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Illusions of immediacy: rediscovering Hall's early work on media

**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Couldry, Nick (2015) *Illusions of immediacy: rediscovering Hall's early work on media*. [Media, Culture and Society](#), 37 (4). pp. 637-644. ISSN 0163-4437

DOI: [10.1177/0163443715580943](https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715580943)

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Available in LSE Research Online: June 2015

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ILLUSIONS OF IMMEDIACY: REDISCOVERING HALL'S EARLY WORK ON MEDIA
NICK COULDRY

Abstract

In this short article I analyse Hall's neglected early work on media and its account of how ideology is reproduced through the everyday workings of media institutions. I trace the importance of that work through later work on the mythical aspects of media institutions (Couldry) and more recent work on the culture of connectivity (Van Dijck) and its appropriation of the social in the form of social media platforms.

Keywords

Ideology; representation; myth; social media; immediacy.

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ILLUSIONS OF IMMEDIACY: REDISCOVERING HALL'S EARLY WORK ON MEDIA

NICK COULDRY

Through David Morley, I had the good fortune to have access to Hall's early and little known writings on mass media in the 1970s. The importance of those early writings of Hall for us in deconstructing *today's* illusions of immediacy will be my starting-point for this discussion.

Today we must make sense of emerging spaces of social life which depend on digital platforms (platforms for so-called 'social' media), the beneficiaries that are the focus of corporate investment on a scale which mass media institutions never received! It is easy to think these platforms are the sites of our 'media life', that they are where all opportunities for the transformation of society and politics are played out. But, in the tradition of Stuart Hall, I want to argue that this is an illusion, indeed a myth, which we must deconstruct, without losing touch with the possibility that, in ways we have yet to understand, institutions *something like* social media platforms *can* play a part in a more democratic future.

Hall's early work on media is still largely neglected, but needs to be placed in the context of the move made by both Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall to extend the materialism of Marx in order to encompass the material underpinnings of culture itself. As Williams put it, it was essential to go beyond Marx's crude distinction between 'base' and 'superstructure' and develop a 'notion of cultural *production*' (1979: 139). Indeed we needed to understand 'the production of a cultural order' as 'itself material' (1977: 93). Hall, in turn, in his famous essay 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms' argued that language needed to be regarded as a material process within what he called 'a properly materialist theory of culture' (reprinted in 1996: 48).

While both Williams and Hall worked towards a shared goal of the Marxist deconstruction of culture, there were tensions too. For Williams (1975: 31), communications technology is 'a social complex of a new and central kind', but he remained interested in exploring the possibilities for that technology and its institutions to generate *representations* of the social world which resonated with daily experience in what Williams called 'a whole way of life'. But it was precisely experience that proved a faultline between Hall and Williams, and indeed an issue within feminist debates and elsewhere. In a 1980 essay called 'Politics and Letters', Hall argued that Williams was wrong to emphasise the wholeness of culture as a way of life, and insisted on the need to 'deconstruct the "lived wholeness" in order to be able to think its determinate conditions' (Hall 1989: 62). Whether or not Hall's critique of Williams was fair on this point,¹ that *will to deconstruct* is the aspect of Hall's early writings on media most essential for us today, faced as we are with a new and intensely mythicised way of life in, and through, media.

I will develop these thoughts, first, by recalling some of Stuart Hall's early unpublished writings and, second, by exploring a thread that connects those neglected works to later work on mass media and more recently on social media platforms.

One aspect of Hall's work on media is very widely known: the encoding/ decoding essay that inspired audience studies from the late 1970s which I will not discuss further. Also well-known is Hall's essay on 'The Determination of News Photographs' published in 1981

(based on an original paper published from Birmingham in 1972). This offers a reading of the coding of photographic images and their ideological significance that draws heavily on Barthes and Althusser. It also, perhaps more surprisingly, involves a social constructionism of a sort which is hard to accept any more. So, for example, Hall writes that ‘what is already known. . . is a set of common sense constructions and ideological interpretations about the world, which *holds the society together* at the level of everyday beliefs’ (1981: 236). News photographs work, for Hall, above all to confirm the sense of an already mythical historic present. Nor do I have space here to discuss the rich and multi-levelled account of how media institutions represent the social world in *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al 1978): that book needs no further discussion.

Instead, I am more interested here in two longer and more general essays from the early 1970s about the workings of media’s mechanisms of representation that have been little discussed (but see Corner 1995: chapter 1) and are still largely unknown.

Hall’s early work on media

I want first to discuss the 1971 essay ‘Television as a Medium and its Relation to Culture’ (originally part of a report sent to UNESCO on British Television, but which was circulated by the Birmingham Centre in 1975: it remains unpublished). Here too, Hall draws on Barthes’ idea that photographic images carry with them an ‘illusion of transparency or immediacy’ (1975: 100), but he says much more about the complex institution of television in general and the ways in which what he calls ‘the social idioms and practices’ (1975: 104) of television collapse any awareness of television as a process of mediation, and substitute for it a mythical sense of television as a ‘window on the world’.

Some of the technological context of Hall’s essay seems extremely remote to us now – the difference that colour broadcasting made to television: that is the price of Hall’s insistence on engaging in detail with the media culture of his time.² But other aspects still resonate strongly today, such as the discussion of television as a hybrid medium that draws and uses many older media together, just as remediation is the basic process of digital media today (1975: 89). Most enduring is Hall’s analysis of how ideological work is done through everyday television, and particularly through the role of the ‘presenter’ who links together diverse slices of film and discussion in a way that is structured and framed by ‘collective values and attitudes’ (1975: 95). Here Hall links the banal formatting details of everyday television to the wider role that TV as an institution plays in wider culture. The whole process, Hall argues, is ‘underpinned by the “utopia” that . . . television does not select or reproduce *at all*: it simply shows what is already there’ (1975: 107, added emphasis). I will return to the significance of this later.

Even more striking is a slightly later essay, written for a 1973 UNESCO conference on ‘Obstacles to Communication’ but also circulated at Birmingham in 1975, called ‘The “Structured Communication” of Events’: published later as Hall 2007). This long essay takes considerably further the implications for broader power of medias’ way of presenting ‘reality’. Within a Gramscian analysis of how consent to a powerful social and political order is won, Hall foregrounds the processes which ‘structure’ the production of news. While the notion of ‘codes’ appears at various points in the essay, it is not essential to the argument, which could just as well be developed outside semiotics in terms of practices of categorization, or the model of news sources developed in *Policing the Crisis*.

Hall is concerned in that piece with how raw news material is framed within the news production and news presentation process: this framing is not a free process of interpretation, but a deeply structured process, linked ultimately to television's relations to government and other powerful institutions. 'The flow of communications is thus structured, not only by the exploratory frameworks within which the media signify events, but at the previous stage: the stage at which events and topics become visible to the media at all, the stage at which an event is defined as "signifiable"' (Hall 2007: 373). The pre-determined closeness of television to key institutional actors leads, Hall writes, to the 'systematic "overaccessing" of certain groups' in television's narratives (2007: 378) and their power to contribute to the shaping of the relevant narrative: by contrast, the general public has a reactive role only, and individual voices along the public are interchangeable with others (2007: 379). Most important, whatever the relative independence of television as an institution (Hall refuses a crude economic reductionism), it benefits from a power asymmetry that is absolute: a 'fundamental asymmetry' between the media professions who *make* media and those, the audience, who *receive* it (2007: 370).

Some might argue that it is exactly *this* sort of asymmetry between big media and the audience that we have *moved beyond* in the digital age, condemning this earlier work of Hall to irrelevance. But that would be exactly wrong. On the contrary, understanding social media platforms as institutions involves grasping the significance of new, but equally fundamental, asymmetries, even if they are materialized through a very different process of representation from the television news of the mass media era. Indeed this is where one last 1970s essay by Hall, 'Culture, The Media and "the Ideological Effect"' (Hall 1977), continues to have real bite. There Hall builds on his specific analysis (in the two essays just discussed) of how media construct audiences' sense of social difference and the social totality of society in what he memorably calls 'the construction of *selective* social knowledge' (1977: 340). Here Hall obliquely recalls social constructionism and the legacy of Berger and Luckmann (1966), but in a much sharper way than in the original 'News Photographs' essay.

Hall goes on to articulate a view of ideology as 'common sense' which articulates eloquently exactly our battles today to grasp the banal power of a platform like Facebook: 'ideologies are the sphere of the lived – the sphere of experience, rather than of "thinking"' (1977: 326). Contrary to traditional Marxism and drawing on Gramsci, Hall sees ideology as not specific ideas but as lying in 'precisely . . . what is most open, apparent, manifest – what "takes place on the surface and in view of all men"' (1977: 325).

There is of course a big difference between how we might approach the analysis of ideology today from Hall's formulations in the 1970s. It is virtually impossible now to argue that ideology works exclusively in the service of a *specific* set of class or group interests (what Hall called 'the "definitions of reality" favourable to the dominant class fractions' 1977: 332); and it is impossible now to argue that the workings of ideology always resolve in one direction to produce 'the primary "lived reality" as such for the subordinate classes' (1977: 332-333). Not only has the political landscape lost many of its distinct reference-points, through globalization, neoliberalism and other large-scale transformations, but we have also had, in the form of Boltanski's critique of Bourdieu's version of post-Marxist deconstruction (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), some very strong arguments for recognising the *pluralism* of values in contemporary complex societies and the necessity of building critique from a different starting-point, that is, from the contradictions within everyday values, rather than

from some academic reference-point outside everyday experience. While there is more to say on the debate between Boltanski and Bourdieu, or on the fate of ideological analysis in sociology and cultural studies generally, no one would now formulate Hall's deconstructive moves in the holistic way he did then. But the need to deconstruct today's configurations of power and ways of living through media continues.

Holding onto Hall's early work on Media

The organization and nature of media, and our lived relations with media, has become hugely more complex than could be envisaged in the 1970s in an era of a handful of terrestrial TV, radio channels and newspapers. The depth to which media contents now penetrate everyday needs and practices could not have been predicted then. But this is all the more reason for holding onto Hall's central insight that ideology lies in 'what is most open, apparent, manifest – what "takes place on the surface and in view of all men"' (1977: 325).

The skill of a recent book such as Jose Van Dijck's *The Culture of Connectivity* (2013) is, through detailed analysis of the business and other practical principles from which social media platforms have emerged as central institutions, to confront us with the puzzle that, within less than a decade, we have come to believe that it is on these platforms that social life must now be lived. The space of 'the social', on this reading, is a playground for deep economic battles about new forms of value, value generated from data, the data that *we* generate as we act online. For that reason, Van Dijck, rightly, avoids the term 'social media' and talks instead of an economically driven 'culture' of connectivity. Although Van Dijck does not cite Hall, the links back to Hall's 'properly materialist' reading of 'culture' are clear.

Nor is the link back to Hall a sudden one. When I began writing in the early to mid 1990s on audience studies, it was becoming clear that our understanding of media power would need to take account of the very varied things people *did* with media. In this context, I was interested (Couldry 2000b) in dealing directly with Hall's main insight: the fundamental asymmetry at the heart of media's symbolic power (the asymmetry between those in media institutions and those outside) that is also at the heart of media institutions' work within the social. But I saw the sites where ideology and the legitimacy of media power are reproduced as more varied than previously understood, indeed as taking up the whole space of everyday life (following Foucault's approach to the distributed nature of power).

Building on Hall's work on the material work that media representations do, I tried to break down how media power is sustained into a number of dimensions which are rarely separated out from each other: the *framing* of reality whereby media marked off a particular presentation of events as the general social reality at which we need to look; the *ordering* of reality, that is, certain hierarchical distinctions built into media discourse, and in particular the hierarchy of what is *in* the media over what is not; and the *naming* of reality, that is media's role in generating and underwriting what count as the specific facts about the world (Couldry 2000b: chapter 3). As we will see, these distinctions may have surprising relevance for a world other than broadcast media. My approach also drew something from Actor Network Theory which, in new ways, explained the materiality of what might otherwise be called cultural processes in terms of practical networks and linkages established and routinized between objects, resources and people (compare Callon and Latour 1980; Couldry 2000b: 6-7).

I had no idea at that point that mobile phones would within a decade provide us with routine internet access, including, routinely, access to sites of social interaction with selected ‘friends’ or as with Twitter with general population of varying sizes. But it was already clear by the early 2000s that our understanding of ideology’s workings through media needed to take more account of the embedding processes in everyday life, not just through the encoding of a particular media text.

Looking back, I can also see my attempt to make sense of why we configure society around media institutions and their outputs through the notion of ‘the myth of the mediated centre’ as itself indebted to Hall’s early work on deconstructing media. I used the word ‘myth’ (Couldry 2003) to help us see an underlying pattern in how, as societies, we make sense of organizing things around *assumptions* that certain types of information, expertise and knowledge are more valuable than others, and offer us a privileged view on the reality of social life. These myths are not merely an elite production: we are all, potentially, involved in producing these myths through our everyday actions. Media institutions work hard to *sustain* that myth, telling us we are all watching, that this programme or event shows ‘what’s going on’ for us as a society. So too do other institutions, such as governments and political parties, which depend on something like a mediated centre to underwrite their ‘space of appearances’. This is how media institutions’ symbolic power gets reproduced.

But the myth of the mediated centre is no longer *enough* to grasp all that media are doing, and that we are now doing with media. It is not that large-scale ‘media’ have disappeared, or that media’s claims to be socially ‘central’ have diminished – arguably those claims have become *more* insistent. Rather the whole terrain of media (and media institutions) has been reshaped by huge external forces. And *this* is where today we need to draw on Hall’s early work on media even more explicitly.

Deconstructing “Social” Media through Stuart Hall

Hall argued in the 1970s that ideology lies in what is most open, apparent, manifest – what “takes place on the surface and in view of all men” (1977: 325). Nothing is more ‘manifest’ today than the space of appearances which social media platforms sustain. And here, I suggest, is a key site where we should look if we want to find at work the ideologies (or at least the myths, in the sense that I have proposed) on which social political and economic organization today is starting to depend.

As a new way of organizing our business and our lives around digital platforms becomes normalized, a new myth is emerging to make sense of this. A myth about the collectivities we form when we use platforms such as Facebook. An emerging myth of *natural* collectivity that is particularly seductive, because here traditional media institutions seem to *drop out altogether* from the picture: the story is focussed entirely on what ‘we’ do naturally, when we have the chance to keep in touch with each other, as of course we want to do. David Morley and Charlotte Brunsdon (1978) had a brilliant phrase for the myth of the mediated centre at its mass media peak in the late 1970s: the ‘nation now’. Today we have: ‘us now’.³ The myth of us is not yet fully established: if the myth of the mediated centre took decades to become so, the myth of ‘us’ too will only fully stabilise over time. ‘Us’: the collectivity of everyday people, everywhere. Vague as it is, this claim grounds any number of specific rhetorics and judgements about what’s happening, what’s trending, and so (by a self-accumulating logic) what *matters*: for government, society, business, and for us.

There is no collectivity, no ‘us’, of the sort we have come to talk about around social media, *until* those platforms attract ‘us’ (whoever we are) to use them, and link to them. The myth of ‘us’ is even less of a belief system than the myth of the mediated centre; it is more a basic form of orientation, as we perform the act of ‘being us’ on platforms that propose we do just that. The myth of ‘us’ is already being embedded into everyday language, making natural our sense that what happens on digital platforms of social interaction already *is* the social to which we must orient ourselves (Mejias 2013). And we need as Ulises Mejias argues to get a distance from this language, even if we cannot, simply, just withdraw from using social media platforms.

The deconstructive stance of Hall’s early work on media institutions can still inspire us today, even in very different and apparently more de-centered, more complex and less massified circumstances. Yes, some will worry that such a deconstructive approach to social media will neglect the new sites where collective action is germinating. Certainly, I have not been arguing for neglect of social media practice, quite the contrary. But research into social media must be conducted with caution, because on social media platforms it is the *very possibility* of an ‘us’ – and also of a certain type of individual oriented to endless self-publicisation – that is being produced for motives that simulate a certain politics, yet remain fundamentally commercial.

We can only grasp how ideology (particularly the neoliberal ideology of markets) is now operating in social life by following its norms into the smallest details of social life. Stuart Hall – with his continual suspicion of the constructed nature of ‘the popular’ - remains a crucial guide. A 1992 essay puts it well: ‘popular culture is not at all, as we sometimes think of it, the area where we find who we really are. It is an area that is profoundly mythic where we are imagined, where we are represented. Not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time’ (Hall 1992: 22). As we puzzle over the desires and constraints at work in our world of platformed sociality, we would do well to remember Hall’s words.

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¹ It was in part, but there was a force to Williams' insistence on experience, as I have argued elsewhere (Couldry 2000a: chapter 6; Couldry 2010: chapter 5).

² Hall's engagement with the media culture of his time was noted by both James Curran and Charlotte Brunson at the conference *Stuart Hall: Conversations, Projects and Legacies* held at Goldsmiths, University of London on 28 November 2014.

³ For a more detailed diagnosis of the 'myth of us', see Couldry (2014).