure more specific to Media Studies is invoking the *Mathematic theory of communication* willy-nilly, as if simply appealing to mathematics and the natural sciences sanctifies its usage, no matter how fundamentally different its subject matter. As its authors made abundantly clear, a mathematical theory applies to formal systems, *not* to semantic use in social contexts. **Slide**

*Information*

What is it that is communicated? Colloquially—and, regrettably, in much communication theory—it is information 'used as an abstract mass-noun used to denote any amount of data, code or text that is stored, sent, received or manipulated in any medium' (Adriaans 2018: 1). For the social world this usually implies a semantic idea of information as well-formed, meaningful and truthful data. Fulfilling such criteria tends to be elusive when it comes to the mass or social media. Information only appears a coherent and self-evident notion because it conflates a multitude of different and antithetical senses accumulated over two thousand years (Capurro & Hjørland 2003).

[13] A problematic is not a synonym for problem, but rejects a realist account of the world as an object of inquiry independent of how we understand it. On this account, a concept or idea only exists in the theoretical or ideological framework in which it is used. That is its problematic is interrogative not positive in that it considers the *absence* of problems as well as their presence. Although the term was made famous by Althusser, the questions had already been posed by Bachelard and are central to the work of Foucault and Deleuze.

> the concept of problematic initiates a critique of the subject–object relation in the explanation of thought in general and of science in particular. To think is not to try to tell the truth about any particular given objects (be these living organisms, things in motion or brains), as if there was a world out there waiting for us to lay our eyes on it; to think is to try to solve specific, singular problems. It might be worth observing that this substitution of the category of problem for that of object is something the French epistemological tradition shares with both the Popperian and the Heideggerian traditions. It accompanies what Deleuze calls in *Difference and Repetition* the critique of *representation*. Problems cannot take the form of an inquiry about the *essence* of things ('what is matter?', 'what is life?', 'what is X?'); instead they constitute that which makes it important, relevant, critical, to know about X (Maniglier 2012: 21).

[14] As Mattelart pointed out, in Western European usage:

> Excommunication [is the] separation from communication or trade with a person with whom one previously enjoyed it… In this sense any man excluded from a society or a body, and with whom the members of that body no longer have communication, may be said to be excommunicated... [So] communication will be understood here from a wider viewpoint, encompassing the multiple circuits of exchange and circulation of goods, people, and messages. This definition simultaneously covers avenues of communication, networks of long distance transmission, and the means of symbolic exchange, such as world fairs, high culture, religion, language, and of course the media. It also evokes the diverse doctrines and theories that have contributed to thinking about these phenomena (1996: xiii-xiv).

Drawing similarly upon the perils of forgetting history, Peters noted that two quite different European conceptions of communication have been around for two millennia: the dialogic and the broadcast. The first he identified with Plato's idea of thinking proceeding through question and response between interlocutors; the latter with the Christian image of sowing seed, only a little of which will fall on fertile ground (1999).

In this instance, early usage and etymology are again revealing. The Latin *informātiō* is literally 'shaping', 'giving form to' and, by extension, idea or conception. The image is of moulding the mind, which helps to explain how the commonsense idea of information works. It is by moulding the thoughts of the recipients. If information were not to have this function, what would be point of advertising and much else besides? Amusingly, classical empiricism subscribed to such a view. For Francis Bacon, the workings of the senses

> are a kind of matter (wax being a favorite empiricist instance) on which objects of the world may leave their shapes or stamps. What is interesting here is that the site of information is being shifted from the world at large to the human mind and senses (Peters 1988: 12, cited in Capurro & Hjørland 2003: 355).

As so often, contemporary usage reifies what was originally fluid and agentive. Consider the Oxford English Dictionary's first two definitions:

1. The action of informing; formation or moulding of the mind or character, training, instruction, teaching; communication of instructive knowledge;
2. The action of informing; communication of the knowledge or 'news' of some fact or occurrence; the action of telling or fact of being told of something.

Amnesia—or plain ignorance—seems a necessary condition for much communication theory.

For a start, the mathematical definition has nothing to do with semantic or agent-based accounts, which are obviously germane to media studies.[15]

> The word information, in this theory, is used in a special sense that must not be confused with its ordinary usage. In particular, information must not be confused with meaning. In fact, two messages, one of which is heavily loaded with meaning and the other of which is pure nonsense, can be exactly equivalent, from the present viewpoint, as regards information (Weaver 1949: 8).

Oh, dear! On this account information has nothing to do with either truth or meaning, which cuts the ground from under most Communication Studies usage. Matters get worse.

> The literature of information science is characterized by conceptual chaos. This conceptual chaos issues from a variety of problems in the definitional literature of information science: uncritical citing of previous definitions; conflating of study and practice; obsessive claims to scientific status; a narrow view of technology; disregard for literature without the science or technology label; inappropriate analogies; circular definition; and, the multiplicity of vague, contradictory, and sometimes bizarre notions of the nature of the term 'information' (Schrader 1983: 99, cited in Capurro & Hjørland 2003: 8).

No wonder French post-structuralist critiques came as a shock to banal Anglo-Saxon attitudes.

*Mediation*

Such misuse pales by comparison with the presupposition that perfect communication is somehow natural, normal, achievable or desirable in social relationships. A moment's reflection shows it to be at worst a pernicious fantasy, at best an ideal vainly to be striven for. As Lin Yutang put it: 'Society can exist only on the basis that there is some amount of polished lying and that no one says exactly what he thinks' (1933: 95). If we knew what political and other leaders really meant

[15] Even in the natural sciences, the concept of information is woolly.

> My skepticism about a definitive analysis of information acknowledges the infamous versatility of information. The notion of information has been taken to characterize a measure of physical organization (or decrease in entropy), a pattern of communication between source and receiver, a form of control and feedback, the probability of a message being transmitted over a communication channel, the content of a cognitive state, the meaning of a linguistic form, or the reduction of an uncertainty. These concepts of information are defined in various theories such as physics, thermodynamics, communication theory, cybernetics, statistical information theory, psychology, inductive logic, and so on. There seems to be no unique idea of information upon which these various concepts converge and hence no proprietary theory of information (Bogdan 1994: 53).

when they spoke to us, we would probably feel impelled either start a revolution or else sink into terminal depression. Mediation is, if anything, trickier with three quite different senses that have become intertwined (Williams 1983: 204-7). The problem is that everything except divine revelation is mediated through signs, relationships and so on. If reality is so thoroughly mediated, analytical recourse to a general hypostatized concept 'media' is pretty inane. It would be more apposite to examine the circumstances, motives and metamorphoses consequent on particular acts of mediation.

*Representation*

It has become voguish to speak of a 'crisis of representation'. This occurs when the notional correspondence between, and validation of, signs or words by what they refer to effectively collapses. Its latest manifestations are 'post-truth' or 'truthiness'. However, its European harbingers date back to Mallarmé in literature (see Foucault 1970) and Dadaism in art.[16] In fact the American founder of both philosophical pragmatism and semiotics, C. S. Peirce, had anticipated the issue as early as 1867, when he argued that signs refer not to the world, but to other previous signs. Although the urge to assume that images and words do—or at least ought to—correspond to some determinable state of affairs, the briefest consideration of how the mass media work brings home how far this is imaginary. What we read, see and hear in print, broadcast and social media refer to representations of representations of representations. At what remove, if any, these last converge on any actuality is questionable.

It was the so-called French post-structuralists, notably Baudrillard, Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault, who each in their own way irreversibly undermined any serious intellectual argument for the innocence of representation. However, to explain what was at issue, I shall use Peirce's American intellectual descendant, Nelson Goodman, because his account is easily accessible and to show that the quandaries of representation are not just Gallic gymnastics. Put simply, you cannot represent something as itself, because whatever it is has too many aspects and is appreciated in too many different contexts by too many different interlocutors using too many different media, genres or styles. In effect, representing involves a sleight of hand. **Slide** It claims accuracy or authenticity while in fact transforming what it represents. In practice, you represent something *as* something else to someone on some occasion for some purpose with some intended outcome. Goodman took the example of the Duke of Wellington, the general who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. However, there are an almost infinite number of actual or possible Wellingtons.[17] **Slide** So Baudrillard is on more solid intellectual ground than we might credit when he makes what might seem the far-fetched claim that we now live in no small part in an age of mass mediated simulacra.[18]

## *2. The objects to be investigated—The public sphere, imagined communities, culture, society*

What objects does a problematic about communication consider need investigating? There are many, depending on whether we are dealing with communication, mediation, representation or whatever. The kinds of problems can be illustrated by reference to communication. Let me consider

[16] Habermas called it a 'legitimation crisis' (1978), Lyotard 'the crisis of [meta-]narratives' (1984: xxiii) and the anthropologists Marcus and Fischer 'the crisis of representation' (1986: 7-16).

[17] Wellington happens to be an interesting example, because he refused all attempts to persuade him to write an account of the battle of Waterloo on the grounds that he had no idea what was going on. His point was that any general's knowledge is strictly limited to what he can see and what reports he gets 'in the heat of battle' with all their inaccuracies and partialities. Of course, that did not stop others publishing 'definitive' accounts of the battle which, as the military historian John Keegan (1976) noted, are sheer fantasy.

[18] His point is that, over the last two hundred years, the idea that images and signs 'reflect' a basic reality has been progressively undermined as we enter the age of the hyper-real (1994).

two that are familiar to anyone dealing with political communication: the public sphere and imagined communities. I shall be brief because, while the notions are appealing and beloved by generations of students who do not wish to think too hard, their deficiencies are obvious.

*The public sphere*

Habermas's notion of 'the public sphere' addresses the role of the media—here books, pamphlets and newspapers—in enabling the formation of public opinion, which acted as a countervailing force to conventional political power. Among the problems are that it is highly rationalist and deals with an ideal situation, which ignores issues of history, class (being focused only on the bourgeoisie) and gender. It universalizes a particular European cultural, and historically changing, dichotomy of public:private.[19] Why Habermas' argument is important is neatly encapsulated by the philosopher Charles Taylor (2004: 84-5). **Slide**

*The imagined community*

What I wish to reflect on is Taylor's point that the public sphere can only exist if it is so imagined, a theme elaborated in the title of Ben Anderson's book, *Imagined communities*. **Slide** When Anderson defined what he meant by the nation as an imagined community, one page encapsulated both the elegance and improbability of the argument.

> It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (2006: 6, emphases are all in the original unless otherwise indicated).

He draws upon the society he knew best, Java, to make sweeping generalizations about close on one hundred million people. Remarkably he went on to define Java—and, more broadly, Indonesia— as imagined through print media. Unfortunately, very few Javanese indeed had access to newspapers in Indonesian. So, Anderson was writing about a minuscule élite imposing their imagination on the rest of the nation, with whom ordinary villagers felt, and feel, scant community, let alone so alien, indeed Christian, a notion as 'communion'.[20] And the idea that a nation consists of a single unitary community rather than an argument between competing antagonistic visions is touchingly naïve. Modern Westerners tend to imagine that others live the antithesis of their dystopic urban existence in harmonious communities—usually farfetched rural idylls. A village community is, as the distinguished Indian anthropologist Srinivas rightly noted, almost always not face-to-face but back-to-back. In other words, its distinguishing feature is far more to do with ancient and modern hatreds than with any sense of communion. In short, we are dealing with a concept that is a charming imaginary, if not indeed circular (communities communicate, which is what makes them communities). Now is this just Anderson's blind spot or does it occur more widely?

*Imaginaries*

There is, interestingly, a fair degree of agreement among more thoughtful scholars, whether conservative or radical, that such concepts are imaginary. For instance, Taylor treats social imaginaries not as a positivity—society—but as *the conditions of its possibility*. It was Althusser,

[19] For a useful account of the relevance of Habermas's ideas in the context of social imaginaries, see Taylor 2004. For a helpful summary of criticisms, see Susen 2011. We might note a familiar tendency in Anglo-Saxon translations to impose a spatial, and so highly static, metaphor that is completely absent in the original. Here Habermas's *Öffentlichkeit* is an abstract noun with no spatial implications that English speakers tend to run with.

[20] Nor does the argument hold by substituting an Islamic *ummat* for Christian community. The literate Javanese élite were—and are—strikingly eclectic and regard themselves as far removed from the concerns of the *hoi polloi*.

however, who made extensive use of the idea of the Imaginary.[21] Helpful as the notions of ideology and imaginaries are as ways of criticizing systems of ideas, they involve untenable presuppositions, as Althusser's most celebrated pupil, Ernesto Laclau, noted (1990). *Inter alia* imaginaries—whether on Taylor's or Althusser's account—presuppose that there is a neutral standpoint, itself without a situated subject or presuppositions, from which you can judge what is real and imaginary, as well as what is true as against false consciousness. **Slide** It also assumes that entities like 'society' or 'culture' are total and coherent systems, arguments which Laclau shows to be implausible and irredeemably flawed. In other words, not only ideas like the public sphere or imagined communities, but grand concepts like society or culture, are unachievable and impossible ideals, which does not prevent them being striven for.

### *3. Key concepts—Institutions, structure, text and discourse.*

*Structure and institutions*

Different scholars tend to prefer different concepts, or different understandings of shared concepts, depending on their disciplinary backgrounds. However, several are commonly invoked such as institutions, structure, text and discourse. Now 'institution' has a range of senses to do with established practices or organizations and is a usefully vague word.[22] While in common parlance it is often used of large media corporations, almost any established group or practice is equally an institution. Anthropologically an institution is simply 'a standardized mode of co-activity' (Nadel 1958: 108). Structures are sets of institutions organized into some sort of totality or system.[23] The word 'structure' is invested with almost magical explanatory properties, which lays it so open to abuse (think of 'structural adjustment'), by scholars and those in power who, of course, have wide scope to enunciate how it is supposed to work. Structure may still have uses in mathematics but, applied to human affairs, it invites two kinds of question. First, what are the practices that are supposed to constitute structure, and how do these change? Second, who makes assertions about structure with what consequences? Claims about structure tend to be claims to power.

*Text*

More recently, two related concepts from Cultural Studies have become voguish: text and discourse. So people now speak of 'media texts' as part of a discourse to be analyzed. This is welcome

[21] Perhaps most famously he stated: 'Ideology is a 'Representation" of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence' (1984: 153).

[22] The two most relevant senses in the OED are:

> An established law, custom, usage, practice, organization, or other element in the political or social life of a people;
> An establishment, organization, or association, instituted for the promotion of some object.

[23] Again, the OED puts it clearly:

> An organized body or combination of mutually connected and dependent parts or elements. The mutual relation of the constituent parts or elements of a whole as determining its peculiar nature or character.

There was a period in the second half of the twentieth century when some scholars promised that structure would explain almost everything, whether in language (Chomsky) or society, myth or thought itself (Lévi-Strauss). Not only did the claims turn out of course to be wildly exaggerated, but structuralism produced its own backlash as it raised questions, deftly wielded by scholars like Foucault, about who had the enunciative power to impose explanations on others and expect them to be accepted. Even mainstream sociologists like Giddens exercised great caution with the notion (1984).
The notion of system is sometimes distinguished from structure in terms of its parts forming an interacting unified whole. While this might be useful for some natural sciences, it is of less help when dealing with social phenomena, because different interest groups or interlocutors articulate the social (and indeed the natural) world differently. For example, anthropologists speak of kinship systems, which implies an integrated whole. However this invariably exists as an ideal. Actuality is often so far removed as to be unrecognizable. The Balinese kinship system has preferential Father's Brother's Daughter marriage (real or classificatory). The incidence in my research village barely exceeded 1%. Some system!

as a step towards recognizing that brute economic might and political closure are insufficient to explain the complexities of mass media 'content'. As a pair of analytical terms to interpret, let alone explain, what is going on they are highly problematic. Given how fond media scholars are of talking about the discourse analysis of media texts, this might seem a rather odd assertion. What has happened is a familiar cultural move by which Anglo-Saxons turn theoretical arguments in continental philosophy upside-down into hypostatized entities. The differences in usage are important. 'Text' in English applies not only to 'the very words and sentences as originally written' (OED), but more loosely to any cultural production that can be interpreted—hence 'the media text'. French scholars by contrast each use text (and discourse) rather differently as part of their broader theoretical programmes (Hobart 1985). The differences are stark. **Slide** What the English call a 'text', Barthes (the author on whom Cultural Studies scholars often draw) called a 'work': that is a realization or instantiation of a historically and culturally specific assemblage of possibilities. Foucault went further and treated anything signified (and so what Barthes called 'works') as deliberately misleading because it displaces attention from articulations about the agency responsible onto the objects themselves as if they were given by nature not the outcome of conflicting interpretive practices (see Foucault 1980).

*Discourse*

Few words have been invoked as loosely and carelessly as has 'discourse'. The OED defines it as 'a spoken or written treatment of a subject, in which it is handled or discussed at length'. However, what gives the term its intellectual clout is its resonances, pre-eminently in the work of Foucault. So you often come across phrases like 'Foucault's idea of discourse'. When you do, you know the speaker is talking gobbledygook, because Foucault struggled with, and kept on changing, his usage before effectively abandoning it as a serious concept. To understand something of the complexity of the notion, look at his inaugural lecture at the *Collège de France*: *The order of discourse*. **Slide** To appreciate post-war French usage, it is useful to appreciate two distinctions of which English-speakers are rarely aware. One is the difference between *récit* and *discours*, narrative and the underlying categories, understandings and rules from which narratives, statements and so on are drawn. The second is between the articulable (the forms of expression) and the visible (the forms of content). Remarkably, media scholars have managed completely to overlook the latter. You will note a perduring theme here: the philosophical sensitivity to the conditions of possibility of something (evident in Taylor's definition of the Imaginary as well) as opposed to its actualization in any instance.[24] There is nothing wrong with people using 'text' and 'discourse' in the ordinary English senses, provided that they do not imagine that so doing imbues them any intellectual heft, least of all post-structuralist thinking which runs in quite contrary directions. However, almost everybody does. The expressions 'the media text' and 'discourse analysis' are pretty vapid if you omit the work of Barthes, Derrida, Foucault and even Ricoeur who thought through these ideas meticulously.[25]

[24] Those with a literary or anthropological background will recognize the close link to the structuralist distinction between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic: the former being syntax—sentences that people actually put together, and paradigms—the underlying unconscious categories which determine what can and cannot meaningfully be expressed syntactically.

[25] A fine example is Fairclough's notion of 'discourse analysis', where he conflates text with Barthes's 'work', draws upon standard linguistic theory and attempts to combine these with a timeless, and therefore hopelessly inaccurate, appeal to Foucault on *discours*, which he tends to muddle with 'practice'.

> My attempt at drawing together language analysis and social theory centres upon a combination of this more social-theoretical sense of 'discourse' with the 'text-and-interaction' sense in linguistically-oriented discourse analysis. This concept of discourse and discourse analysis is three-dimensional. Any discursive 'event' (i.e. any instance of discourse) is seen as being simultaneously a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice, and an instance of social practice. The 'text' dimension

### *4. Who does what to whom, how?—Transmitting, consuming, seducing?*

*Turbo-charged transmitting*

Who—or what—the agents are that are doing what to whom and how bring us back to what looks more like *terra firma*. Whether we are dealing with Mattelart's broad sense of communication or Shannon and Weaver's mathematical one, these seem graspable.[26] Applied to social communication, the transmission model is deeply flawed but, no matter how often it is killed off, like the vampire in Count Dracula films, it mysteriously rises again. Indeed, you could say both are not quite living, but 'undead'. **Slide** How then has the familiar sender⟶message⟶receiver model been reworked to make it more suitable? Two well-known versions are relevant. One is Jakobson's model of different functions of language (1960). (It is quite easy to get up to about twenty if you try.) **Slide** What Communication Studies treats as the main—or sole—function, the referential, is just one of six. The others all provide the context or greatly complicate what communication is all about.

Taking issue with such simplistic models, Stuart Hall devised an alternative account, which stressed encoding and decoding media messages as quite separate processes. His piece became a founding text of Cultural Studies approaches to mass media (1980) and spawned a more fine-tuned interest in what audiences actually did. It showed how the possible conditions of reception of messages are quite different from, and far more tenuous than, those imagined by producers. He went on to outline three possible ideal types of subject positions of readers or viewers. They could accept the 'dominant-hegemonic' reading preferred by producers; modify these according to their particular circumstances and experience in a 'negotiated' reading; or to appreciate what the aim of the message is, 'detotalize' and reframe it in an 'oppositional' reading. While Hall's analysis set out to refine and improve the basic model, it still assumed the centrality of a relatively unproblematic 'message'. The determination to find an essence to communication results in privileging the message at the expense of everything else that is going on. That is why people find McLuhan's take upon mediation and the idea that the medium is the message perplexing, if not downright disturbing. However, he is far from being off the wall. When he argued that 'the "content" of any medium is always another medium' (1984: 1), he was simply rebutting familiar commonsense with post-Peircean good sense.

Why, considering that it is so grossly inadequate, do politicians, media producers and even academics return to the transmission model like dogs to a well-gnawed bone? There are two reasons *inter alia*. First, it creates an Imaginary. What is going on in social communication is contextual, extraordinarily complex, often undecidable and potentially unknowable. So, it is not surprising if people long to embrace any 'theory' which creates the illusion that they know what they are talking about. Second, transmission, by definition, prioritizes the sender of messages. It closes down all the

> attends to language analysis of texts. The 'discursive practice' dimension, like 'interaction' in the 'text-and-interaction' view of discourse, specifies the nature of the processes of text production and interpretation, for example which types of discourse (including 'discourses' in the more social-theoretical sense) are drawn upon and how they are combined. The 'social practice' dimension attends to issues of concern in social analysis such as the institutional and organizational circumstances of the discursive event and how that shapes the nature of the discursive practice, and the constitutive/constructive effects of discourse referred to above (1992: 4).

[26] I say 'seem graspable' because the commonsense usage in communication studies has little to do with Shannon's famous model. McQuail offers good example of the former. Note how he adopts the smörgåsbord account of information as truthful, meaningful, verifiable and factual.

> In a broad sense, the content (messages) of all meaningful communication is information. More narrowly (but still loosely), information usually refers to verifiable and thus reliable factual data about the 'real world'. This includes opinions as well as reports about the facts of the world. Even more narrowly and precisely, information may be equated with communicated 'data' that do (or can) enable discriminations to be made in some domain of reality and thus 'reduce uncertainty' for the receiver (2000: 497).

ways that communication may work by focusing exclusively on the sender or producer as agent and the message as essence. That is why the study of audiences threatens to wreak havoc with the models.[27]

Accounts of how media work depends on unrecognized recourse to metaphor. Mass mediation rather obviously involves transmitters and receivers, whether radio, television masts and receivers, computer modems or mobile phones. However, the processes of articulating—and engaging with—such mediation are so varied that collapsing them into the processes of sending and receiving is profoundly misleading. Images of media reception serve to simplify what on close inspection is protean. Similar weaknesses apply to production. While mass communications are an industrial sector, their 'product' differs in many ways from more conventional forms. At that point, speaking of production becomes a metaphor or synecdoche, insofar as it confuses part for the whole. Ethnographic analysis of, say, television 'production' shows what is pretty obvious on reflection, namely that what happens—from mulling over possible ideas, devising initial treatments, writing and then endless re-writing, visualizing, meeting, discussing, questioning, gossiping, filming, editing, compositing, viewing, yet more meeting and so on—has only a passing acquaintance with production in its narrow sense.

*Consuming and seducing*

Similar *caveats* apply to another popular image: consumption. We talk happily of 'consuming media' or even a 'media diet'. As with text and discourse, Anglo-Saxon literal-mindedness is at odds with critical French thinking, exemplified by scholars like Baudrillard, from whom two quotes on consumption should give cause for reflection.

> Individuals no longer compete for the possession of goods, they actualize themselves in consumption, each on his own... *There are no limits to consumption*. If it was that which it is naively taken to be, an absorption, a devouring, then we should achieve saturation. If it was a function of the order of needs, we should achieve satisfaction (1988a: 12, 24).
>
> Paradoxical though it may appear, consumption is defined as *exclusive of pleasure*... Pleasure would define consumption *for itself*, as autonomous and final. But consumption is never thus... The best evidence that pleasure is not the basis of consumption is that nowadays pleasure is constrained and institutionalized, not as a right or enjoyment, but as the citizen's *duty*... The consumer, the modern citizen, cannot evade the constraint of happiness and pleasure which in the new ethics is equivalent to the traditional constraint of labor and production (Baudrillard 1988b: 46, 48).[28]

Elsewhere Baudrillard takes issue with the lazy extension of the image of production to encompass how we think about the whole contemporary world, by contrasting the metaphor of production with that of seduction (1990). Seduction here is not sexual, but rather whatever subverts the deadly serious bourgeois attempt to impose a worldview of production as hegemonic, as the only game in town.

[27] It is also why communication studies scholars in particular have been so anxious to dissolve the myriad problems presented by audiences into long-domesticated concepts such as 'effects' and 'influence' which were out of date long before they posited them. I discuss causation below. As to 'influence', it is a weasel word. It promises a determinate connection but refuses to say what it is. (X affects Y, but I am not going, or am unable, to tell you how.) Fittingly, the etymology of influence is astrological: 'emanation from the stars' (OED).

[28] Lest you should think this is just Baudrillardian exuberance, consider the following quotation where he develops the work of a hard-headed Canadian economist. In contemporary capitalism,

> either prior to production (polls, market studies) or subsequent to it (advertising, marketing, conditioning), the general idea 'is to shift the locus of decision in the purchase of goods from the consumer where it is beyond control to the firm where it is subject to control' (Baudrillard 1988b: 38; citing Galbraith 1967: 215).

Seduction is the antithetical order to production, which embraces not only play, humour, satire and critique but also the attraction and lure of modern media in its sheer superabundance and diversity.[29]

*Audiences*

If processes of communication, mediation or whatever cannot be tamed by the metaphors we impose on them, who (or what) is involved in doing what to whom (or what) is just as problematic.[30] An example is the issues surrounding audiences. Audience studies is now a sub-discipline of its own, too extensive to discuss here. Suffice it to say that, if Media Studies were a bath full of the pleasantly warm soapy water of most writings, then audiences are the bath plug: pull it out and the water drains away leaving only a cold bather and a rim of scum. Producers, politicians, pundits and most media academics like to speak as if audiences are some kind of knowable, positive entity. Wiser scholars beg to differ. **Slide** That there appears to be something tangible is because media corporations 'desperately seek' an imagined product—audiences—to sell to advertisers and others (Ang 1991). They are an 'invisible fiction' (Hartley 1992). That so much written about audiences seems to make sense is due to the term covering so many different usages that you can predicate virtually anything of 'audience'. And people do! **Slide** You would have thought that if we could not answer the question 'Who does what to whom, how?', then we might at least have a clear idea what we are talking about. The more we inquire, the less clear it becomes (Nightingale 1996).

The difficulties become even worse if we ask what exactly is it that we expect to learn by studying audiences. Although it is rarely put as bluntly as this, it is to find out what audiences *think*.[31] Immediately this statement requires qualification. Categories do not think. *Prima facie* we are inquiring either what do individual human beings think or what do a variety of individuals think as a sample of a wider population. However, the former notion is quite inadequate. Communication Studies and most Media Studies make a truly remarkable move: *they discard the unconscious*. Most human sciences for close on a hundred years have been forced willy-nilly to come to grips with the potential relevance of the unconscious aspects of human thinking. Not to do so is to align yourself with behaviourism or pretty crass versions of psychology. By contrast, Film Studies is more sophisticated, as it took on board the implications decades ago (e.g. Mulvey 1975). If a significant part of our thinking is subconscious or unconscious, then Media Studies condemns itself to studying the marginal. It falls into the twin traps of essentialism and interiorization—assuming that thought is a clear-cut and accessible process taking place inside individuals' minds.

[29] My purpose here is not an exposition of the relevance of Baudrillard's thinking to the mass media, which I have done elsewhere (1994), but to warn against adopting hegemonic images as somehow self-evident truths.

[30] As much media creation is done by complex agents and aimed not at individuals, but categories of, say, viewers or consumers, it is more accurate to speak of what, not whom. As this piece is intended to offer examples of questionable presuppositions in Media Studies, there is not space to offer a comprehensive analysis of what I mean by complex agents (on which see Inden 1990: 21-28; 2014). So I do not examine everything that is tangled up in the notion of 'media producers'. Ethnographic studies of media production show the processes and agency to be complicated, surprising and to have little to do with most preconceptions or published accounts in Media Studies.

[31] Whether it concerns readers, viewers, spectators, people chatting online or whatever, the questions tend to converge around the same imaginary access to *what people think*, as if this were an accessible, unitary, coherent, non-contradictory object of inquiry. What goes largely unappreciated is the difficulties in modern mass societies of knowing what the masses are up to—hence the felt need to keep them under surveillance. So it is delightfully convenient that subscribers and participants organize their own surveillance through online search engines and social media sites, while collaborating in the corporate-driven fantasy that they are somehow 'free'. However, who the masses are is less obvious than might appear (Baudrillard 1988c). For many purposes, the masses are 'ordinary people' going about their daily lives. Simple as the notion seems, it has proven almost impossible to determine what this quotidian is (Roberts 2006).

An alternative is to investigate the social practices of engagement with media of whatever kind. These range from anticipating what will happen, through the (often shared) experience of reading or viewing to discussing what happened afterwards and crucially what, if anything, people do afterwards.[32] The alternative approach of extrapolating from individuals to draw wider conclusions commits itself to a particular kind of atomism that Vološinov identified as 'subjective individualism' (1973: 45-64). It does not really matter whether you use surveys, interviews or focus groups. In each case, effectively the aim is to find out what individuals think. You can, however, study a quite different object: namely, how people argue and engage with one another. This object is not conceived as something fixed, interior and private, but as public practices of discussing, arguing, agreeing, disagreeing, keeping silent, getting animated and so on. For over twenty years my work on audiences as other aspects of Balinese society, has concentrated not on imaginary atomized individuals, but on argument as a social practice. The two are chalk and cheese.

### *5. What intellectual genealogy should we use? The example of ethnography.*

Different disciplines have different histories, each with their own preferred problematics, objects of study, concepts, methods and so on. This is not a weakness of Media Studies but a strength, provided we appreciate this diversity and its entailments. After all, we are dealing with an extraordinarily encompassing, widespread, heterogeneous and now virtually omnipresent aspect of modern life. Trying to reduce this to one-size-fits-all seems quixotic, even pathological. Nonetheless the lure of a good metaphor seems irresistible. Unfortunately, the most popular—the capitalist image of a happy accumulation of ever more knowledge—is deeply flawed. As the title of Kuhn's *The structure of scientific revolutions* indicates, one body of knowledge often invalidates, nullifies or at least requires major reworking of others.

#### *The anthropological moment*

The revolutionary discipline here is arguably Anthropology.[33] Asked what distinguishes Sociology from Anthropology, a common anthropological response is that it is the difference between what people say (in answer to questions, surveys, interviews and so on) and what they actually do under different circumstances. In short, what is distinctive about Anthropology is its stress upon practice as an object of study with ethnography by participant-observation as its distinctive method. Properly what are relatively self-evident and uncontroversial givens in other disciplines, like media institutions, structures, texts and so forth, become problematized. They emerge as far more contingent, contextually interpretable in different ways, and indeed often undecidable, when you examine the practices through which such apparent positivities are constituted, imagined, questioned, argued over or denied in different circumstances. In other words, what most people take as given are

[32] Evidently how subsequent action relates to engagement with media is complex, situated and under-determined. Communication, Media and, indeed, Film Studies are perturbingly Eurocentric in that they assume that viewers are atomized and largely asocial individuals focused on their own interiority. Viewing television and even film in many parts of the world is a strikingly and enjoyably social activity, with people anticipating the spectating experience, commenting aloud to one another during the event, discussing what their impressions afterwards and talking about what, if anything, to do afterwards.

[33] Anthropology and History are the two disciplines which, used critically, do inestimable damage to hegemonic visions of the world. History does so, as Foucault showed incisively, by revealing that what we currently take for granted as self-evident is both rapidly changing and subject to political, social and epistemological processes that we ignore at our risk. Anthropology makes clear that what masquerades as universal is merely a particular, albeit powerful and often dominant, set of culturally specific representations among an extraordinary plethora of possibilities. And 'culture' itself is contested and a site of struggle.

the momentary outcomes of on-going struggles, in which class, gender, race, generation and other social divisions play a part. 'All that is solid melts into air' (Marx & Engels 1906 [1848]: 17).

*Ethnography and its avatars*

Intensive ethnography by participant-observation, whether of media organizations or audiences, has such an effective—I would say 'nasty'—habit of dissolving seeming solidities that claims to be 'doing ethnography' have become the vogue.[34] Nowadays researchers declare they have done ethnography if they have spent time in a media corporation, talked to producers, or conducted interviews with producers or audiences. **Slide** It is about as much ethnography as Donald Duck is a specimen of *Anas platyrhynchos* (mallard). So, if a researcher claims to have conducted ethnography, you need to examine carefully exactly what they did, how, under what circumstances, over what period and, when dealing with other societies, how versed they were in the language and cultural references of those they studied.

To illustrate how the approach works, let me take two examples from ethnography studies on television production by two former research students who, coincidentally, both worked in Singapore, but on quite different kinds of broadcasting.

*How producers decide on commissioning programmes*: The Singaporean Malay channel, Suria, set about deciding what programmes to purchase or commission ostensibly based on eminently rational criteria. They used a sophisticated market research agency, Taylor Nelson-Sofres (TNS) that provided audience figures in 15-minute blocks, which comprised the raw material for executive meetings. To the outside world and to anyone carrying out research on Suria, the corporation exemplified the sort of up-to-the-minute decision-making that you would expect of so technocratic a modern society. However, the researcher, Ivan Kwek (2010), took part in all these executive meetings and discovered that the key factors which determined decisions were of a quite different order. They were mothers-in-law and weddings! How could this be? Having laid out audience figures, costs and so forth, discussion would turn to what to commission. Over a period of eighteen months, Ivan noted that personal experience trumped 'objective' data. Commonly senior executives would cite what family members had told them they enjoyed watching, with mothers-in-law leading the field. The other source of judgement was weddings, which are big and frequent occasions among Malays (who marry, divorce and re-marry often). During the festivities, on learning that someone was a TV producer, other guests would often buttonhole them with their opinions about various shows that they had watched. It was these personal experiences of 'real' viewers that more often than not was the key consideration in deciding on future investment.

*How censorship works*: Singapore is a surveillance state. Government keeps a very tight eye not only on the doings of its citizens, but above all on what enters the public domain. Television as the mass medium that reaches over 95% of the population is accordingly tightly regulated and censored. In a predominantly Chinese city, Chinese language broadcasts have the largest audiences. In 2012, the first 'live' Reality TV show, Sunsilk Academy Fantasia was allowed to be aired. However, coverage was restricted to 18 hours a day and a time lapse was built in, so that the censors could block anything deemed inappropriate. The Media Development Authority (MDA) visited the company to ensure compliance with the strict censorship regulations, which took place amid tight security and great

[34] David Morley's *Towards an ethnography of the television audience* offers a useful introduction to the issues as seen from Cultural Studies. Nearly thirty years ago, he had noted that

> in recent years the very term 'ethnography' has become totemic (a ritual genuflexion towards a newly instituted tribal deity?) within the field of audience studies. Suddenly everyone is an ethnographer (the ethnographer as fashion victim?); but, as Lull points out, 'what is passing as ethnography in cultural studies fails to achieve the fundamental requirements for data collection and reporting typical of most anthropological and sociological ethnographic research, "Ethnography" has become an abused buzz-word in our field' (Morley 1992b: 186, citing Lull 1988:242).

> secrecy, when the guidelines to be followed were laid down. Publicly the broadcasts were subject to the tightest official scrutiny.
>
> What happened in practice? First, the budget was so tight that the senior producer was obliged to hire young students who were cheap, barely out of their teens and who knew nothing about the job or its demands. Second, implementing the guidelines turned out to be up for grabs, because in day to day practice whether something was appropriate or not was often far from clear. Different producers had different ideas about what was acceptable and what not. They, however, were not aware of the divergences, nor the implications. For the formal intents and purposes of the MDA, government and the television station, censorship worked to the draconian standards expected. However, the researcher, Fong Siao Yuong, who worked as an intern on the production team throughout was repeatedly struck by how open, uncertain and casual the process of censoring was in practice (2016: 178-186). What is interesting is that the producers' models did not register how far practice departed from expected procedures. To them it was merely adventitious adaptation to the circumstances and would not have been apparent during interview or from casual observation.

It would be comforting to generalize how the findings of intensive ethnography diverge from other kinds of account. However, this proves impossible because the contexts and circumstances of actual practice in any instance are so diverse. So long as people are content with the formal, institutional, in part imaginary, accounts on offer, what actually goes on will remain largely unknown. What intensive ethnography reveals is almost invariably unpredictable, unlikely, even impossible.

### *6. How do media work? Through effects, belief, persuasion or what?*

*Do media and communication work?*

How are the media supposed to work? If they do not affect or help to form the minds of those at whom they are notionally directed, then billions of dollars are being routinely thrown down the drain. Now, in fact it does not necessarily matter whether they *do* work so long as they are *imagined* to work. In that sense, audiences are the credit-based currency between media producers and their paymasters. Scientific-sounding research helps to keep the credit from unwanted perlustration. And for advertisers, if ads shift goods, who is too bothered about how or why? There is an amusing parallel with witchcraft beliefs, which are part of a self-justifying system that is proof against any disconfirming evidence (Evans-Pritchard 1937). Similarly, Schudson elegantly showed that it is perfectly plausible 'that advertising helps sell goods even if it never persuades a *consumer* of anything' (1993: xv). A correlation is not an explanation. So how do media work then?

*Causation*

The simplest kind of explanation is causal. Media produce effects on audiences. Morley has lampooned the mechanism notionally at work here as the 'hypodermic' model by which media inject messages into people's brains. Citing Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955:16)

> the image of the mass communication process entertained by researchers had been, firstly, one of 'an atomistic mass' of millions of readers, listeners and movie-goers, prepared to receive the message; and secondly…every message [was conceived of] as a direct and powerful stimulus to action which would elicit immediate response (Morley 1992c: 41).

Plausible as it might seem, the media effects model is riddled with improbabilities (see Gauntlett 1998). As the notions of cause and effect seem so obvious, why should this be dubitable? Here different disciplines behind Media Studies head in different directions. The more natural scientific like clear-cut explanations and so want something like cause. By contrast, the more human scientific

embrace something closer to the interpretation of meaning.[35] The problem with causation is that it is common sense not good sense. As the philosopher, R.G. Collingwood remarked:

> In the nineteenth century we find a different presupposition being made by the general body of scientists: namely that all events have causes… In modern physics the notion of cause has disappeared. Nothing happens owing to causes; everything happens according to laws (1940: 50).[36]

The reason that some idea of causation remains popular is that it offers easy, clear, authoritative-sounding and sellable explanations, which is what politicians—and, it seems, many media scholars—want.

*Belief and meaning*

What about the alternatives? Do the media work because, say, people believe in them? An advantage of this account is that it does not fixate on the 'message'. If you trust someone, you are more inclined to believe what they say.[37] The problem is: what sort of state is belief? While the Mediterranean religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) stress belief, the Asian religions on the whole do not. Furthermore, how do you know if someone believes something? The anthropologist Rodney Needham was sceptical. He argued with justification that 'belief cannot be established as a distinct inner state' (1981: 58). Not only does the idea presuppose the culturally and historically specific interior modern self discussed earlier, but the evidence we have for belief is what people say they believe, which is not the same at all (Needham 1972). As an alternative, do media work because what they convey is meaningful? First, this brings us back unwittingly to the transmission model (or its avatars, such as 'convey' which presupposes a 'conduit metaphor' of meaning, Reddy 1979). Second, what do we mean by meaning (Hobart 1982)? As Ernest Gellner pointed out, such arguments presuppose that 'social behaviour is essentially meaningful: to understand it is to understand its meaning' (1973: 55). It is an easy step from there to show that much that is said or done is confused, ill thought through or meaningless (think of Donald Trump's *obiter dicta*). It also assumes that social life is never irrational, internally incoherent or contradictory. Yet again we seem to run into explanations there are unworkable, implausible and effectively impossible.

*Argument and dialogue*

The problem is that these explanations presuppose there to be some single, essential answer to why media appear to achieve tangible results that is general, universal and so neither historically nor culturally particular. At SOAS that is a questionable starting point, because it is an invitation to collude in a Eurocentric hegemony. So I reject grandiose claims to ultimate explanation and shall ask the more modest question of how different people in any society under different circumstances talk about the media (whatever they are thought to be), set about persuading people, and how and when

[35] The distinction between different kinds of explanation in the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) as against the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), a distinction made by Wilhelm Dilthey (1883), is central to any understanding of how different branches of Media Studies work.

[36] Although in daily life, we tend to take ideas of causation for granted, the whole issue has been vexed ever since Hume questioned whether cause could ever be established empirically. Instead it tends to be recognized to be part of the absolute presuppositions governing a body of thinking, not something you could actually show. Hacking stated matters clearly in the opening paragraph of *The taming of chance*.

> The most decisive conceptual event of twentieth century physics has been the discovery that the world is not deterministic. Causality, long the bastion of metaphysics, was toppled, or at least tilted: the past does not determine exactly what happens next. This event was preceded by a more gradual transformation. During the nineteenth century it became possible to see that the world might be regular and yet not subject to universal laws of nature. A space was cleared for chance (1990: 1).

[37] In classical rhetoric, appearing credible is a vital feature of a speaker's *ethos*; whereas *logos* is their appeal to culturally recognized argument; and *pathos* the ability to move audiences through emotion.

they are successful or not.[38] Such an approach invites us to think about what in any instance is considered persuasive. In other words, we are dealing with argument in some form—that is with rhetoric and reason, two ways of thinking which have a very long and distinguished pedigree of mutual, mostly antithetical, engagement (Lloyd 1979). In Europe, it dates back before Aristotle (e.g. his *Rhetoric* 1954) and equally early in India in Nyāya and, later, Buddhist thinking (Lloyd 2016).[39] Examining argument, as against media, shifts the emphasis from mechanics (transmission, messages, effects, media as against mediating) to social relationships in their disparate contexts. It introduces openness, variability and uncertainty by recognizing that argument involve rival styles of interpreting, competing ways of understanding, a gamut of means of persuading—in short, power, as processes much subtler than coercion—all of which are sidelined in Media Studies or, at best, lumped under notions like 'soft power'.

Reframing communicating and representing as common practices in social life changes how we think about the media in all sorts of ways. I shall mention only two here. The first is it draws attention to the fundamental differences between dialogue and monologue.[40] Whereas dialogue, by definition,

[38] Theoretically this is a pragmatist approach. It asks 'how', not 'why'? It takes it that humans represent what happens in different ways on different occasions, including how—and indeed whether, or to what extent—what people say or do is persuasive. Discussing how media work is part of how they are understood to work, not mere secondary commentary.

[39] You do not have to have a written canon dealing with reasoning and rhetoric to engage in, and be sensitive, to styles of argument. How different people in different societies argue in different circumstances requires investigating. So doing should enrich our understanding of how humans variously communicate and represent the world about them. Incidentally this approach does not prioritize a European sense of argument. That too requires investigating.

The different tenor of, say, Indian thinking about rhetoric deserves reflection.

> *Sadharanikaran*, a Sanskrit term meaning 'simplification', (2nd. Century BCE) is an approach to communication where persuasive gestures and language spark emotional responses in the audience, leading a higher level of connection. Persuasion is used to connect humans to one another with speaker and audience to the point where both sender and receiver enter the same elevated experience. Such a conception of rhetoric did not emerge in the West until Kenneth Burke's notion of 'consubstantiality' (Lloyd 2013: 2).

[40] To give a sense of how Bakhtin and Vološinov contrasted the open world of dialogue to the dead world of congealed power wrought by monologue, consider the following quotations.

> Bakhtin advances the term *unfinalizability* (*nezavershennost*') as an all-purpose carrier of his conviction that the world is not only a messy place, but is also an open place. The term appears frequently in his works and in many different contexts. It designates a complex of values central to his thinking: innovation, 'surprisingness', the genuinely new, openness, potentiality, freedom, and creativity—terms that he also uses frequently. His paraphrase of one of Dostoevsky's ideas also expresses his own: *'Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future*' (Morson & Emerson 1990: 36-7, citing Bakhtin 1984: 166).

In stark contrast, in monologic forms

> the live medium becomes dead: activity is represented by stasis, heterochrony is reduced to singularity, irreversibility is perceived as reversibility, openness is reduced to a closed systematicity, and potentials are completely overlooked (Morson & Emerson 1990: 56).

The most devastating critique is reserved for that favourite standby of communications and media theorists: code. Bakhtin and Vološinov in different ways both make the pragmatist move of treating language not as an abstract, objective system, but by interrogating the circumstances under which it is imagined to be so. Bakhtin is succinct and devastating.

> Context and code. A context is potentially unfinalized; a code must be finalized. A code is only a technical means of transmitting information; it does not have cognitive, creative significance. A code is a deliberately established, killed context (1986: 147).

It is fitting to conclude with Vološinov's justly celebrated summation.

> Language…is an abstraction justifiable in theory and practice only from the standpoint of deciphering and teaching a dead, alien language. This system cannot serve as a basis for understanding and explaining linguistic facts as they really exist and come into being. On the contrary, this system leads us away from the living, dynamic reality of language and its social functions, notwithstanding the fact that adherents of abstract objectivism claim sociological significance for their point of view. Underlying the theory of abstract objectivism are presuppositions of a rationalistic and mechanistic world outlook. These presuppositions are least capable of furnishing the grounds for a proper understanding of history—and language, after all, is a purely historical phenomenon (1973: 82).

is open, so that a speaker has relatively limited control over the kind and nature of the response, monologue has a battery of familiar modes, such as assertion and enunciation (styles that Foucault identified as forms of power). Remarkably, the distinction between dialogue and monologue is glossed over in most media studies, as if it were of marginal significance. Monologue cannot be simply identified with broadcast media and dialogue with social media as some assume. A striking feature of much social media (like the use of emojis) is that a remarkable amount of 'content' is in fact fixed, so users are being nothing like as creative as telecommunications' pundits flatter them into imagining that they are. They are invited to prefer one formula to another rather than choose, although it is rarely phrased this way.[41]

Dialogue is usefully considered not just as a conversation between two people, but in the wider sense argued by Bakhtin and Vološinov. On this account, all utterances are dialogic as they are the acts in which people engage in daily life. Books, films, television programmes and political speeches are dialogic then in that they are articulated in the light of previous works and anticipate responses. The meaning of an utterance is affected by not just the past, but also the future. More broadly, dialogue serves as an encompassing framework (a Peircean Third) that is the antithesis of ideas of structure and system (what Bakhtin called 'theoretism', 1984-5: 110, cited in Morson & Emerson 1990: 176-7) in which everything can be treated as situated actions (including events, because someone articulates these *as* something or other). Rethinking argument as dialogue is instructive. On the one hand, reason in its guise of logic closes down possibilities by asserting very few statements to be correct or true. (Moreover, anything visual—and with that most media creations—fails the test as it is not reducible to falsifiable propositions.) On the other, rhetoric, the art of using language, imagery and appearance, to persuade others opens up as many opportunities, potentialities, even contingencies, as there are kinds of interlocutor or spectator and circumstances of engagement. It is hardly surprising that scholars who see their lives' tasks as making the world consistent, orderly, intelligible and explicable long for reason and system and eschew the untidiness, indeterminacy, unpredictability and ferment to which rhetoric beckons.

*People behaving badly*

Liberal intellectuals are sometimes perplexed at people's apparent willingness to be 'taken in' by the irrational and unrealistic claims of political populism. Rehearsing the age-old confrontation between the dry pleasures of reason and the titillation of rhetoric, they ignore Hamlet's reminder that there is more in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in their philosophy. The whole apparatus of rationality that is brought to bear to measure, assess and control audiences through information rather misses the point. Here we need recourse to the more philosophically literate French post-structuralists.

> There is and there always will be major difficulties in analyzing the media and the whole sphere of information through the traditional categories of the philosophy of the subject: will, representation, choice, liberty, deliberation, knowledge, and desire. For it is quite obvious that they are absolutely contradicted by the media; that the subject is absolutely alienated in its sovereignty (Baudrillard 1988c: 214).

[41] The significance is important and carefully glossed over by capitalist corporations which set out to give consumers the fantasy of freedom of choice. Preference is being invited to decide between two or more options that have been pre-selected. Choice is when you are able to decide what it is that you want. Going to a supermarket and selecting one of a range of ready-cooked meals is preference. Wandering around to find the ingredients you want to cook a particular dish involves choice.

What if the masses (of which each of us is part whenever we engage with the mass media) fail to subscribe to the élite's vision of them as human subjects and fail to allow themselves to be interpellated accordingly?[42]

> Our true unconscious is perhaps in this ironic power of nonparticipation of nondesire, of nonknowledge, of silence, of absorption of all powers, of *expulsion* of all powers of all wills, of all knowledge, of all meaning onto representatives surrounded by a halo of derision. Our unconscious would not then consist of drives, of *pulsions*, whose destiny is sad repression; it would not be repressed at all; it would be made of this joyful *expulsion* of all the encumbering superstructures of being and of will. We have always had a sad vision of the masses (alienated), a sad vision of the unconscious (repressed). On all our philosophy weighs this sad correlation. Even if only for a change, it would be interesting to conceive the mass, the object-mass, as the repository of a finally delusive, illusive, and allusive strategy, the correlative of an ironic, joyful, and seductive unconscious (Baudrillard 1988c: 217).

Attempting to cram the complexity of thought and action into an exiguous vision of the human subject and a reified model of communication makes Sisyphus' task of rolling a rock up a hillside look child's play.

## Irrelevancies or Impossibilities?

If thinking, arguing and discussing are dialogic activities and therefore open and unfinalizability, then a conclusion would be contradictory. So I leave it to you to decide whether my questioning the conventional wisdom of Communication and Media Studies is necessary or worthwhile. Am I making mountains out of molehills? Or are we dealing with effective impossibilities, whether before or after breakfast?

[42] Baudrillard is not just being clever when he highlights the paradoxes around how information works in the media. (Incidentally his reference to the masses being formless or informed is a neat play on classical definitions of information.)

> Obviously there is a paradox in the inextricable entanglement of the masses and the media: is it the media that neutralize meaning and that produce the 'formless' (or informed) mass; or is it the mass which victoriously resists the media by diverting or by absorbing without reply all the messages which they produce? Are the mass media on the side of power in the manipulation of the masses, or are they on the side of the masses in the liquidation of meaning, in the violence done to meaning? Is it the media that fascinate the masses, or is it the masses who divert the media into showmanship? The media toss around sense and nonsense; they manipulate in every sense at once. No one can control this process: the media are the vehicle for the simulation which belongs to the system and for the simulation which destroys the system, according to a circular logic (1988c: 218).

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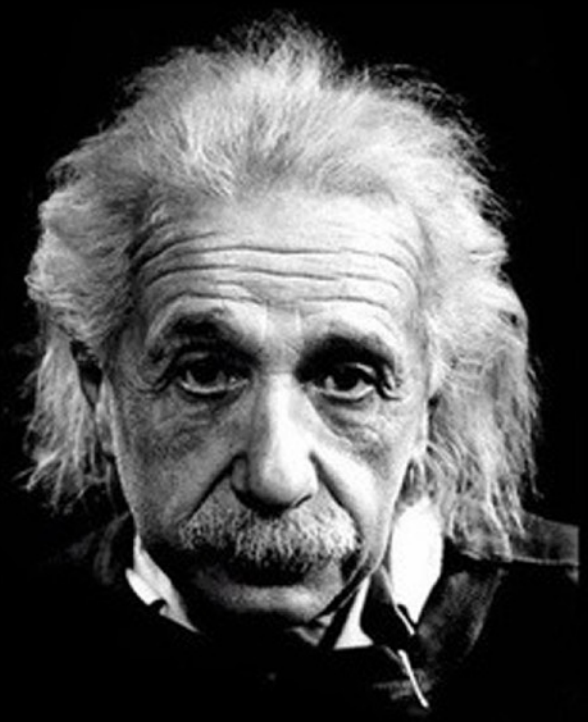
# Six Impossible Things before Breakfast

## The Imaginary World of Media Studies



We can't solve problems
by using the same kind
of thinking we used
when we created them.

# Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast

## Asked to believe that the White Queen was one hundred and one, five months and a day.

‘I can’t believe *that*’ said Alice.

‘Can’t you?’ the Queen said in a pitying tone. ‘Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.’

Alice laughed. ‘There’s no use trying,’ she said, ‘one *can’t* believe impossible things.’

‘I daresay you haven’t had much practice,’ said the Queen. ‘When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast’ (Lewis Carroll *Through the Looking-Glass*).

# Six problems of communication

1. What kind of problems does Media Studies single out for examination?
2. What are the objects Media Studies investigates?
3. What ideas/concepts does Media Studies draw on to frame these problems?
4. Who/what engages whom/what, how?
5. What disciplinary background is invoked? How does this affect inquiry?
6. How is communication/mediation supposed to work?


Communication as a two-way process

# Problem 1

What kind of problems (Bachelard's Problematic) from the morass of social life does Media Studies single out for examination?

Some possibilities:

- Communication
- Information
- Mediation
- Representation

# Problem 2

## What are the objects Media Studies considers important to investigate?

**Possibilities include:**

**Nations as imagined communities**

**The Public Sphere**

**Culture**

**Society**

**The polity**

Coffee shops as the public sphere

Magritte - Son of Man updated

**Or are all such kinds of objects ultimately Imaginaries? (If so, are we actually dealing with the surreal)?**

# Problem 3

**What ideas/concepts does Media Studies draw on to frame these problems and objects?**

**Possibilities include:**

**Institutions**

**Structures**


**Texts**

**Discourses**

# Problem 4

**Who/what engages with whom/what, how?**

**Possibilities include - Who?**

**Senders/Receivers**
**Élites/Masses (ordinary people —who on earth are these?)**
**Producers/Audiences**

**—How does it work?**

**Transmission, Persuasion, Socialization, Entertainment, Consumption?**

# Problem 5

What intellectual genealogy is brought to bear on the issues? And how does this affect inquiry?

As each of the disciplines that claims to address the mass media have their own distinctive histories and agendas, how does each set about investigating the media?

Here I draw upon Anthropology, which examines media institutions as practices, by drawing upon ethnography as its method.

How ~~not~~ to do ethnography of audiences?

# Problem 6

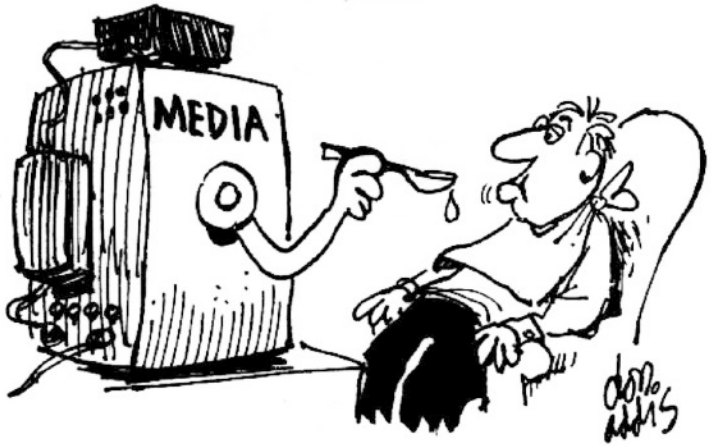
How are the media supposed to achieve their results?

Is it through some notion like effects, persuasion or influence?

Or is it closer to texts or discourse from which readers or viewers extract meaning?

And what happened to the idea of argument?

***Do we actually have any idea how the media actually work?***




‘Extracting meaning’ is a metaphor

# A Balancing Act?

With so many disciplines claiming a voice—Political Science, Political Economy, Economics, Sociology, Mass Communications, Social Theory, Film Theory, Information Theory, Feminist Theory, History, Law, Psychology, Cultural Studies, Literary Studies, Rhetoric and Anthropology—is this what Media Studies really involves?

# The dangers of dancing in minefields

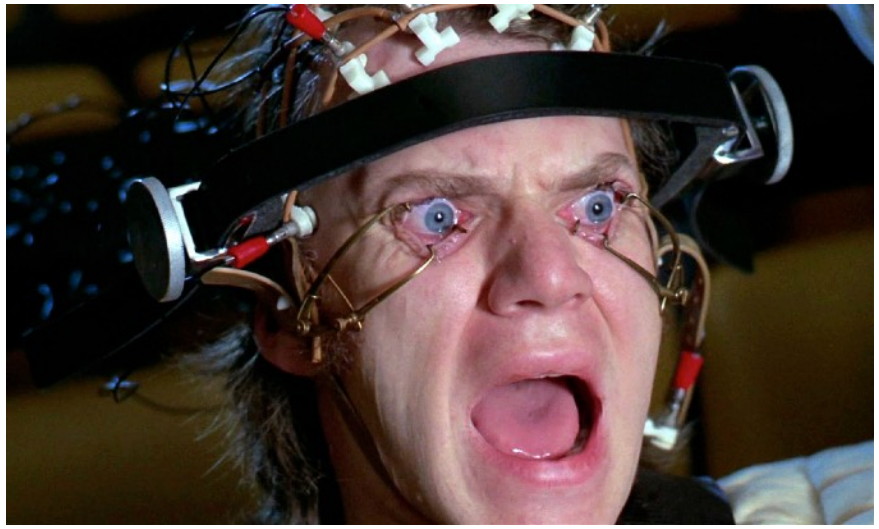
Students are advised to proceed cautiously, otherwise…

# The Individual according to Statistics

In statistical affairs ... the first care before all else is to lose sight of the man taken in isolation in order to consider him only as a fraction of the species. It is necessary to strip him of his individuality to arrive at the elimination of all accidental effects that individuality can introduce into the question (French Academy of Sciences, *Paris 5 October* 1835).

Statistics can be applied only when we have classes that can be regarded as 'infinite masses' (Hacking *The taming of chance*).

# The Individual according to Psychology 1



The first important set of changes connected with the development of the modern subject/person involves the unification of these [public, sacred, mythical etc.] spaces—without which the modern conception of a unified personality may not be possible—and then interiorization. Finally, the space of disclosure is considered to be *inside,* in the 'mind'. We may want to judge this in the end as fanciful a view as the ones which preceded it, but this doesn't dispense us from understanding the process of self-transformation which was partly constituted in this shift (Charles Taylor *The person*).

# The Individual according to Psychology 2

Psychology because of its insertion in modern social practices, has helped to constitute the very form of modern individuality. Psychology is productive: it does not simply bias or distort or incarcerate helpless individuals in oppressive institutions. It regulates, classifies and administers; it produces those regulative devices which form us as objects of child development, schooling, welfare agencies, medicine, multicultural education, personnel practices and so forth. Further, psychology's implication in our modern form of individuality means that it subjectivities as well as objects (Henriques *et. al*. *Changing the subject*).

# The Individual according to Anthropology

Human existence is symbolically constituted, which is to say, culturally ordered… structure is the organization of conscious experience that is not itself consciously experienced (Marshall Sahlins *Two or three things I know about culture*).

The concept of culture I espouse is essentially a semiotic one. Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun (Clifford Geertz *Thick description*).

As culture (and so humans) are defined as essentially semiotic (about signs/ symbols/meaning), the argument risks being circular, because you are using semiotic/semantic criteria to define culture, humans and meaning.

# The individual according to Foucault

My objective has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects. My work has dealt with three modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects. [These are: the objectivizing of the speaking subject; objectivizing through ‘dividing practices’; how humans objectivise themselves by turning themselves into subjects (e.g. sexual subjects)] (Foucault *The subject and power*).

# Some Issues with Communication & Mediation

**Communication -** From Latin *communicare*, hence *communicate* - make common to many, impart…transmit, a one-way process, and share (cf. communion and especially communicant), a common or mutual process.

***Note***: 1) starkly contradictory senses; 2) sharing within community through communion.

**Mediation** - All 'objects' are mediated by specific social relations or signs but cannot be reduced to an abstraction of that relationship.

Note: 1) Everything we know is mediated, only divine revelation is unmediated; 2) So the dichotomy between the media representing reality accurately or misleadingly is nonsensical.

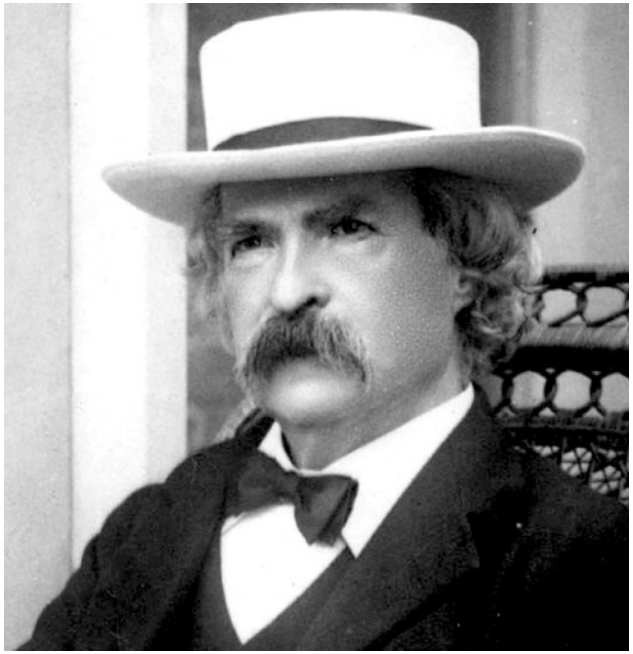
Quotes from Raymond Williams *Keywords*.

Unmediated communication
i.e. Divine revelation

# From the Horse's mouth

The semantic *problems* are concerned with the identity, or satisfactorily close approximation, in the interpretation of meaning by the receiver, as compared with the intended meaning of the sender. *This* is a very deep and involved situation, even when one deals only with the relatively simpler problems of communicating through speech (Shannon & Weaver *The mathematical theory of communication* 4).

None of us could *live* with an habitual truth-teller; but thank goodness none of us has to. An habitual truth-teller is simply an impossible creature; he does not exist; he never has existed. Of course there are people who *think* they never lie, but it is not so - and this ignorance is one of the very things that shame our so-called civilization. Everybody lies - every day; every hour; awake; asleep; in his dreams… Even in sermons - but that is a platitude (Mark Twain *On the decay of the art of lying*).



Mark Twain

# Representing as

The mass media face *a crisis of representation* because of the gap between what they show or state and the notional world of facts and events.

However this world largely consists - fairly obviously for the media - of previous representations. Representation cannot repeat something previously present because what is represented is already a sign, resulting in what Derrida called endless *différance* (deferment).


**Nelson Goodman's revision**

You can only represent something ***as*** something else to someone one some occasion for some purpose. So all representation inevitably involves transformation, while claiming to be authentic and accurate to the original.

# Representing as…

## You represent something *as* something else to someone on an occasion for a purpose with some outcome

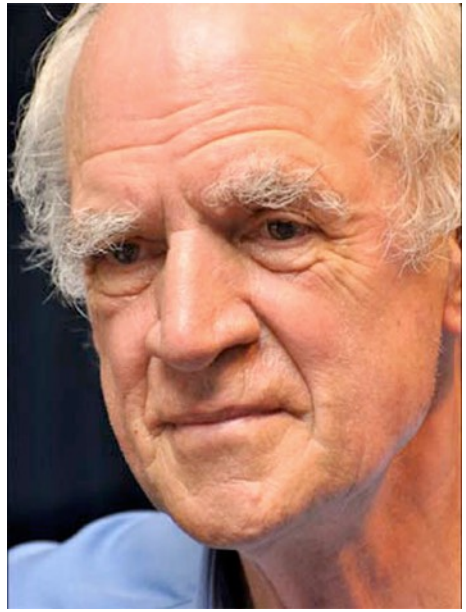
In representing an object, we do not copy...a construal or interpretation – we achieve it. In other words, nothing is ever represented either shorn of or in the fullness of its properties. A picture never merely represents x, but rather represents x as a man or represents x to be a mountain, or represents the fact that x is a melon (Goodman *Languages of Art*).

Goodman took the example of the Duke of Wellington at Waterloo as, say, against him as an elder statesman.

# The public sphere - metaphors and imaginaries

Jürgen Habermas

Habermas's public sphere is a rather strange thing, when one comes to think of it. The people involved here have, by hypothesis, never met but they are seen as linked in a common space of discussion through media – in the eighteenth century, print media… That a conclusion 'counts as' public opinion reflects the fact that a public sphere can exist only if it is ***imagined*** as such… With the modern public sphere comes the idea that political power must be supervised and checked by something outside. It is not defined as the will of God or the law of Nature, but as a kind of discourse, emanating from reason and not from power or traditional authority… The public sphere is, then, a locus in which rational views are elaborated that should guide government (Charles Taylor *Modern social imaginaries*).

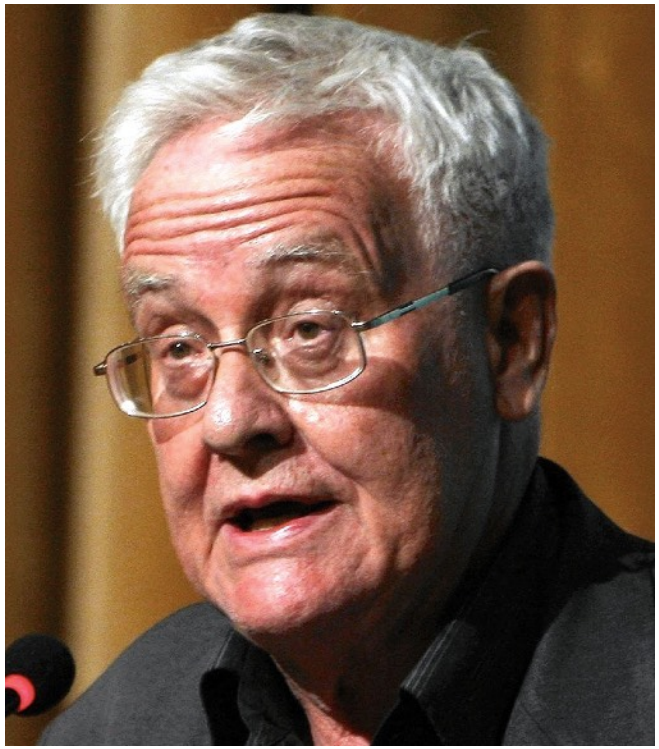


Charles Taylor

**Note: The English imposes a spatial metaphor absent in the German 'Öffentlichkeit'.**

# Imaginaries - the imagined community

The nation is an imagined political community… It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (Anderson *Imagined communities*).

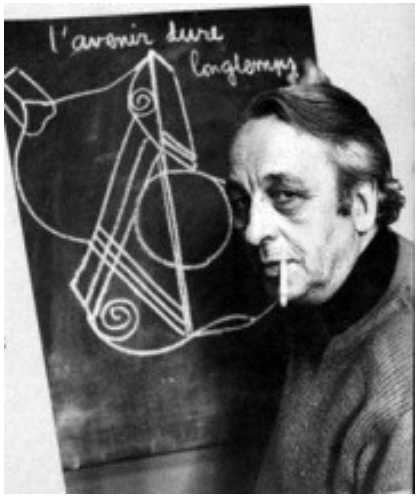


Benedict Anderson

An imagined community is a direct-access society, which 'couldn't have arisen without social developments like that of print capitalism, but the transformations of the social imaginary are not sufficiently explained by these developments. Modern society required transformations also in the way we figure ourselves as societies. Crucial among these has been this ability to grasp society from a decentered view which is no one's (Taylor *Modern social imaginaries*).

# Imaginary objects

The social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society (Taylor *Modern social imaginaries*).




Louis Althusser

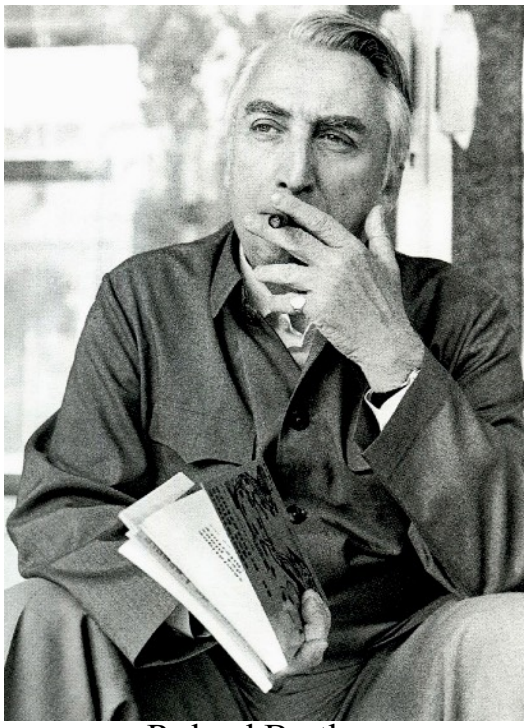
Concepts we rely on like 'culture' or 'society' are imaginaries. They are ideal, but ultimately unachievable. And they set conditions of possibility. Imaginaries are like myths. 'They do make allusion to reality, and that they need only be "interpreted" to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world (ideology = *illusion/allusion*)' (Althusser *Ideological state apparatuses*).

Ernesto Laclau

Any structural system is limited, that it is always surrounded by an 'excess of meaning' which it is unable to master and that, consequently, 'society' as a unitary and intelligible object which grounds its own partial processes is an impossibility… The social only exists as the vain attempt to institute that impossible object: society. Utopia is the essence of any communication and social practice (Laclau *The impossibility of society*).

# Explanatory concepts - the media text

We can focus on people as producers of culturally meaningful media texts, or as 'readers of texts' from which they take cultural meanings, with implications for the rest of social life (McQuail *Mass Communication Theory*).


Roland Barthes

We should not confuse the work as a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of media products with the Text as a methodological field… *The Text is experienced only in an activity of production* (adapted from Barthes *From work to text*).

The idea of 'the text' is misleading because 'one does not interpret what there is in the signified [the text], but one interprets, fundamentally, ***who*** has posed the interpretation (Foucault *Nietzsche, Freud, Marx*).

# Explanatory ideas - discourse

Michel Foucault

In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality. These are:

1. Procedures of exclusion and prohibition, which determine criteria of sense and reason, what counts as true or false etc.
2. Procedures of classification, ordering and distribution aimed at mastering chance (through narratives, rituals, texts, commentary)
3. Procedures that determine what constitutes discourse, how it applies, its rules of access, who may speak and who not.

We must conceive discourse as a violence which we do to things, or in any case as a practice which we impose on them; and it is in this practice that the events of discourse find the principle of their regularity (Foucault *The order of things*).

Foucault's *The archaeology of knowledge* presents the generalized theory of the two elements of stratification: ***the articulable and the visible***, the discursive formations and the non-discursive formations, the forms of expression and the forms of content (Deleuze *Foucault*).

# Shannon & Weaver's Transmission Model of Communication

Noise source

Signal

Received Signal

Sender (Information Source)

Transmitter

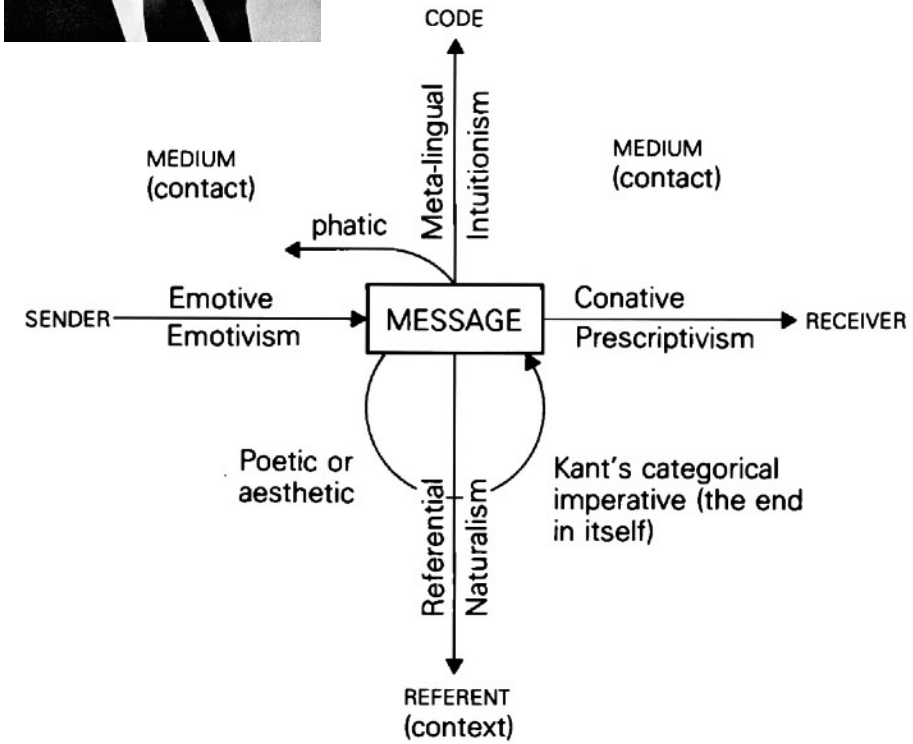
Message

Receiver

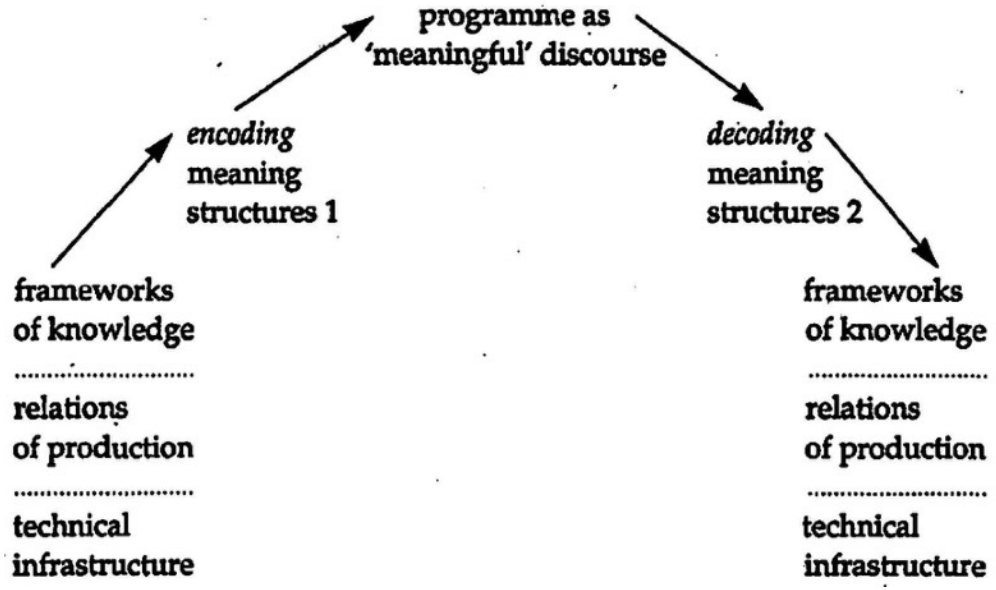
Listener (Destination)

# Refinements of the transmission model of communication

## Jakobson's model of six functions of language




## Hall's model of Encoding/Decoding



# What is ‘the television audience’?

The television audience is not an ontological given, but a socially-constituted and institutionally-produced category. This means that the notion of television audience as such derives its primary relevance only in relation to the specific institutional arrangements within which television technology is socially exploited and used (Ang *Desperately seeking the audience*).

Ien Ang

John Hartley

In no case is the audience ‘real’, or external to its discursive construction. There is no ‘actual’ audience that lies beyond its production as a category, which is merely to say that audiences are only ever encountered *per se* as *representations* (Hartley *Invisible fictions*).

# Which is the ‘real’ audience?

Masses, publics, communities, collectives, consumers; commodities to be delivered to advertisers, information for databases; dupes, passive subjects injected with messages hypodermically; ordinary people, what holds families together, the equivalent to the natural order, real people in whom commercial culture lives; objects to be known and constantly objectified, othered, measured and controlled; capricious subjects to be disciplined, unwitting sources of labour; invisible and mysterious interlocutors, locked in their condition of privatized reception who must constantly be seduced, attracted, lured - but almost always excluded from their self-representation (These definitions are compiled from Ang, Hartley, Jhally, Morley, Nightingale).

# How not to do ethnography

***What ethnography is not:***

Meeting people

Recording people

Interviewing people

***The method is:***

Participant-observation - you do what they do, day and night in their language, blending in as much as possible. Ideally you cannot tell who is the ethnographer. But is this yet another Eurocentric imaginary?

**How not to do ethnography?**

Spot the ethnographer

**How to do ethnography?**