

## In celebration of critical encounters

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It is a particular pleasure to contribute to this volume. The thirtieth anniversary of the publication of *De los medios a las mediaciones: Comunicación, cultura y hegemonía* is a matter of note. For a book's influence to reverberate over three decades certainly merits our attention, and it is surely fitting to laud the author in his eightieth year.

My starting-point is the introduction of Jesús Martín Barbero's work to the Anglosphere, in which I am delighted to have played a part, at the time quite unknowing of the wider impact his work would have. Consequently, this brief reflection is of a personal kind. From being Jesús's first English-language translator I became an interlocutor. We have remained in touch from time to time, and I am pleased to have met him on several memorable occasions. We have exchanged work, some of mine subsequently being translated into Spanish through his good offices. Who cannot be happy to join good company in the republic of letters and reach new readerships?

We first met in Barcelona in 1988 at the IAMCR's (AIERI) annual conference. When introduced, I told Jesús I had just translated one of his articles into English and he showed real pleasure. The piece in question appeared just after the Barcelona event. It was part of an issue titled 'Latin American Perspectives' published in the leading international journal *Media, Culture & Society*, which always had – and maintains – a vocation of disseminating a wide range of work in our field, although with the increasing commonality of academic English as a default for publication, translation is no longer the norm<sup>30</sup>. Martín Barbero's article synthesized many of the themes of *De los medios a las mediaciones*. It was concerned with the question of popular culture, syncreticism, and the contested field of the nation in the context of transnational, globalizing forces. First published in Brazil in 1985, then in Mexico in 1987, it was a clear precursor to the book itself. Thirty years ago, then, Jesús's work was already circulating in three languages, thereby addressing distinct academic publics, in that slower, pre-digital moment.

A few years after my aleatory translation – my first attempt to understand the new wave of work on media and culture in Latin America and to compare it to similar approaches in Europe – I was asked by Robert White of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) to write the Introduction to his and Elizabeth Fox's translation of Martín Barbero's book, which appeared in 1993<sup>31</sup>. While computation by Google Scholar is but a crude index of attention given to academic work, the 868 citations achieved by Martín-Barbero's monograph would make many authors in the

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<sup>30</sup>Jesús Martín Barbero, 'Communication from culture: the crisis of the national and the emergence of the popular', 447-465 in 'Latin American Perspectives', *Media, Culture & Society* 10(4) October 1988. I was then, and remain, one of the journal's editors.

<sup>31</sup>Sage Publications: London, 1993. A French translation appeared only in 2002.

humanities and social sciences somewhat envious. Moreover, that first article in *Media, Culture & Society* has attracted 120 citations whereas a subsequent one that I co-translated<sup>32</sup>, on questions of identity, has gained some 77 – figures that indicate extensive take-up in the field.

The English edition of *De los medios a las mediciones* inverted the author's original title. It was published as *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to the Mediations*. In one of our conversations, Jesús expressed his understandable puzzlement and irritation at this choice. It was missing the point of his original title, he thought. That said, the titular inversion certainly did not impede engagement with his work.

Such crossing of linguistic boundaries and intellectual traditions does not happen by accident. The key role played by WACC in Martín Barbero's promotion in the Anglosphere was noteworthy and paid off handsomely. No doubt, generosity of human vision and anti-authoritarianism underlying Jesús's work provided one spur to such intervention as, doubtless, did a deep, underlying concordance of his approach with the particular set of Christian principles espoused by WACC. That said, in the Anglosphere the influence of *De los medios a las mediciones* has been secular rather than religious.

I was involved in two events promoted by WACC that also featured Jesús's work. These epitomised the difference between the public influence secured by publication and citation and the achievements of quite intimate dialogue and conversation. Although much of the debate conducted on those occasions has subsequently seen the light of day in published form, it was the discussions themselves that achieved deep engagement<sup>33</sup>. They were not characterized by what we now take for granted in academia – the instrumental drive to disseminate everything at all costs.

The first event, which WACC asked me to host, was held in October 1996 at the University of Stirling in Scotland. It was quite expressly conceived as a cultural 'encounter' that sought to contrast Latin American and European perspectives on media and culture and to learn from the dialogue between representatives of continents where the question of how to address difference was to the fore, albeit in distinct ways. Much discussion therefore centred on questions of identity and hybridity<sup>34</sup>. It now seems rather prescient, given the political convulsions of our times. The second encounter took place in Córdoba, Argentina, in June 2002 and was more narrowly focused on how globalisation was affecting states, cultures and media in Latin America and also in Europe<sup>35</sup>. This too remains part of our contemporary agenda.

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<sup>32</sup> Jesús Martín Barbero, 'Identities: traditions and new communities', *Media, Culture & Society* 24(5) September 2002, 621-641.

<sup>33</sup> I have discussed these 'encounters' and my evolving views of Martín Barbero's work in some detail in 'Huellas de conocimiento', en Jesús Martín Barbero', *Revista Antropos*, 219, 2008, 104-112; see also comments in my article 'Identities – traditions and new communities: a response', *Media, Culture & Society* 24(5) September 2002, pp.643-648.

<sup>34</sup> Twenty-two participants came from Europe, India, Latin America, and the USA. The papers and discussion are captured in 'Cultural Boundaries: Identity and Communication in Latin America', *Media Development*, 1, 1997. The long introductory paper of that title that I co-wrote with Nancy Morris, along with some key contributions, were translated into Spanish and French and republished in *Telos* 49, March-May 1997; *Estudios sobre las culturas contemporáneas*, Época II, 3(5), June 1997; and *Hermès*, 28, December 2000.

<sup>35</sup> Several papers have been published in 'Globalization and Identity', *Media, Culture & Society* 24(5) September 2002.

*De los medios* is centrally concerned with how culture is negotiated and becomes an object of transactions in diverse contexts. It is that very opening up of mediated culture, its diverse appropriation by social actors, and the potential productiveness of its uses, along with the inspiration provided for a radical politics of communication, that has made this particular book so open to new interpretations. Not surprisingly, then, with passing years Martín-Barbero has become a reference point for present fashionable debate about ‘mediatisation’, a possible inspiration for rethinking social and cultural relations in the digital age and also, given his emphasis on the contingencies of shifting identities, a source of influence in performance studies. In the end, that 2003 translation has found its place in the vast sea of Anglophone academic literature, marking Jesús Martín Barbero’s productive influence in cultural analysis.

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