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On the Cutting Edge, or Otherwise,
of Media and Communication Research

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Where is the 'cutting edge' for media and communications?

Research at the forefront, new fields for research, the cutting edge? Given this rather ambitious and possibly grandiose brief, I began by asking around among my colleagues for their views, I kept my ears open at the recent ICA in San Francisco, so as to listen out for the new ideas in the air before they reached the always-delayed publication stage, and I scanned recent issues of the media and communication journals. But while the ICA was full of interesting ideas and people, I did not detect any major new orientations. Similarly, my colleagues looked rather blank when asked for the cutting edge in media research. And the journals are, by and large, publishing the same kinds of articles on the same kinds of subjects as they always do.

In this brief paper, I offer some general remarks about the state of media and communications research, using audience research as my example. These remarks focus on the disciplinary status and ambitions of media and communications research, and are certainly not intended as any kind of attack media and communications research or researchers: there is a huge amount of interesting, valuable, productive and thought-

provoking research going on across many fronts, though in the main, I see it as contributing more to the task of consolidation rather than of innovation.

By contrast, if we consider how the study of media and communications fits into the rest of social and cultural debate, there are, I suggest, two widely acknowledged cutting edges, both of which have a strong interface with media and communications. One states that social theory is where the action is: obvious and important examples include the theory of late modernity, globalisation, the public sphere, individualisation, network society, post-Colonial theory and ethnic or cultural diaspora. Primarily but not entirely arising from the engagement between continental philosophy and sociological theory, this interdisciplinary enterprise is generating a new set of concepts for thinking about the importance of media and communications, among other things, in a globalised world (Giddens, 1991; Thompson, 1995). The other states that new technological developments in media, information and communication technologies now lead social research: hence the return of medium theory, the shift towards studies of users rather than of audiences, research on interactivity at the interface between interpersonal and mass communication, on hypertext and the end of linear narrative; basically, research on the Internet.

These two cutting edges are, of course, increasingly related - the Internet is closely linked to globalisation, digital television promotes and is promoted by individualised consumerism, interactive video games depend on the pleasures of virtual participation, etc. - whether we see technology as shaping or shaped by cultural processes of late modernity. In short, it will hardly be news if I draw the conclusion that developments in social theory, and developments in technology, are now the key drivers of innovation within media and communications research and elsewhere.

While they are, as 'cutting edges', clearly very different kinds of influence on research, they are similar insofar as both undermine two premises on which much media and communications scholarship has been established. First, they challenge the view that media and communications should represent a discipline; i.e. not just an *ad hoc* collection of approaches addressing a common problem but a self-sustaining, theory-generating, data-accumulating autonomous discipline, institutionalised through journals, departments, conferences, careers. Instead, it looks at present as if other social sciences are driving media and communications.

Second, they challenge the view that media and communications should set its own agenda according to social and cultural considerations, rather than following the agenda set

for it by technological developments, tracing the social changes brought about by technological determinants. Right now, it seems that we are tracking the new media, especially the Internet, being led by what's technologically new rather than what's socially new (Livingstone, 1999). Meanwhile, our main expertise looks rather dated, being concentrated on mass media, especially, television: we know most about mass culture, public service, national broadcasting, well-established genres, and so forth.

In other words, while both social theory and new technologies are posing exciting and productive questions for media and communications researchers, I am suggesting that the effect - in practice though not of necessity - supports the view that media and communications represents not a discipline but a diverse set of phenomena, informed by social theory, bounded by technology. Informed by social theory, bounded by technology: if this is a fair conclusion at least as far as the cutting edge goes, let me consider these two conclusions in turn.

Informing, or informed by, the larger social scientific enterprise?

Forefront of what? Is acceptable for the theoretical innovations and impetus to come from outside media and communications? For if we accept this, then the cutting edge, the research at the forefront, though it may be conducted by its researchers, will be research at the forefront not of media and communications but of political science or psychology or history or anthropology.

Perhaps it may be considered that the benefits to media and communication research are sufficiently great: that this is the kind of interdisciplinarity which is exciting, not undermining, of media and communications (as a field), and that social theory does indeed offer the potential to overcome the traditional divides against which scholars have railed for so long - qualitative and quantitative, humanities and social science, theoretical and empirical, critical and administrative.

If so, I would ask, more ambitiously, whether we can make the argument stick that media and communications is not just another domain for the application of social theory but one that actually plays a key theoretical role in the conditions and processes of late modernity identified by social theorists. In other words, that we cannot conceptualise the workings of the public sphere, or of cultural processes of individualisation, or of globalisation, or of consumerism, or of information networks, without articulating a key role for the media? This,

surely, would be research at the forefront, and research which might have a chance of making it clear to those outside media research why our analysis of the media is valuable, powerful, and not simply to be reinvented from the outside.

Yet at present, those working in fields bordering our own, from economics to political science to sociology and social theory, the media are little discussed and media research even less so, while attempts to generate more funding for media research in relation to consumption, leisure, identity, community, social exclusion, etc. are seen as low priority by national funders. For example, frustratingly for those of us interested in audiences, the 'implied audience' is generally rendered invisible within, say, discussions of which new media technologies will 'take off' or which public policies will 'be acceptable' or which political arguments will 'work' (Livingstone, 1998a). Yet none of this is seen as problematic.

Interestingly, this relative neglect of our field - especially noteworthy at a time of increased interdisciplinarity - is generating a crisis of confidence within the field. For example, the argument for radical contextualism in the field of audience research (Radway, 1988) has led to the curious charge of 'media-centrism' being levelled at media researchers, problematic in leading us away from texts and audiences though valuable for integrating us with others interested in people, or families or citizens more generally (Schr`der, 1994). Indeed, there is a sense in which many media researchers are genuinely not very interested in the media. Very often we find that when the research gets really interesting, it is because the issues at stake concern not media but democracy, or culture, or social exclusion, or gender, or just the endlessly fascinating practices of everyday life. Again the problem of disciplinarity arises: for concepts of democracy, or culture, or inequality, and so forth are often more effectively theorised elsewhere and we, as media researchers, may lack the expertise to do this, unless we are also, originally perhaps, a something else (psychologist, anthropologist, sociologist (- ever less the case as media and communications is becomes widespread at undergraduate level).

Media and communications: Bounded by technology?

Perhaps one reason which partly explains why we appear unconvincing to those outside, is that we appear to be stuck with the *ad hoc* collection of objects included in the category of 'media'. For what, apart from technology, holds together such diverse questions as regulating the BBC, integrating the Internet into schools, identifying the pleasures of video games for

children, questioning the political agenda setting role of the press or recognising the role of music in peer culture? Hence, I would also ask, is it acceptable for the phenomena we study to be defined by technology, and thus to change as technologies change?

For if what holds our field together is defined in lay terms (and the public does not doubt what the media are though they may be surprised at how we study them), or in technological terms (i.e. technical innovations, with an associated cluster of institutional producers and regulators), then we should not be surprised that our starting point is often not theoretical but rather the desire to contradict public moral panics or to counter the technological (or sometimes, economic) determinism of inventors and policy-makers. Certainly, I observe that much media research relating to children and young people often starts - sometimes with considerable frustration - with a repudiation of public anxieties or moral panics surrounding the issue. And similarly today, much work on new media begins by critiquing the technological determinist hype accompanying the introduction of these media. While such a repudiation or critique is often justified, it both distracts us from the careful construction of a theoretical starting point and leads us to underplay, or even reject, the valid expectation upon academic researchers that we should address issues of public concern.

This kind of starting point often leads us to assert, straightforwardly, that the media have never been so important, so all-encompassing, so all-pervasive, that the public are very concerned about their impact, and so we are working in the right field, our task being to chart how media are penetrating every aspect of life. Doubtless, this is how many of us open our lectures and articles. But this assertion remains agnostic about the significance of media studies or media science as a discipline. For when asked for our agreed theoretical premises, our standards and procedures for empirical methodology, our significant historical thinkers or, crudely, our unique selling point, we become less confident, and our guiding principles appear unresolved. Such a lack of resolution may itself be productive, and at times in media and communications research this in itself has been the cutting edge - bringing together qualitative and quantitative, humanities and social science, administrative and critical, text and audience, political economy and the culture of everyday life - but right now I think this excitement is fading.

If we try to rectify matters through the concept of the *media*, I suggest no real defence is possible. The study of media is a multidisciplinary collection of ideas, findings and middle-range insights which has a worthy history, which has produced a valuable body of knowledge, and which represents a legitimate specialism for an academic career or

programme of study. But it is not a self-sustaining discipline. I say this in the knowledge that interdisciplinarity has also, in recent years, provided a cutting edge across the academy, making my concern with disciplinarity possibly old-fashioned (though I would argue that the case for interdisciplinarity has been somewhat over-blown and that it has proved somewhat less successful institutionally than the initial radical claims made for it).

However, in relation to *communication*, a defence can be mounted, and many have done this. In Britain, the term 'communication science' has relatively little meaning, but in America it is far more successful; perhaps the same is the case in the Nordic countries? The defence would assert, I think, that the key processes of communication - meaning, influence, interpretation, persuasion, relationship, institutionalisation, identity, and so forth - do refer to important debates, genuine intellectual histories, self-sustaining research programmes, and so forth. But necessarily, this includes interpersonal communication as central and only as a matter of contingency does it include the media.

Learning from a past cutting edge: the case of audience research

Perhaps one can only identify significant developments or emerging themes in retrospect. We might look back rather than forward, and ask what the previous cutting edges have been, and, when we identify them, whether they delivered what they promised and so turned out to be a good thing in the end. To illustrate some of these points, consider what has happened in audience studies.

Ten years ago, audience research - together perhaps with cultural studies, the public sphere, and feminist theory - was surely at the cutting edge of media and communications. It was exciting, innovative in theory and methodology, stimulating for researchers outside the field as well as inside. Thus I would contrast my presently rather gloomy view with the mood I observed in conferences during the 1980s, ICA among them, where audience research, particularly reception studies, was the focus of considerable interest, and also with conferences in the early 1990s, where the ethnographic turn had taken over and was the subject of excited debate. Today, many of the then-influential audience researchers have left the field. And when a colleague canvassed opinion on the merits of starting an academic journal on audiences the feedback was 'no', the heyday of the audience is over, and researchers hardly believe in the concept of the audience any more. It is a concept firstly tied to just one technology, namely broadcast television, secondly tied to a dated conception of

mass society, thirdly so overextended as to have lost its value, and fourthly corrupted by the commercial and administrative agendas of media institutions.

While I disagree with this pessimism, the critical debate has been valuable (Livingstone, 1998b). I do not find it plausible that audiences have wholly transmuted into new media users, or wholly dissipated into the everyday contexts of domestic life, or never existed in the first place except as the malevolent invention of the broadcasting industry: yet somehow they have become, again, somehow optional. However, I would be more inclined to agree that insofar as recent audience research has not just been research on audiences - valid, interesting, informative - but also research at the cutting edge, its success contained the seeds of its downfall.

It seemed to be making claims about political resistance which caught the attention of political scientists, and then failed to impress. It seemed to be making claims about identity and the pleasures of consumption, which caught the mood of cultural studies but then became indistinguishable from consumption studies generally and no longer much to do with media specifically. And it seemed to be opening up an exciting interface with literary studies, but lost its purchase and now they - with at times a rather cavalier approach to empirical methods - are reinventing what we already knew about audience interpretation.

All these and other disciplines on the interface with audience research thrived on the excitement of a cutting edge, and possibly - the jury is still out - each gained from it within their own discipline. But none saw it as their task to build up, to inform or further develop, a core body of research on audiences *per se*. The result is that, after some years of vigorous activity, it is still not easy to refer clearly to audience theory (possibly a conservative ambition on my part) or to collect together the main empirical studies beyond those which have become canonical (Livingstone, 1998b). In the language of bureaucratic management, while more usually media and communications is a net importer (citing other disciplines but less cited ourselves), for the duration of the cutting edge moment in audience research, we became net exporters. I think the same is happening again over excitement with the Internet. But in the long run, neither does us much good, for both situations are unbalanced.

The future for audience research

Where does this lead audience research? From a theoretical point of view, I think the stress should indeed be on communication rather than on media, as I suggested above. Instead of

asking what audiences, conceived as an artificial reification of a particular technological interface, are really like, we could better conceptualise 'audience' as a relational or interactional construct, a way of focusing on the diverse relationships among people mediated by historically and culturally specific technological forms (see Livingstone, 1998a). Our central concern would then be that of communication, and our media-centrism would represent a legitimate specialism in the context of other communication scholars looking at other forms of communication. On this view, the audience becomes a shorthand way of pointing to ways in which people stand in relationship to each other, rather than a thing of which people may or may not be a member and whose peculiar ways must be discovered. The advantage, from my point of view, is that this reading of audience research puts audiences at the centre of media and communication research, rather than locating them - or worse, deferring their study - as the last stage in a long chain of more interesting events.

The new media are changing this anyway. For example, in a paper about content analysis some years ago I thought I was being mildly challenging in arguing for audience-centred categories; i.e. for analysing texts in terms of audience reception rather than first analysing texts and then asking if audiences get it right or not (Livingstone, 1989). Now, as I face a new project on Internet users I find we have no choice but to do this, for to analyse the text in advance is impossible. We can only reach the text through an analysis of the user's selections, sequencing, generic classification and interpretation of contents, and even that is not easy.

Charting the possibilities and problems for communication, or relations among people, insofar as these are undermined or facilitated, managed or reconstituted by the media, does seem to me a challenging agenda, though maybe not a cutting edge. However, it might interface effectively with the many and diverse debates around social theory, where questions of communication can sit happily among discussions of information, public, identity, technology, risk, globalisation, and so forth. However, from the point of view of the field of media and communications as it negotiates its relation to neighbouring disciplines, funding competitions, evolving policy agendas and the public interest, I also think it legitimate to set our agenda according to the cutting edge of new media technologies.

Most simply, our concepts, methods and experience will serve perfectly well in the enterprise of tracking the ramifications in everyday life of changing media and communication technologies: it is near impossible to figure out what the Internet will be or will mean in a few years time, but describing its current forms and uses can only be valuable.

But more ambitiously, as media and communication research comes to terms with the end of the dominance of mass communication and the growth of more diverse forms of communication technologies, our task changes commensurately, and we must ask how far we can draw on what we know of communication, especially of mass communication, in researching the new media environment.

In short, our job is no longer that of charting how the predictable mass audience gets on with the business of making sense of what it's given. In the early days of television, the household acquired a single television set, placed it in the living room, and negotiated how they were going to use it. On the screen you could view one, or perhaps a few, national channels, each intended to appeal to the entire public, each broadcast during much, but not all, of the day according to a fixed and familiar schedule. Under these circumstances, it was clear that the interesting questions concerned texts (as each nation transferred its cultural traditions onto the screen) rather than contexts (which were relatively homogenous and deeply familiar), just as it was also more interesting or pressing to consider questions about ideology rather than conditions of production, and about effects rather than lifestyle.

Today, households are acquiring multiple television sets along with the capacity for multiple channels and, in lesser proportion, multiple video recorders, personal computers, telephones, and now the Internet. And we have shifted our focus so as to study the diversifying conditions of production, along with their economic and policy considerations, studying also the contexts of use and associated lifestyle choices. This means shifting from the mass to the interactive, from a single medium to inter-linked media, from public service to diverse, more commercialised forms of content delivery, from the national to both global and local, etc.

Does this invalidate our knowledge of the mass audience and the mass media? How far are we seeing a radical switch to the new, and how far are old and new co-existent, or even mutually transformative? And what about the audience? It seems fair to observe that in key ways, people are becoming users rather than just audiences insofar as new media and information technologies open up new modes of engagement with media - playing computer games, surfing the Internet, using the computer, etc, while the term, audience only really satisfactorily covers the activities of listening and watching. Yet this admission complicates rather than simplifies. For if the crisis over the concept of the audience focused on the apparent untenability of the central concept of watching television - how can we define it,

measure it, place boundaries around it, and in whose interest is it if we do so anyway? - these problems are magnified in the face of an innovating and diversifying media environment.

However, what we know already about television audience reception may yet prove illuminating for new media, for example, allowing us to go beyond the ill-defined and excessively-hyped concept of 'interactivity' by applying well-established concepts which draw on semiotics, on theories of genre, narrative, openness or modality, on a history of the textual and social management of spectatorship, on a social psychology of interpretative resources, and so forth. Once again, if I may eschew the grandeur of a cutting edge, I will end by suggesting that these questions represent an interesting challenge.

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