

Preamble

This debate was sparked off by Nick Couldry article ‘Theorizing media as practice’ in Social semiotics (14, 2: 115-132) and Mark Hobart’s critique ‘What do we mean by ‘media practices’?’ in *Theorising Media and Practice*. eds. Birgit Bräuchler & John Postill, Oxford: Berghahn. The debate was originally to be published in Theorizing Media and Practice but, for reasons of space, only a short exchange was possible. Anyone interested in reading the fuller argument may access it [here](#).

**MEDIA, PRACTICE AND POWER: OR,
TWO DOGMAS OF PRAGMATISM**

NICK COULDRY
GOLDSMITHS, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON
n.couldry@gold.ac.uk

Let me start this response to Mark Hobart's comments by acknowledging my debt to him. In his chapter, he has greatly enriched the space of argument in which my original piece (Chapter 2) was situated. That piece, written in late 2003, was part polemic, part manifesto.¹ I wrote it fast, because the then recent adoption of practice theory in sociology - social theory and the sociology of consumption - seemed to have urgent implications for sociology of media, my field (as it has turned out, the piece has provoked more interest in media anthropology than in media sociology). So while I was well aware of the deep philosophical currents swirling around the term 'practice', I deliberately stepped across them for my immediate purpose of disrupting current schemas for analyzing 'media' and suggesting some new ones. Of course it is good to enlarge the discussion to include those philosophical issues, as Hobart has done. I want in this brief discussion to take up Hobart's challenge: this will enable me to explore the unstated philosophical hinterland of my original argument. Even better, it will force me to distinguish two rather different ways of introducing 'practice theory' to media research.

The first, 'radical' approach (Hobart's) adopts practice as its key philosophical concept to ground a complete reorientation of our epistemology of social analysis.² A second, 'instrumental' approach (my own) is more limited in scope and intent: it develops the analytical implications of certain debates and terms from 'practice theory' to dislodge old habits in the specific field of media analysis. It might sound as if the latter approach is philosophically lazy! Indeed that is what Hobart suggests. But this apparent laziness (and brazen instrumentalism) has the advantage of sidestepping the philosophical 'dogmas', as I shall call them, of the radical pragmatist approach - what, playfully, given Hobart's reference to Quine, I shall call the 'two dogmas of pragmatism'. This links incidentally to a wider divergence: between Laclau's social ontology/epistemology (applied to media research by Hobart) which gives most weight to discourse and interpretation and the rather different ontology/epistemology of critical realism (Roy Bhaskar) which is concerned above all with the material bases of power. I have explored the implications of that divergence for understanding media power elsewhere (Couldry forthcoming): it is this divergence I suspect that underpins the disagreement between Hobart and myself on 'practice'.

At the same time, there is a great deal on which Hobart and I agree: on the need to reorient media research and to internationalise it in a thoroughgoing way, and in our hostility to the survivals of functionalist explanation in media research.³ It is these points of agreement of course that draw each of us to apply practice theory to media research.

Let me take that agreement as read - more productive here to focus on our disagreements, and so clarify some of the varied choices and priorities that the move to practice in media research opens up.

Structure and practice

As already explained, Hobart's aim and my own are rather different. For Hobart, 'practice is not supplementary to notions such as system, structure, order or individuals but replaces them'; in this sense, at least, it deserves the title 'radical'. All my work, by contrast, has aimed to extend our understanding of what I would still prefer to call the 'structural' role that media do indeed have in social life (Couldry 2003); nor was my borrowing from practice theory an apostasy. Certainly, from his 'radical' perspective, Hobart is right to see my account of practice in media research as incomplete: I am guilty as charged! In response, I will argue that a 'radical' account depends on certain hidden assumptions and biases which compromise the openness of our understanding of practice in subtle ways and therefore are not necessarily radical. I agree with Daniel Taghioff that applying practice theory interlinks with political questions in a broad sense (Taghioff: [check date]), but will argue that in this respect the claim to radicalism of Hobart's approach is less secure than it first appears.

Rather than spend time on Hobart's critique of sources such as Swidler from whom I borrowed in my original piece, let me try to get to the root of our disagreements. What Hobart seems to object to above all in my use of practice theory (Schatzki), and certain social theory that has affinities with it (Swidler), is my primary interest in the question of how practice is organized. So when Hobart quotes me asking whether media might have a privileged role in organizing (let's put to one side Swidler's particular term 'anchoring') other practices, he responds: 'however privileging the media this way begs the question, because it anticipates how media practices relate to others'. Since in the passage Hobart is discussing I was merely asking, not judging, whether media have such an organizational role, Hobart must mean even to ask about such possibilities of ordering is to reject an ontology in which such ordering is excluded in advance. Indeed it is, but it is surely such an ontology that is question-begging; indeed this is the first sign of the a certain philosophical dogmatism that underlies Hobart's radical version of practice theory. Why after all believe in advance that what for convenience we might call a space of practices' (the various practices of a particular collection of individuals) is more likely to be unorganised than organized? The answer paradoxically lies, I shall suggest, in Hobart's at root idealist understanding of how practice might be organised.

Why is it that Hobart says he prefers the distinctive social ontology of a radical practice theory? (I'll leave aside the question of whether Hobart's picture of sociology is adequate. His passing comment on 'yet more surveys and questionnaires' suggests that he thinks that is all sociology has to offer to practice theory, which reduces the partial historical divergence of sociology and anthropology of methodological caricature; but the issues of ontology are, as he suggests, genuinely difficult and I will concentrate on them.) At one point, in discussing the issue of shared interpretation and understanding (clearly one possible feature of organization: whether it is necessary is something to which I

return), Hobart says: ‘how shared understandings are depends on how far away you are from the situatedness of daily argument’. So the analyst’s perception of shared understandings is, Hobart would have us believe, merely an illusion of distance, because there will always be details (graspable only close up) that override in significance the similarities graspable from afar. But this is to deny – in advance, by ontological fiat – the whole domain of convention and to give automatic priority instead to local interpretation. Convention, and more generally, habit are the broad terms we use to characterize a state of affairs where certain actions, understandings, and expressions get repeated without the causal input of interpretation, which is not to say that conventions or habits are not themselves open to further interpretation (of course they are).

A little later, Hobart raises the question of the analytic practice of academic – quite fairly – but his view of the consequences of academics seriously analyzing their own analytic practice in addition to just analyzing others’ practices is an odd one: ‘then we cannot speak unproblematically of hierarchies or authoritative representations – whose, where and when? . . . this in turn requires us to consider who does to *as* what, to whom, on what occasion, for what purpose.’ Hobart writes as if to register the possibility of a hierarchization in the practice of others is already to impose an interpretation on them, and worse, an interpretation which must overrides their own interpretations and representations. I would not for a moment deny that ‘representation *as*’ is an important domain of practice. But (outside a certain idealism) representation is not the only, or even the most important, mode of hierarchization. When in societies where class or gender are important organizational principles people enter buildings, sit or stand in locations, or hold their bodies in ways that associate them with members of the same class/gender and disassociate them from those of another class or gender, they may not (very often they are not) making representations about hierarchy or their place within it. But hierarchy will be reproduced if the different positions/ locations associated with those genders or classes are in turn associated with a further material condition, the regular and unequal distribution of resources, for example in relation to the resources of media production.

Suppose an academic came to the view that those conditions were met, and that a hierarchy was being reproduced here. The question of how that academic came to make that judgement would only disable such a judgment automatically if (a) s/he refused to reflect seriously on the possible implications of her/his position (in space and social organization) on her/his ability to observe such regularities or if (b) the inequality in question was such that it is negated always and automatically by a contrary interpretation by those allegedly subjected to hierarchy (for example a hierarchy of access to pleasure or a sense of happiness). Leaving aside (a) – clearly Hobart is right that judgements about hierarchy that make no such reflection are inadequate⁴ - the real issue is (b): but many inequalities do not require for their existence agents’ positive sense of being unequally treated.

Hobart tends to rely on maxims about what we know from anthropology to block off further inquiry as to whether a particular space of practices might in particular ways be hierarchically ordered. For example he writes: ‘hierarchy and authoritative representations are the familiar language of approaches which privilege the knower above

the known', but this ignores the possibility of successfully identifying hierarchy among others under the conditions just discussed. Or (he writes) 'practices tend not to line up neatly': but (to echo Hobart) who says so? Is this always and everywhere? How any one field, such as anthropology, can establish such general conclusions is puzzling, unless it has the sanction of a certain philosophical authority that trumps any particular claims about observed hierarchy or organization.

How are practices organized?

Perhaps however (leaving aside some comments about 'system' in general) Hobart's real concerns are narrowly focused on the question of how one practice can be established to be in a hierarchical relationship to another practice. It is here that Hobart questions the compatibility (with a radical theory of practice) of conventional notions of how practices are organized in relation to each other. The problem is interpretation. For if understanding the organization of a space of practices depends on (1) accurately translating the practices of others into the language of the analyst's practice and as well (2) establishing the intertranslatability of the languages of the two or more practices being analysed, then according to Hobart the whole enterprise is doomed. Sometimes, it is true, Hobart draws a more limited conclusion that 'a single coherent account of practice [that is, practice in general, NC] is doomed' – and quite plausibly, but this was never something I claimed to offer. When however Hobart uses philosophical arguments to cast doubt on the very possibility of organization within a space of practices, the wheels of his argument (to borrow his own metaphor) start to fall off!

Let me mention a few problems. First, Hobart suggests that the understanding of other people's practices that is required for claims of organization or ordering involves assuming 'a correspondence theory of reference, a universal hermeneutics and direct access to other minds'. But this is rather misleading. Wittgenstein's late philosophy (from which Schatzki developed his notion of practice) had already deconstructed, for many definitively, the pseudo-problem of 'other minds', through its account of the intersubjective basis of language and language games. Knowing 'other minds' according to Wittgenstein is not the impossible attempt to track the unreachable 'inner' experience of a separate consciousness, but instead the intersubjectively anchored and validated practice in language of registering what others say, and continually comparing what they say with what they do and subsequently say. Nor is any 'universal' hermeneutics' needed to form adequate understandings of what others think and do in particular circumstances provided that there are some language games that analyst and analysand share in common (Hobart is right of course that sometimes that condition is not met, and that we must be careful here, but we do not require a universal hermeneutics to do so). Paradoxically, Hobart here is using the stick of a pre-Wittgensteinian view of the old 'problems' of language and other minds to beat applications of the (Wittgensteinian) notion of practice which happen not to fit with his own social ontology: this is to do philosophical history back to front.

Similarly on translation. Hobart mentions Quine's (1960) problem of 'radical translation' and the incommensurability between all but the most closely related natural languages.

But Donald Davidson's work has subsequently brought into question how radical such problems really are. Davidson (1984) argues in his essay 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' that the frequent claim of conceptual relativism – and the idea that many cultures are incommensurable – assumes in the background the misleading notion that each supposedly non-translatable language or culture has its separate and distinctive 'conceptual scheme', an implicit mentalism that Davidson wants to banish in impeccable Wittgensteinian style. The very idea of such a 'conceptual scheme', Davidson argues, itself would make no sense unless some translation between that scheme's associated language and other languages were possible, contradicting the claim of cultural relativism. From that (no doubt limited) translation between two very different languages, a broader area of common understanding can be built through the open-ended process of listening, explanation and comparing talk with action. Indeed, the apparently 'radical' position of scepticism about translatability – and the whole supposed problem of 'radical untranslatability' - is an illusion. It ignores the continual necessity to deal with cases of partial untranslatability which are resolved, as they must be, by what Davidson calls the principle of charity in interpretation. According to Davidson, 'charity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters' (1984: 197). Indeed the perception of difference is not opposed to, but dependent on, the better grasping of what understandings are shared: 'we improve the clarity and bite of declarations of difference, whether of scheme or opinion, by enlarging the basis of shared (translatable) language or of shared opinion' (1984: 197). Davidson therefore bypasses the supposedly fundamental philosophical problem of analyzing others' practice that Hobart claims undermines my analysis.

The key term indeed here may be action. For the fundamental problem, I suspect, with Hobart's attempt to rule out any 'non-radical' notion of practice is his reliance, paradoxically, on a notion of understanding as the transmission of ideas between hermetically sealed individuals, rather than an inherently intersubjective practice that, so to speak, is 'out in the open', in the space where talk and action can usually be compared (and where talk itself is just another form of action). Of course the practice of interpreting others' practices remains difficult; it is unlikely to be easy. But it is not doomed in advance, either to failure or to a disabling charge of interpretative 'imperialism', any more than all mutual understanding and translation are doomed in advance by the pseudo-problems of 'other minds' or 'radical incommensurability'. It only muddles things further if, as Hobart does, we give such old philosophical objections a political spin. It is almost as if Hobart wants to offload all the problems of anthropology's 20th century history at the door of sociology. Hobart asks: 'what grounds do we have for assuming the understandings of the subjects of study are commensurate with the researcher's, when anthropological research suggests this is usually not the case'. But what without something like an anthropological 'imperialism' is there to convince a sociologist here (or a historian or economist for that matter) that their careful attempts to develop understandings of others (respecting, but often going beyond those others' self-reports) are doomed in advance by the 'lessons' of anthropology?

There there is Hobart's claim that any sociological adaptation of practice theory that seeks to preserve the empirical possibility (no more) that a space of practices is, at least

partly, hierarchically organized is tantamount to ‘hierarch[izing] and normal[izing]’ [its] subjects of study’. But what if, after talking with, listening to and observing particular ‘subjects’, an analyst concludes that, for example:

- when they refer to one type of action, they generally do give some priority to interpretations of it by a particular type of agent (say, a media source), or
- when they describe another type of action, they do generally relate it to statements from a media source, or
- that actors particularly associated with and shown in media are more frequently treated as reference-points in a particular domain than other types of actors?

Are we to rule out of court any such claim of pattern, order, even hierarchy? My point is not – and here Hobart’s critique is salutary – that establishing such claims is easy. Rather such paths of analysis should not be ruled out of court in advance by rhetorical gestures towards some general politics of representation.

Two Dogmas of Pragmatism and Beyond

I want to go a little further and suggest that underlying Hobart’s various arguments (negative and positive) for a ‘radical’ practice theory are two unarticulated (and unjustified) assumptions within Hobart’s own pragmatism. (Pragmatism is the term Hobart uses most often to characterize the philosophical positions he builds upon, so I repeat it here, without myself claiming to offer any commentary on the broader history of pragmatism.)

The first dogma is to see the social world as primarily and constitutively made up of *interpretations* (with no or little weight given to habit, the embodiment of prior interpretation in gesture or hexis, and so on). Of course, interpretations matter hugely, but their status is rarely divorced from action and, while actions themselves encode and enact, we are rarely left only with people’s interpretations of their world. Indeed interpretations are themselves, as Hobart would no doubt agree, themselves actions, whose regularity and patterning may have a significance that is not based on recourse to yet further interpretation on the part of the subject. That at least is the basis of discourse analysis which Hobart might be happy to jettison as a methodology, but which I am not.

The second dogma is to assume that the space of practices (if I may use that term, for convenience, to cover the infinite set of practice-spaces that might be analysed) is *naturally flat, that is, without organization, order or hierarchy*. A better starting-point, I suggest, is to assume neither that it is flat nor that it is ordered, but simply to allow that sometimes one practice is treated by those directly involved as providing the principal context for interpreting the significance of another practice. If so there, for certain purposes, there is order and perhaps even hierarchy. To deny this on the ground that, in the abstract, ‘this is the way things are’ prejudges the space of practices no less illegitimately than the pre-judgements of which Hobart accuses other notions of practice.

Free of those two dogmas, we can apply the specific insights, and the interpretative adventurousness, of practice theory to register better the full variety of media-related practices around us. And here I am happy to adopt Hobart’s suggestion of the term

‘media-related’ instead of my original ‘media-oriented’, since it acknowledges (cf Couldry 2006: 13-15) the dangers of assuming everything in contemporary societies is oriented towards media – a great deal is not! But this insight need not come with an aversion to registering media’s possible contributions to regularities of power - an unnecessarily high price to pay for the less media-centric language for media research that both Hobart and I want. The practices of mediated political spectacle, the interlocking of state and media practices, are in many countries too clear and insistent for us to ignore in the hope of achieving a ‘radical’ practice theory whose philosophical radicalism is itself, as I argued, open to challenge. Indeed there is a politics – a problematic politics – in blunting our tools for analyzing such tendencies towards order for the sake of a supposed philosophical radicalism.

If however we are freed from the unnecessary ontological limitations of the ‘radical version’ of practice theory, we can reflect openly on the responsibilities of interpreting media within a genuinely internationalized framework inspired not least by Hobart’s own work on Bali.⁵ All our concepts (including the term ‘media rituals’ which I have myself developed) need of course to be rigorously reviewed to see what transformations they must undergo to be useful for countries beyond those for which they were originally developed. This requires intense examination of what might, and might not, be comparable between how media-related practices are embedded in countries with diverse religious, political, economic and cultural norms. In all this, Hobart’s call for caution and self-reflexivity before applying concepts beyond their horizon of usefulness is immensely helpful, and reinforces the interpretative decentring that follows from practice theory however applied. But this transformation of our analytic and conceptual languages surely requires us to be as open as possible to the varied ways in which practices are more or less organized and articulated to each other under various conditions. A modestly instrumental use of practice theory may guide us better, I suggest, here than a ‘radical’ pragmatism that relentlessly reads the web of practice in one particular, and paradoxically dogmatic, way.

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¹ That, for example, is why it uses the term 'paradigm' rhetorically, without much philosophical discussion.

² I use the word 'social' here and in what follows to encompass any attempts to understand the domain of human interactions: I am not making specific points about the concept of 'society' or 'the social', for example, which there is no room to debate here.

³ See Couldry (2005), (2006: 178-183).

⁴ See eg Bourdieu's 'reflexive sociology' (1998).

⁵ See Mcmillin (2007: 169) discussing Hobart (2004).

If only practice were so easy: a response to Nick Couldry

Mark Hobart
SOAS, University of London
m.hobart@soas.ac.uk

Appearances notwithstanding, media studies is remarkable for its relative lack of critical theoretical or philosophical debate.¹ Little wonder then that media and communication studies are, by their own admission, in crisis. So I warmly welcome Nick Couldry's article on media practice and his rejoinder to me. My reading suggests he broadly agrees with my stress on practice, but registers caveats and disagreements. Although Couldry has yet to develop his theoretical account, it would appear that we each adopt fairly obvious, but antithetical, accounts of media practice. Couldry's position, as I understand it, might be described as cautiously conservative, while mine is more radical. Couldry adopts a cumulative account of knowledge and wishes to conserve and build on existing achievements, while remedying their shortcomings by adding practice.² By contrast I have grave reservations about much current theory. My approach is radical in that I wish to reconsider all media and mediation as practice, root and branch.

Evidently I have failed to be clear enough about my argument. If Couldry who is philosophically literate is confused, other readers may well be so too. This is not however the place to rehearse the theoretical argument, so I confine myself to sketching out the background to my account of practice.³ My aim is to rethink not just the production, dissemination, and readers' or audiences' engagement with media by reference to their constitutive practices, but also the innumerable practices of commentary by politicians and media producers themselves. In place of abstractions such as structure, agency, hegemony and the like, I consider those finely-honed practices through which scholars claim, enunciate, argue and challenge such notions. Although there are differences of degree and kind, democratically on this account there is no sharp dichotomy between the practices of producers, audiences and commentators, of known and knowers.

The arguments for attempting a thorough-going account of practice are several. It is parsimonious, elegant (Hesse 1978) and therefore easily invalidated. It

¹ 'Theory' in media studies is largely reduced to massaging concepts, many adopted idiosyncratically from other disciplines (think of 'text' and 'discourse'). The lack of engagement with wider philosophical argument is striking. Among the reasons seems to be nostalgia for the originary Gramscian political moment of media studies, together with an awkward coupling with communication studies which, for the most part, is theoretically antediluvian. This has resulted in media studies scholars not only dismissing post-structuralism (Chen 1996) and film theory, but even selectively cherry picking the philosophers whose work underpins or aims to engage with cultural and media studies, like Laclau and Butler (e.g. Hall 1996: 142). Unfortunately at times Couldry slips into this stance, as when he complains of my use of Laclau. I look forward to what an international media studies grounded on a transcendental – and so ahistorical and acultural – argument for realism or naturalism (Bhaskar 1979) would look like.

² Such approaches usually assume a capitalist metaphor of knowledge as happily accumulating and finesse away the revolutionary metaphor, by which new knowledge overthrows previous knowledge (Hobart 1995).

³ For those interested, I give bibliographic references as I go along.

defamiliarizes conventional approaches and knowledge. By rethinking the object of study, it problematizes the relationship between ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ approaches and invites a critical rethinking of action, the human subject, their relationship and issues of explanation more generally. As concepts and theories have presuppositions and histories, it largely avoids imposing these under the guise of the self-evident, natural or normal.

My account of practice draws on various sources. Following the later Foucault, I am interested in the historical and cultural diversity of the ‘micro-practices’ of power/knowledge which he argued make up social life, with special reference to the mass media, because of their articulatory role. Following Laclau, I question totalizing accounts of, say, culture (aka convention), structure or ideology, and human subjects, in favour of analyzing the practices through which these are constituted and antagonisms articulated. I would argue such practices constitute not only the object of study but also the knowing subject. Such an account is evidently anti-dualist,⁴ to the point that I would wish not to separate mind from action. Following Collingwood, this approach

does not ask what mind is; it only asks what mind does...[and] renounces all attempt to discover what mind *always and everywhere does*, and asks only *what mind has done* on certain definite occasions' (Collingwood 1942: 61, italics in the original).

Following Taylor, I treat mind and consciousness as historically situated action and ‘something that is achieved’ (1985: 90). In short, I am trying fairly systematically to redescribe culture, structure, mind and ideas as historically and culturally specific practices. So I was amused to see Couldry depict my understanding of practice as idealist. As I take understanding to be a practice, nothing could be further from the case.⁵ As Couldry attributes to me (as presumably others might) a whole raft of positions that I have argued strenuously against, something is going on.

Let me give two examples. I do not assume that practices are more likely to be unorganized than organized, flat rather than hierarchical. As Goodman argued ‘coherence is a characteristic of descriptions, not of the world...there is no such thing as a structure of the world for anything to conform or fail to conform to (1972: 24, 31). My concern is neither with assuming or divining some ultimate essence of the world, structure or practice, but with the conditions under which people (including notably scholars) have claimed or denied them as being something or

⁴ In much of his argument Couldry seems to favour some form of dualism both in invoking Davidson against Quine (see Taylor 1985: 77-9) and in contrasting discourse/interpretation and power/materiality. One reason for citing Laclau and Taylor is that these are the two philosophers whom Couldry’s own source, Schatzki, draws on at length.

⁵ A similar misplaced charge was laid, as Hirst pointed out (1985: 45ff.), against Collingwood. This will, I hope, clear up other confusions. Couldry raises the question of how, on my account, I am to achieve the *accurate* translation of practice. This presupposes however some *a priori* standard or a correspondence theory of the kind I question. On my account, there are practices which the practitioners or others may label ‘translation’ under certain circumstances, and there are practices of evaluating those practices and so on. The aim is problematize the intellectual practices of translation and representation, as part of reconsidering the implications and consequences of the articulations that scholars themselves make.

A residual Either-Orism is also at work. At moments it seems that, if I am not a realist or materialist (which Couldry evidently favours), then I must lean towards idealism. The other charge, that of relativism, incurred presumably because of my criticism of rationalism, I have addressed in detail elsewhere (1985, 1992)

other to other people on particular occasions with varying consequences. That is I am interested in how groups and people articulate and counter-articulate rival ways of knowing, understanding, acting upon and engaging with the world. In such processes mass mediation is evidently implicated.

Couldry also attributes to me a commitment to some form of interpretivism and some remarkable ideas about the human subject. This is slightly odd as in my original piece I criticized pre-Heideggerian hermeneutics in favour of an analysis in terms of articulation, precisely because it refuses the dualism of mind and body. In other words, following Derrida and Foucault, I am post-, rather than anti-, hermeneutic (Hobart 1982 to 1999).⁶ Couldry also states that my vision of ‘understanding is the transmission of *ideas* between hermetically sealed individuals’ instead of intersubjectivity. To clarify, I seek to problematize both intersubjectivity and Euro-American projections of the subject onto others (1986, 1990, 1997) in favour of a more Foucauldian analysis of the historical and cultural practices through which people (and sometimes other entities) are objectivized as subjects, objects or whatever (1982). Likewise I have questioned the political and epistemological imperatives that lead authorities as diverse as development agencies (Hobart 2007) and media studies scholars (2005) to uphold transmission models despite their evident inappropriateness.

That Couldry could so consistently attribute to me the precise contrary to my argument raises intriguing questions. Unless I am even more ignorant and confused in my presuppositions than I thought, what is going on? Let us try to glean what we can of Couldry’s position to see if this helps. His ontology is significant, because it is not confined to practice. In addition, Couldry allows in various other explanatory notions including structure, convention and some conception of the human subject.⁷

All my work...has aimed to extend our understanding of what I would still prefer to call the ‘structural’ role that media do indeed have in social life (Couldry p 2).

Convention, and more generally, habit are the broad terms we use to characterize a state of affairs where certain actions, understandings, and expressions get repeated *without* the causal input of interpretation (Couldry p 3, emphases in the original).

There are several problems here. Probably the least significant is the much-argued status of structure and convention⁸. As Couldry offers no critique of post-

⁶ I assume Couldry does not simply mean that, if I am not a card-carrying materialist or realist, I must *ipso facto* be an interpretivist. However, a pervasive dualism seems to run through Couldry’s comments. He writes of discourse as if that were a synonym for text, rather than the anti-dualist account of the later Foucault, where discursive practices are situated and involve power inseparable from knowledge.

⁷ I am not quite clear what Couldry takes to be the nature of the human subject. ‘Why after all believe in advance that what for convenience we might call a space of practices’ (the various practices of a particular collection of individuals) is more likely to be unorganized than organized?’ (Couldry p 2). This suggests that humans as subjects may relatively unproblematically be considered to be individuals (on the highly specific genealogy of this notion, see Bakhtin 1981; Rorty 1976).

⁸ Whereas Couldry is happy to take structure and convention as philosophical substances, I am interested in how apparent regularities come to be asserted, denied and opposition silenced. As such argument, contestation and conflict is often not made public, it is not easily observable. Consider the difference between the order and apparent compliance of students in lectures and classes compared with what they say about the lecturer elsewhere.

In addition, Couldry invokes a spatial metaphor of practice over ten times in a short piece. Taken together with the visual metaphor of observing (regularities, hierarchy, organization, subjects), it suggests that the default presupposition of uncritical realism is at work in which mind is ‘the mirror

structuralism or hybrid ontologies like Bourdieu's,⁹ for the moment we must assume that his is a conventional account of structure and convention. However there is a serious problem of explanation. If structure, convention, individuals and practice all have distinct, different, irreducible and non-derivative roles in explaining social life, what precisely is the explanatory status of each? And what is the relationship between them? What is the *explanans* and what the *explanandum*? Structure, convention, individuals and practice cannot each determine social action without trivializing the notion of determination. Or are we in a world in which the explanatory defects of any one is dealt with by deferring to and supplementing by the others, with all the attendant Derridean traps of *diffrance*? It is hard to see how Couldry can argue that his account of practice comprises a new paradigm even by the casual standards in use in the human sciences when, at least until he explains otherwise, practice apart it seems to be the default commonsensical position in much media studies. In any event, epistemologically the approach is so untidy and confused as to be largely vacuous.

How deep the differences are becomes clearer when we consider Couldry's account of understanding and translation. These he argues can adequately be addressed by recourse to intersubjectivity and a principle of charity, so opening two cans of philosophical worms which wriggle in directions he would hardly wish. In each case Couldry depend upon universalizable arguments which run directly counter to the evident advantage of a practice-based approach, namely its sensitivity to historically and culturally specific circumstance.

As to intersubjectivity, if recognition of others as subjects or objects is not just a matter of degree and kind, but is open to changing understanding by the parties involved and is conditioned in any instance by a range of circumstances which are so extensive as to be partly unknowable, what does intersubjectivity consist of on any particular occasion?¹⁰ And who gets to decide? Instead of solving the problem, by appealing to Wittgenstein's language games, Couldry falls back on pre-Heideggerian analytical philosophy which deals with ideal situations not lived experience.¹¹ To use his own image, Couldry has to 'anchor' the essence of the subject and intersubjectivity independent of any actual situations so that the knowing subject – the media studies scholar – may enunciate *ex cathedra* (or, in this instance, *ex London SE14*). If Couldry's approach cannot grasp what a fellow media

of nature' and knowledge is about polishing the mirror and making accurate representations (Rorty 1980). This would start to account for why Couldry has difficulty with my account of knowing and understanding as situated practices.

⁹ As Nightingale notes, the blending of semiology and sociology in 'new audience research' equally raises problems of translation (1996: 59) which Couldry's recourse to charity does not address.

¹⁰ As Schutz, an obvious starting point, noted of the sort of Weberian position adopted by Couldry:

Weber makes no distinction between the *action*, considered as something in progress, and the completed *act*, between the meaning of the producer of a cultural object and the meaning of the object produced, between the meaning of my own action and the meaning of another's action, between my own experience and that of someone else, between my self-understanding and my understanding of another person. He does not ask how an actor's meaning is constituted or what modification this meaning undergoes for his partners in the social world or for a nonparticipating observer... [He pays] little attention to the ways in which an interpreter modifies meaning... Far from being homogeneous, the social world is given to us in a complex system of perspectives... He naïvely took for granted the meaningful phenomena of the social world as a matter of *intersubjective agreement* in precisely the same way as we all in daily life assume the existence of a lawful external world conforming to the concepts of our understanding (1967: 8-9).

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of why Wittgensteinian language games are inapplicable to understanding translation, see Habermas 1988: 117-70.

scholar is arguing, why should we assume he can appreciate in significant detail how people living under varied circumstances relate to the media? How, for example, does his approach advance understanding of how different viewers actually engage with television?

Couldry's response to issues of translation is similarly problematic. He invokes Davison on the need for a principle of charity in translation. Not only do most of the problems of intersubjectivity return with knobs on, but he ends up with a largely situation-free account of language which might be suitable to philosophers, but is unhelpful to studying socially situated practice. Gellner offered a sustained critique of the charity principle for the kind of language use at issue. For example,

why should it not be a part of their use that the ambiguity of words, the logically illicit transformation of one concept into another...is exploited to the full by the users of what seems to be 'one' concept?... It equally blinds us to the possibility of, for instance, social control through the employment of absurd, ambiguous, inconsistent or unintelligible doctrines (1973: 39)

In short, practice defies the neatness for which Couldry seeks. For the mass media above all, I would have thought he would want to allow such complex and indirect use of language.¹² And who gets to wield the principle of charity? His approach sidelines questions of power in translation (Asad 1986; Hobart 1990). Couldry neatly demonstrates quite how ill-equipped existing media theory is to address media practice elsewhere. Indeed I begin to worry how well it can work on its home turf.

Couldry's argument exemplifies a wider point about academic practice itself, which is just how closed it is around known worlds and inscribed conventions of thinking. I am reminded of how Martin Hollis demonstrated with unimpeachable reasoning the impossibility of any other logic than the western one (Hollis 1970; cf. Hobart 1985). The Indian logicians writing for last couple of millennia had the misfortune not to have read Hollis and so did not realize what they were doing was impossible.

This discussion may help clarify why I argue for a radical account of practice. *Inter alia* the reasons are philosophical, political and moral. A cluttered ontology entails endless confusion as to whether you are attempting to explain, interpret, describe, or play with smoke and mirrors. Couldry's appeal to convention takes on a new significance. Perhaps what media scholars do is simply follow conventional procedures – normal science – however incoherent?

Short of opting for a naïve realism (Collingwood 1940: 20-33) which treats actions and thoughts as presupposition-free, scholars might consider the implications for power/knowledge of their arguments, because these come with all sorts of presuppositions entailed. Consider the consequences of unreflectively describing or imposing ideas of the human subject and intersubjectivity on others through, say, development projects, ideas about psychiatry, counselling, child-rearing. And what is at issue is not imperialism of the media industries, but of the supposedly left-liberal media scholars in their writing and teaching. That, as I understand it, is hegemony at work.

Finally, if post-coloniality is not to be a potentially cynical cover for such hegemony, it requires some kind of open, unfinalizable dialogue, even if this

¹² Whether images, and so film footage, can so easily be encompassed in a principle of charity raises another set of questions.

threatens the comfortable accumulation of academic capital. It requires throwing aside the safety mechanisms of clawback – structure, convention, principles of charity and so on – by which media scholars insulate themselves in favour of appreciating how other people may understand themselves and articulate the world in ways media scholars can barely imagine. At least, it was in that hope that I moved into media studies, not to redescribe a heterogeneous changing world in threadbare old categories. However different our approaches to practice, I am sure that Nick Couldry would share this hope.

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