What do we mean by 'media practices'?

In

Theorising Media and Practice

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Who needs a collection on theorising media and practice, and why? Except for the few malcontents who stray into academia, media practitioners and policy-makers are mostly too busy doing media to have time for scholars whose grasp of the intricacies of a fast-moving industry are often rudimentary. Have the media and practice not been endlessly and largely repetitively theorized already? And has not the phrase 'media practices' been used so promiscuously as to be a cliché? Perhaps our time would be better spent doing something else.

The frequency with which media practice is invoked though suggests that it is an attempt to address a perceived difficulty. Most approaches to media studies, despite claims to the contrary, encounter two problems. They are how to address the relationship between academic models and actuality (whatever that is); and how to address the practices of which media production, distribution, reception and commentary arguably consist. So, is it possible to devise an account of practice that will meet the intellectual requirements of media studies and reflect recognizably the activities of practitioners? And, as Western scholars often imagine that their notional intellectual radicalness mysteriously frees them from potential Eurocentrism, does such an account make sense beyond the narrow confines of Anglophone academia?

Here I argue that a critical appreciation of practice is as important is it will prove difficult. The reasons are historical and cultural. Since the Greek philosophers, the dominant approaches of European thought have been based on models, mostly ideal, that stress system, structure and coherence while downplaying or explaining away contingency, applicability and performance. Practice is generally defined in terms of, and invoked to address defects in, theories which have other concerns. In other words its function is remedial, prosthetic or supplementary. And the gulf between the theorizers and theorized remains unbridged.[1] However, involving those whose practices are at issue requires not just turning our scholarly world upside down but re-inventing our constitutive intellectual practices. A serious account of practice should be neither just another lurch of the juggernaut of theory nor, as so often, a strap-on.

There are two implications of the historical and cultural nature of theory which are immediately relevant. First, while the histories of science and social science may have obliged us to acknowledge that theoretical models are part of historical argument, we still have great difficulty recognizing how far their presuppositions are also culturally specific. At its simplest, words have histories and accrete connotations. And the kinds of words we are talking about like culture, media, meaning, practice are singularly complex. They do not travel well outside the Anglophone world. While apologists of globalization might dismiss this as quaint difference shortly to be MacDonaldized or bombed into oblivion, how ironic were left-liberal media scholars to endorse approaches that reiterated a Eurocentric

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[1] There has, of course, been a loyal opposition, whose genealogy is often traced most recently through Vico, Croce, Collingwood, Wittgenstein, Bakhtin and Volosinov and the philosophical pragmatists, notably Peirce, Goodman and Quine. I find it useful to consider the work of Foucault, Baudrillard and Deleuze as part of this trend. Although it deals with problems more specific to analytical philosophy, granted how developed philosophical pragmatism (henceforth plain 'pragmatism') is, it is striking how marginal it has been to disciplines which involve, rather than theorize about, practice.

hegemony.[2] In principle at least, this is what anthropologists can contribute to media studies' debates.

The second implication is less obvious. To what does an account of practice apply? Is it supplementary to existing approaches? If so, it is limited by the presuppositions of the model, the defects of which invoking practice is designed to ameliorate.[3] Or is it intended to replace them? To do so is difficult and challenging. Terms, like mind, intention, understanding, meaning, have cultural histories which follow the theoretical ox like the cart it draws. Specification of what counts as practice similarly involves presuppositions. Now the distinctive task of anthropologists is to recognize and work between incommensurate ways of imagining and engaging with the world without reducing one to the other.[4] To take just one example: does the account of practice include the researcher's own practices and milieux? Here old intellectual habits get in the way – *aka* the history of epistemological presuppositions, including the hierarchical relationship of the subject and object of study, the knower and the known. If we are to live in a post-colonial world, it is unacceptable to assume *a priori* that the practices of the researcher are so radically separable from those of the researched or are of such a different and superior order that they can, or should, not be considered together. Sauce for the goose here is emphatically not sauce for the gander.

Such a partial account naturalizes the kinds of difference that I would argue analyses of practice should question. For the purpose of invoking practice is precisely to eschew recourse not just to familiar epistemological and ontological systems, and the conventional paraphernalia of theory, but to those intellectual practices by which theory is replicated. Then the knower can no longer claim superiority to and separateness from the known, but becomes part of the known with all the attendant problems.[5] So a theory of practice which fails to include the

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[2] As an example, lecturing, as I do, on media and cultural studies in Indonesian is informative, because you land up giving side lectures on the background and history of cultural usage of many of the key terms. And obviously Indonesian students relate ideas to their experience of the Indonesian mass media with fascinating, if unpredictable, results. Cultural translation consists in effect of everyone else having to learn the myths of the master race.
Whether the rest of the world will continue to lie down quietly is questionable. For example, although statements of difference remain couched in the theoretical language of the hegemon, the proliferation of journals and collected volumes on Asian media and cultural studies suggests epistemological colonialism may be running its course.
[3] This is the drawback of Bourdieu's approach which is, in the end, supplementary. While he made some steps in *Homo academicus* (1988) towards recognizing academic practices as an object of study, they are at such a level of generality as to ape the shortcomings of structure that practice was designed to redress.
[4] How difficult it is to cross these divides is evident in the collection resulting from the Bielefeld conference on *Practices and social order* (Schatski et al. 2001). Something resembling a coherent theory of practice is only possible by the ingenious selection of examples which ignore most social life. Such armchair punditry not only reveals a profound Eurocentrism, but scholarly practices themselves remain conveniently unproblematized. This kind of theorizing remains so trapped in its own world that it is part of the problem rather than a solution.
[5] The political – and indeed imperial – implications of this hierarchical theory of knowledge are discussed by Inden (1990: 15). Significantly he draws here upon the pragmatist philosopher, Richard Rorty (1979: 357) and more broadly upon that other pragmatist, Collingwood. For a more extended analysis of the colonial implications of power and knowledge, which is pertinent here, see Inden 1986.

researcher and practices of theorizing, research and writing as integral reiterates the presuppositions it claims to reject. A strong and workable account of practice is far more demanding than its proponents appreciate.

Where are we?

What is the state of debate over practice in media studies? A thoughtful recent overview by Nick Couldry (2004), developed further in this volume, is a convenient starting point. Couldry argues for a new paradigm which 'treats media as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media' (2004: 117). While, given the internal dissention in media studies, not everyone might agree with his analysis, his argument about the lack of attention to practice is strong and the case for redressing this compelling. Couldry sagely notes that 'focusing on practice is a more radical adjustment to our research agendas than might at first appear' (2004: 126). And by bravely leaping into this shark-infested new paradigm,[6] Couldry reveals what a perilous venture this is.

For a framework Couldry looks to practice theory in sociology (2004: 115). Leaving aside how adequate this might be within sociology, it has evident problems as the general theoretical basis for media studies. How are yet more surveys and questionnaires are going to add to a serious understanding of practices? It suggests a failure to appreciate what a study of practice entails. Detailed research into the interlocking phases of production in diverse media in different countries or how, say, different groups and kinds of viewers engage with television raises complex issues. It certainly invites ethnographic approaches and at least some recognition of the anthropological thinking behind such work. Waving sociological theory at anthropological problems tends to prove ungainly, incoherent and unworkable. How would it work? Do we use a sociological approach to deal with practices embracing large groups or populations and an anthropological approach to the relatively small groups where production and reception occur? And will the senses of practice designed for these different purposes be sufficiently commensurate as to avoid misunderstanding?

Couldry spells out sensible considerations that need to be taken into account for a practice-based approach. However when he attempts to use sociological practice theory to address the issues he has identified, the wheels start to come off. As Couldry notes, how to define practice is much more difficult than Swidler, on whom he relies, allows. She distinguishes 'routine activities (rather than consciously chosen actions) notable for their unconscious, automatic, un-thought character' from discourse as 'the system of meanings that allows them to say anything at all' (Couldry 2004: 121, citing Swidler 2001: 74-5). The former is so extensive as to be unknowable. And, if it includes the unconscious, on what authority is the researcher to infer the individual (or is it collective?) unconsciouses of large populations? Can we generalize a global theory of practice oblivious both to the research questions and their purposes, and also to people's

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[6] Couldry frames his approach in terms of a new paradigm. If paradigm is not simply a synonym for approach or something similar, this is a strong claim because, from the debate following Kuhn's original argument (1970; e.g. Lakatos & Musgrave 1970), a paradigm entails a rigorous ontology and epistemology, and specification of how the assumptions of the new paradigm differ from its predecessors.

self-understandings? Swidler's industrial seine-netting risks catching more seaweed and flotsam than anything. She defines discourse in terms of bounded systems of symbols and meanings (2001: 75). If an idealist, all-embracing model of culture can be prestidigitated to become practice, anything can, so making the notion entirely vacuous.

When Couldry addresses other aspects of practice, matters get more problematic still. The first is 'how people *understand* what actions constitute a distinct practice' (2004: 121). Apart from explicit understandings, actions are supposedly 'governed by common rules and by sharing the common reference-point of certain ends, projects and beliefs' (2004: 121). How shared understandings are depends on how far away you are from the situatedness of daily argument. And, knowing what others peoples believe is deeply problematic (Needham 1972). This account of belief and rule-governed behaviour harps back to pre-Wittgensteinian models (cf. Schatzki 2001: 51-3). While the questions are admirably formulated, the proposed answers grow less convincing at each turn.

Couldry, citing Swidler, then asks 'how [do] some practices anchor, control, or organise others' (2004: 122). Her answer – and so Couldry's with reservations – is in terms of a definitional hierarchy, to which Couldry adds that the media 'anchor other practices through the "authoritative" representations and enactments of key terms and categories that they provide' (2004: 122). Now hierarchy and authoritative representations are the familiar language of approaches which privilege the knower above the known from which Couldry wishes to distance himself. Among the difficulties, let me pick up two themes already introduced.

Does an analysis of practice not apply to the thinking of academics? If not, then we back to the skewed account of practice which applies only to the object of study. If it does, then we cannot speak unproblematically of hierarchies or authoritative representations – whose, where and when? We would have to inquire critically into our own scholarly practices. We would have to consider who hierarchizes practices and under what circumstances.[7] This in turn requires us to consider who does so *as* what, to whom, on what occasion, for what purpose. As Nelson Goodman has argued (1968: 27-31), a pragmatist approach to reference entails not imposing correspondence theories, usually unthinkingly. It requires us to consider 'representation *as*' as a practice. Far from hierarchy solving the problem, it complicates the issue by posing entirely new sets of questions about who hierarchizes whom on what occasions to what ends. Couldry is let down by his theoretical sources on practice. Similar confusions attend the idea of authoritative representations. Leaving aside who represents what as what to whom, according to whom and under what circumstances are these representations considered to be authoritative? As with hierarchizing, invoking the 'authoritative' merely compounds the problem.

What we can actually know about other people's practices, about their understandings of their practices and what underwrites our knowledge? There is a hidden presupposition about the psychic unity of humankind, usually modelled

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[7] The theorists in Schatzki *et al.* 2001 refer simply to 'context', which ignores the circumstances of practice. To the question 'do media practices have a *privileged* role in anchoring other types of practice because of the privileged circulation of media representations and images of the social world?' (Couldry 2004: 127), the answer is that the circumstances of privileging as a practice would have to come under scrutiny.

uncritically on academics' idealized self-imaginings or some fantasy of 'the everyday'. For a study of media in complex societies, we have few grounds on which to presume transparency: for example, that the worlds of producers' and recipients' practices are mutually accessible. If translation is involved, as for most anthropologists, a whole further dimension appears.

I shall address only three obvious problems. How is the researcher to understand other people's practices? Implicit are a correspondence theory of reference, a universal hermeneutics and direct access to other minds which assumes the researcher knows what is happening sufficient to cover all reasonable eventualities, and has command both of available interpretive frameworks and what people are thinking. As A.F.C. Wallace noted, even in a dialogue between close interlocutors we have no grounds to presume that we understand someone else's utterances. All we can assume is that we can interpret what they said in terms of our own frame of reference, which he calls 'equivalence structures' (1961: 29-44). It remains unproven that our grounds for thinking that the frames of reference of an academic researcher and a film editor, a working class housewife watching television – far less media producers and viewers in other parts of the world – are likely to be similar.[8]

The second issue is translation. Quine's argument in *Word and object* was that, outside the narrow confine of western European languages, radical translation is an issue, because there are always several alternative manuals by which we can translate any set of utterances (1960: 73-79). As Hesse has noted, Quine's argument about the under-determination of reference applies not only to translation but to the kinds of materials with which social scientists deal (1978). We have to add the irrelevance of translation (or indeed interpretation) to the list of presuppositions required to launch this theory of practice.

Finally 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?[9] And how is the researcher to know the significance to participants of their practices?[10] Swidler's argument in terms of hierarchy and authority, and the failure to address the problems of understanding and translation, gives the answer. With breathtaking insouciance, this sociological practice theory objectivizes, hierarchizes and normalizes the subjects of study just as did its predecessors, except they made lesser claims. As a theory for a dialogic – or indeed any – understanding of other people's media practices, it is a non-starter. Couldry asks important questions but, in relying upon sociology of practice, he ends up Swidled.

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[8] The assumption that media producers worldwide share frames of reference either because they have been trained in the same way or because of the dictates of technology is not supported by ethnographic studies.

[9] This is the issue of radical metaphysics, which has been central to philosophical pragmatist concerns from Collingwood (1940), Bakhtin (1986), Volosinov (1973) and Foucault (1986a, 1986b). The failure to recognize, let alone engage with, many streams of pragmatist thinking highlights we are dealing with a pre-theoretical theory of practice.

[10] This problem is serious enough for well-articulated practices. How the researcher is supposed to know the unreflective or unconscious meanings of someone in another society boggles the mind.

What would an account of practice involve?

This brief review shows how Couldry's argument is let down by the lack of appropriate theoretical resources on which to draw. So what would we need for a suitable account of practice? Indeed is a single, coherent, acceptable account likely? I think not for several reasons. First, theory is best treated as a continuous argument between rival ways of understanding complex events and actions. The apparent consensus about the importance of practice results largely from discontent with existing theories, not with agreement about what practice is. Second, the use of theories and concepts depends on the purposes and objects of inquiry. Practice is particularly suited to detailed research of the kind anthropologists specialize in to address questions thrown up by previous research. It is inappropriate to the analysis of macro-processes, although it would be central to the overlooked questions about the constituent intellectual activities of researchers. Practice therefore, like culture or meaning, is likely to become a site of contestation. As one example, should we treat practices as 'the chief context of human activity – and of social orders'? Or should we treat practice as 'order-transforming activity' (Schatzki 2001: 46, reviewing Taylor's and Laclau & Mouffe's arguments respectively)? Evidently which kind of approach will depend on the theoretical background and concerns of researchers. It cannot be settled by fiat. I happen to require an account which facilitates analysis of how practices transform groups, individuals and the conditions of their articulation. But that is just my personal preference determined partly by the research questions that interest me.

Attempting to formulate a definitive account of practice therefore would be premature. However there are a range of issues and theoretical questions that need addressing. Because an account of practice aims to differentiate itself from previous approaches, it will presumably have to answer questions about the kinds of ontology, epistemology and politics entailed.[11]

Ontological questions

What kind of thing is practice? What else inhabits the world, and what can we exclude? Is everything practice or to be redescribed as practice? Or are we, as many philosophers of practice are inclined, to allow other things such as skills, understandings, mind, intention, meaning, causation, language, logic, rules and much else besides? If the latter, as these concepts bring with them a long history of usage, how radical could such an account of practice ever be? It would land up as just another attempt to compensate for the shortcomings of existing theories. And how would such an account deal with lack, silencing and exclusion?

As an object of study practice raises singular problems in that practices are not just historical and cultural, but situated and so partly contingent.[12] They may be moments of slippage, change, openness. And what constitutes evidence of the existence of practices? The trap is naïve realism. We may

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[11] I leave issues of power largely implicit here, because I do not have space to develop them. Also, in the wake of Foucault's work, they are more obvious than before.

[12] Contingency, a notoriously difficult problem to handle, can through practice be addressed by considering how it is articulated.

mistake features of discourse for features of the subject of discourse (Goodman 1972: 24).

If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say? We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described. Our universe, so to speak, consists of these ways rather than of a world or worlds (Goodman 1978: 2-3).

Practice is not a natural object but a frame of reference that we use to interrogate a complex reality.

Practice therefore depends on it being identified as such. In other words some agent or subject – be it the researcher, the media, local intellectuals or whatever – articulates some set of activities or events *as* a practice.[13] So researchers would be unwarrantedly naturalist to dismiss how their subjects of study imagine and articulate their practices. Among the practices in which we are likely to be especially interested are those which articulate, reflect upon, question and revise other practices. A strong account of practice requires us to work between two changing congeries of articulations – discourses if you will – a problem familiar to anthropologists.

Evidently different scholars will argue for different ontologies. Again, speaking personally, I prefer parsimony. Not least, each new element brings with it a far-from-innocent history of prior usage. Wherever possible I would aim to redescribe necessary concepts in terms of action or practice. So 'mind' is what mind has done on particular occasions.[14] Similarly the great icons of macro-analysis – structure, capitalism, the polity and economy – require rephrasing in terms of the constitutive practices of enunciating, invoking, reiterating, denying them on different occasions, without which they effectively remain transcendental (Laclau 1990a).[15] We can now see why media practices are so important: the mass media have become central to such articulation and its detailed study correspondingly important. If articulating other practices – by representing, mediating or commenting on them – is what gives the impression of ordering them, then our own and our interlocutors' analytical and commentative practices inescapably become part of the object of study.

On this account, practice is not supplementary to notions such as system, structure, order or individuals but replaces them. This is a radical move which will

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[13] Whether some occurrence is construed as an action or an event depends on how it is articulated. Here the disjuncture between researcher's and participants' frames of reference comes in. Anthropologists are familiar with what we would call an event like disease being treated as the result of an action, witchcraft. 'Natural' calamities or great events may well be attributed with agency.

[14] Collingwood put it succinctly. The sort of study of mind appropriate to historical and anthropological method

involves two renunciations. First, it renounces with Locke all 'science of substance'. It does not ask what mind is; it asks only what mind does... Secondly, it renounces all attempt to discover what mind *always and everywhere does*, and asks only *what mind has done* on certain definite occasions (1942: 60. Unless otherwise indicated, all emphases in quotations are in the originals).

Charles Taylor makes a related point about action and consciousness. Reflective 'awareness in our action is something we come to achieve. In achieving this, we also transform our activity' (1985: 84).

[15] Given my interest in how societies change, my short list of concepts to be redescribed in terms of practice include agency and subjecthood; structure and history; consciousness, meaning and the everyday. I have addressed each elsewhere.

require time and argument to think through for anthropology and media studies.[16] Likewise our assumptions about individuals require rethinking through the practices by which they are constituted, divided, addressed and learn to recognize themselves (Foucault 1982). And with this goes assumptions about individual agency.[17] Such a non-dualist approach makes the articulatory role of the mass media much easier to think about. Unfortunately old intellectual habits are so engrained, massive slippage is inevitable.

In the light of this, Schatzski's definition of practices as 'organized nexuses of activity' (2001: 48) fails to stress agency and articulation. I prefer to think of practices as those recognized, complex forms of social activity and articulation, through which agents set out to maintain or change themselves, others and the world about them under varying conditions. Such an account is deliberately open and problematizes *inter alia* what it is to articulate, to recognize as, or to ascribe agency.[18]

How might practice be further circumscribed appropriate to the study of mass media? Couldry argues for 'media-oriented practice, in all its looseness and openness. What, quite simply, are people *doing* in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?' (2004: 119). He then specifies: 'do media practices have a *privileged* role in anchoring other types of practice because of the privileged circulation of media representations and images of the social world?' However privileging the media this way begs the question, because it anticipates how media practices relate to others, or indeed what comprises a media-oriented practice. I prefer 'media-related practice', as it includes, say, women cooking meals so the family can view favourite programmes, family decisions about capital investment in radio, television or computers, preferences in dress or other consumer items shown in advertising or programmes.[19] It also allows for a consideration of absences: the refusal to read a particular newspaper, to watch soccer or whatever.

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[16] Although the philosophical case has been argued through in some detail, how it would work for different human scientific disciplines is far from a matter of simple applying theory, not least because of the dual discursive nature of inquiry into practice.

[17] Collingwood stressed how agency is widely complex or compound (1942). Cf. Taylor: 'All action is not in the last analysis of individuals; there are irreducibly collective actions' (1985: 93).

[18] Recognizing implies recognizing as or representing as. Practices are not natural objects in the world. Articulation here is in the sense argued by Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 104-14). To develop Peirce, if actions are taken as primary, activities are sets of actions. Practices are more complex in that they involve the articulation of subjects, objects and purposes. The categories are evidently overlapping and situational.

In answer to the question 'Is television-viewing a practice?' we cannot decide *a priori*, but must inquire about kinds and degrees of viewing, for what purposes and according to whom. I consider my flopping in front of television after a hard day at work an activity, but a practice if I am critically watching an ethnographic film. So accounts of (usually) men watching news as part of making themselves informed citizens might be considered a practice in some situations, as might the couch-potato life of the British TV series, The Royle Family, where television-watching is constitutive of their social life and roles.

[19] It works nicely, for example, for domestic and industrial work patterns in Bali. Women frequently cook and make offerings with the radio or television on. And handicraft wood-carving often takes place in big sheds with several televisions sets tuned to different channels, so carvers can move around to watch their preferred channel.

Epistemological considerations

As the epistemological presuppositions of existing theories have been extensively criticized (e.g. by Foucault and Derrida or, from a different background, Rorty 1979), I would only note the legacy of naturalism in communication studies and the effective failure by cultural and media studies scholars to engage seriously with post-structuralist critiques (Chen 1986). I only have space to raise two questions. What is the relation between the knowledge or understanding of the researchers and the objects of study? And what are we actually doing when we research and write?[20] Specifically, how are we to represent other people's practices?

The work of Foucault enables us to go beyond the old divisions between the *Natur*- and *Geisteswissenschaften* and rethink scholarly inquiry and professional authority through which we 'authorize' our subjects (Asad 1986) and for whom. If we are critically to reconsider our own practices, then we need to rework the worn distinctions between describing, explaining and interpreting (Wittgenstein 1958). And interpreting has proven far less elegant and satisfactory than Clifford Geertz claimed (1973). Interpreting, as a practice, is arguably endless and turns back on the interpreting subject.

> If interpretation can never be brought to an end, it is simply because there is nothing to interpret. There is nothing absolutely primary to interpret because at bottom everything is already interpretation... one does not interpret what there is in the signified, but one interprets, fundamentally, *who* has posed the interpretation... The second consequence is that interpretation always has to interpret itself (Foucault 1990: 64, 66).

How we get from the gamut of people's intellectual practices, the attendant disagreements, misunderstandings and antagonisms to the neat, coherent expositions satisfying to the primary audience of western academics remains largely mysterious. For example, notoriously Geertz's interpretations of Balinese culture titillate western readers' fantasies about exotic Asia, but have precious little relation to the Balinese thinking they purport to interpret.[21]

Quite how researchers are supposed to understand other people's practices – media or otherwise – is likely to prove a vexing problem, even if the sociology of practice on offer, eurocentrically, ignores it. As we do not have direct access to what other people think of their practices, we may require something like the method of re-enactment that Collingwood argued was distinctive of history and, by extension, anthropology, where we cannot assume shared experience, understanding or presuppositions. So the researcher has in effect to re-enact what the subject of study was up to through their own thinking. Collingwood outlined what this entailed for historical thinking (1946: 282-302), and it has a distinguished genealogy in British social anthropology, significantly in part through Evans-Pritchard's use of Collingwood.

Understanding the circumstances of practices would presumably often require something resembling intensive ethnography by participant-observation, a quite

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[20] I have attempted to address this question for ethnography in Hobart 1996.
[21] E.g. Hobart 2000. I would adopt a harder line than readers may like. The abuses of interpretive power are so endemic, I would argue for avoiding interpreting altogether in favour of a critical analysis of others' commentaries on their own practices and productions (Hobart 2006).

different beast from what most media studies scholars imagine. Command of language and usage is a major issue because understanding what is said in newspapers, television and film demands not a Berlitz course, but appreciation of the endless and intricate references. Collingwood went further however. To understand other people's practices requires recognition of the presuppositions implicit in their thoughts and actions, not in the abstract but as these are used in practice to evaluate their own and others' actions (1940). The researcher then brings her or his theory and training to bear critically on interrogating the evidence, which includes understanding gleaned from re-enactment.[22] The moment that media studies steps beyond the safe shores of the Anglophone media, the world suddenly becomes a much more complicated place.

A stress upon practice requires us to rethink not just the object of study but the whole venture of media studies. If we are to reconsider media production, distribution, reception and commentary as practices, for example the old issues of how structures of power work through media ideologies to perpetuate hegemony among individuals have to be recast – and not before time.[23] This is not to say that human subjects are not interpellated by, or implicated in, the mass media in various ways, but that what is happening is more complex and interesting than this framework allows. Media corporations are not omniscient, omnipotent agents (yet slaves to practical reason and ideology) because, on this account, they comprise congeries of practices, sometimes coherent, sometimes contradictory, sometimes unrelated, and largely uninvestigated. Similarly, the residual individualist/collectivism dichotomy implicit in interpellation with its Lacanian genealogy,[24] prevents us considering the practices through which the media brought to bear on people's lives. This potentially involves families, peer groups, friends as well as the complex circumstances of people's engagement and implication in the mass media. Quite simply, if we are to take practice seriously, we have more or less to rethink how we set about the study of media and mediation from scratch.

What does it look like in practice?

What can such a fine-grained, critical approach tell us about the media that we do not already know? The general case for ethnographic and anthropological studies of media has already been made (e.g. Ginsburg *et al.* 2002; Bird 2003; Peterson

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[22] This is therefore a version of the Baconian method (Collingwood 1946: 269-282). A key source of evidence is commentaries on practices by the participants and others (Hobart 2006).For reasons spelled out at length in his later work by Collingwood, himself a philosopher, debates about practice among analytical philosophers cannot offer a workable framework for the analysis of media practices, especially non-Western ones. *Inter alia* the object of study involves congeries of presuppositions which are both historical and culturally specific and so require historical or anthropological approaches. Insofar as philosophy presupposes its object, it is unsuited to this task. Insofar as practice requires recognition of the circumstances, purposes and outcomes of action, as Nigel Barley noted of a general theory of sexual intercourse, it leads eventually to frustration, sterility and impotence.

[23] It is not that issues of power are irrelevant, but the limitations of what were useful approaches and concepts in their day have become evident. You only have to think of the incoherencies in the notion of ideology (Laclau 1990b).

[24] Althusserian accounts of interpellation look increasingly ropey anyway, e.g. Carroll 1988: 53-88; Laclau & Mouffe 1975.

2003; Rothenbuhler & Coman 2005). As intensive ethnographies of production appear, surprising worlds open up that were inaccessible to other approaches, as they were never designed to address practice. At times the divergence is so stark that the reader wonders how they could possibly be talking about the same reality.

After this abstract and general discussion, let me end with some implications of brief examples drawn from ethnography. They address not only what is possible, but what may be problematic. I draw here on the work of some of my research students.[25]

Let us start with a conventional question: how are the economic and technological changes in India reflected in popular journalism? Matti Pohjonen, working in India's biggest, Mumbai-based tabloid *Mid-Day* and with *Desimediabitch*, a weblog reporting on SMSs from the Asian Tsunami, exemplifies the kinds of insight you can only obtain from ethnography. Instead of the idealized hierarchy of sources that researchers conventionally extract through interview, it took working alongside journalists and querying the gap between the formal version and practice for a senior sub-editor at Mid-Day to comment:'For us, Google is God'. Practice theorists postulate general rules for ordering practices (Schatski 2001; Swidler 2001), but that is of a quite different kind from the working practices through which journalists selected and used different sources from newsfeeds, gossip, contacts and the Internet depending on the story and the circumstances. And journalists' practice stands in a complex relationship to their reflection on their own practices, including recognition of how industrial and social pressures in the workplace affect what they write.

By contrast, Pohjonen's research on web-logs shows the sheer contingency by which SMSs picked up from tsunami-ravaged Sri Lanka became transmogrified into authoritative text in *The Guardian*. An analysis of practice does not just dissolve system and structure, but clarifies how revered transcendentals like 'text' come about and, despite the closure offered by routine, how fortuitous the givens of much media study are.

How you inculcate fear by articulating events was the theme of Angad Chowdhry's ethnography. This required him to research several different media organizations. To understand how newspapers achieve this, he trained as a crime reporter for the Mumbai-based *The Indian Express*. The training itself was an object lesson on learning practice. It was not just how to write what is supposed to frighten the Indian middle classes, but how to represent the confusion, uncertainty, messiness and human suffering after the crime. Routine cannot entirely order the ambiguities and ambivalences of the journalist's own position, between the newspaper, the police, relatives and parties wishing to use the media to various ends. To be a crime reporter is to be plunged into multiple and often murky political waters, to have an anomalous status and stand in a curious relationship with other reporters. Practice

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[25] Age, status, professional experience and ethnicity affect how easily the researcher can become a participant. Young researchers are more easily assimilated to working groups, whereas when I, as an ageing 'professor', hang about an Indonesian TV studio, I am hardly part of the furniture. By contrast, a PhD student who was an experienced television producer was quickly absorbed into the channel he was researching, because on any given day the staff often needed an extra hand, for camera, sound or whatever.

here is partly about survival. The gap between Chowdhry's academic field notes and his newspaper copy highlights the incommensurateness of academic and journalistic discourses.

A detailed analysis of practice may undermine both practitioners' and media scholars' accounts. In the highly industrialized, numerate and technophile climate of television production in Singapore, Taylor Nelson Sofres audience ratings are crucial. However Ivan Kwek's ethnography on the Malay channel Suria in Singapore showed that what actually happened at the crucial decision-making meetings between the station and the channel's advisory committee subverted executives' understandings of their own practices. Senior management fondly imagined that they exemplified state-of-the-art practical reason, driven by such considerations as viewer response, advertising revenue, changing trends in the industry, the competition and, in Singapore, government. However Kwek's ethnographic study of boardroom practice suggested quite different practices affected many decisions. Mothers-in-law and weddings could overrule AC Nielsen, as executives would cite their affines' and other relatives' opinions about programme quality. And weddings are an important, and frequent, social occasion among Malays. That is where television executives actually talked to members of their audiences. For media executives, such dialogue presented a quite different way of assessing how programmes were received than disembodied viewing figures. Exactly the same happened in the television stations in which I have worked in Indonesia.[26] We are confronted with the significance of the difference between how people understand or represent themselves as against how their practices appear to the outside analyst, which is arguably the *raison d'être* of anthropology. This difference cannot be collapsed into either the participants' or researcher's discourse alone without irremediable trivialization.

If a stress on practice complicates the study of media production, its implications for the study of reception are equally far-reaching. Whereas production relies on clearly-articulated practices in relatively small and highly organized groups, reception presents more problems. How useful it is to define as practice all the forms that reading and viewing of print and broadcast media alone may take is a moot point. As we are dealing with mass media, we are dealing with unknowably large populations. However surveys, focus groups or interviews cannot access practices in the sense proposed. Here ethnography hits a problem too because, by synecdoche, a few examples have to stand for the whole. And looming over everything are two problems. What readers and viewers are making of what they read and watch remains largely undecidable. And it remains unclear exactly whether there is a coherent object of study.

Practices tend not to line up neatly. They exhibit sprawl, mutual contradiction, often unplanned originality, undecidability – in short they exemplify everything that undermines system. As Laclau pointed out, the genealogy of European thought from Aristotle has sidelined the contingent and unpredictable in favour of the essential and continuity (1990a: 18-26). The epistemological and political implications are obvious. However it puts media studies scholars in a dilemma. To take on the full

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[26] Here the recognition is effectively on the part of the researcher, which is why practice has to be defined between two frames of reference.

implications of a philosophy of practice wrecks most of the discipline. To carry on academic practice as usual by inoculating themselves occasionally with a judicious *soupçon* of practice-lite temporarily to ward off the more evident incoherencies makes mockery of the whole purpose. We should not be too optimistic. As J.K. Galbraith remarked

> Faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving there is no need
> to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof.

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