

## A robust and dynamic field

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As critical thinkers, it is our nature to take stock of our surroundings. For academics, this often means assessing the state of one's field, and in communication and media research, this typically requires an assessment of whether a field yet exists. Corner's query reanimates a discussion that dates back at least as far as the 1983 special issue of *Journal of Communication* that has become canonical as a milestone in the field despite the massive changes taking place since. Here we respond with a rejoinder meant to echo the playful yet provocative tone Corner sets forth. After all, it is not the question of whether there is a field or the answer that is nearly as interesting as the evidence put forth to persuade. Thus, if we are to meaningfully engage Corner's query of "whether there is a 'field' of media research," we might first consider what is at stake in posing this question, and then consider the alternative: what it would mean not to be a field.

To begin with, any discussion of media studies should acknowledge that we arrived late (and continue to arrive late) in academia, and that tardiness regularly requires us to remind people we're here and why we and our object of study matters. Departments and degrees in media studies didn't exist 40 years ago, and still don't exist in many universities. Consequently, we haven't had the time to sink our roots deep into institutional structures to the same extent as have "older" departments such as English, Sociology, and History. We are still not part of the hegemonic common sense of a university, in other words, and, more disturbingly, the study of media and their roles in society is not yet seen as something in which every university worth its salt should be engaging. Many university administrations, funding bodies, and helicopter parents are not inclined to support us – indeed, we have had bad press, and to some we represent a surrender of the humanities to populism, trash, and the cult of now.

And so a great deal is at stake in insisting that the study of media matters, not as a side note, a singular specialization of a solitary department member and her lone course on

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the subject, but as a vibrant, wide-ranging field. We are latecomers to academia, and must now argue for our importance to the liberal arts mission of most universities, we must demand our fair share of resources, and we must ensure that our students are taught to think critically about the media through which they experience much of the rest of the world. If we are too polite, too eager to acknowledge that we're not the only people doing what we're doing, and/or too wary of being A Discipline because of all the pigeon-holing and boundary establishing that this might entail, funding and other resources will continue to bypass us, and the media will continue to go under-studied.

Witness here recent developments in "the Digital Humanities." We do not mean to disparage the breadth or depth of the nascent interdisciplinary area, but we have often seen proposals for Digital Humanities funding that read like rationales for increased funding to media studies departments, yet are written by, and result in significant funding for startup programs based in other departments and disciplines. We are all for sharing media as an object of study, but let us be careful that our timidity in announcing ourselves as a field or discipline does not instead lead to abdication or poaching.

We are "late" in other ways, too, since media studies is often taught late. While the subject has made incursions into secondary school curricula in the UK and a few other nations, in the United States it is still rare for students to arrive at university having ever taken a course on media, and sometimes having ever had a single, dedicated hour of classtime to discuss the media. This produces an alarming combination of familiarity with an object of study yet unfamiliarity with the *critical analysis* of that object of study. Certainly they will have ideas and inklings about how the media work; indeed, most arrive brimming with them. But in part because media studies is not as ubiquitous in education systems as it should be, many of those ideas will draw from sloppy, hack popular analyses: "new media aren't *real* communication," "television is bad for community," "print is inherently 'better' than film, which in turn is inherently better than television, which is inherently better than videogames and comics, and the internet might beat them all if only it wasn't overrun with stalkers and pedophiles." All teaching requires some unteaching, but we suspect that media studies requires more than average. To get on and do this, and to lobby for that process to begin as early as possible and address as many as possible, we need to arrive as a discipline, and to be quite prepared to announce ourselves.

As Corner notes, "duplication" abounds in media studies, but this is why we should argue for a robust media studies as a vital presence within the university. On one hand, as suggested above, popular culture is full of botched analyses of popular media. On the other hand, without wanting to be hostile to our academic colleagues in neighboring disciplines, we should acknowledge that at times their analyses can be similarly problematic. As anyone who teaches introductory courses in any subject learns, there are always a few "natural" (learned, hegemonic) roads and approaches to any subject, but some of them lead in problematic directions. Take, for instance, the study of representations and depictions of minorities. A "stereotype" and "good"/"bad" depiction mode of analysis seems to be a universal starting point, and while this mode has its uses in the study of representation, ultimately media studies has developed a more complex, sophisticated, and helpful mode of analysis that steers clear of essentialism and analyzes representation as discursively constructive and constitutive. And yet we often read analyses of

representations from other fields that were clearly written without consulting Hall, Shohat and Stam, and others, and that produce crude, poor, limited analyses as a result. This is not to disparage the academic mettle of our colleagues in other disciplines, but rather to acknowledge that disciplines walk people down paths and allow conversations to begin down those pathways, rather than begin at the beginning. Just as it is a challenge for us not to botch our own interdisciplinary travels, we should be proud of the path-constructing and -mending for which we in media studies have been responsible, and should encourage others whose journeys bring them to our paths to walk down them a little, to respect the work that has been conducted, and to learn from it.

Or else perhaps we could entertain our second question: what is the alternative to being a field? Though evidence may be marshaled that illustrates a lack of disciplinary coherence that exists in other fields, what if we were to suppose that there is no coordinated intellectual inquiry – this is what a field is at its core, no? – developed as media studies? The argument that there isn't a field of media research is every bit as difficult – if not more so – to sustain as the supposition that there is one. Though the near century of communication and media research that exists is broad in perspective, including social science and critical inquiry, this breadth indicates a robust and multifaceted range of thought. Admittedly, cross-conversation is disappointingly rare, but this doesn't negate the benefit of a tradition of inquiry so openly wide-ranging. Likewise, the segregation of work – which is notably a newer development – can be argued as being an acknowledgement of the complexity of the phenomena of study and the need for precise parameters of claims just as well as it might be argued as being an “aspectualism” in media inquiry.

The field of media research may not exactly resemble many others, but as a younger area of inquiry that is less institutionalized, it has on one hand suffered poor resource allocation, but on the other hand has perhaps been freed from constraints of orthodoxy in approach – which subsequently allows for breadth in approach. We may be publishing in different journals that we're not all reading, but thankfully this is allowed because there is no single journal and approach to which we must all pay fealty. Let us also acknowledge the dynamism of our object of study. Though some insights developed in the early 20th century remain relevant in contemporary media use and social formations, it is to the credit of those in the field that our research continues to revisit previous insights in light of adjustments in media technologies and their uses.

And if one were to ignore the evidence of a near century worth of thinking, experimenting, and theory-building about media and their role in society, what would be solved by decreeing there is no field? Should we instead run to fields such as literature and join them instead of continue the “duplication”? In an era in which university administrations are stitching together Frankenstein monster departments to save money, producing odd unions such as the University of Salford's recent filing of media studies under the School of Nursing, let us aim to take in the refugees rather than create or become them. Is it any wonder that other fields – particularly those in humanities that are hemorrhaging students and resources – give up their own long held objects of studies and attempt to study “the philosophy of *Breaking Bad*” or “*The Wire* as Dickensian Serial”? It is difficult to imagine that fields such as philosophy or literature – though perhaps more bounded and conventional fields – would be better fields for media research than the haphazard

agglomeration of communication and media researchers. If duplication is the problem, perhaps the onus to address duplication belongs more properly with those who have only come recently to recognize the importance of popular forms of media as an object of study.

In offering a proud statement of arrival as a field, though, we do not intend to propose setting roots. Media studies has always benefited from being interdisciplinary in *approach*, and it should remain so. We should be willing to innovate, rebuild, and criticize ourselves at every turn, and to heed Nick Couldry's sage warning that we also consider how the media doesn't matter at times, and how it is just one piece of a grander structure, not the magical keystone that holds up the entire edifice of society (2006). We may be a messy field, even an ugly one at times, but because there is value in being a field, because there are risks to not being a field, and because as a field we have accomplished a lot, we advocate to keep the field.

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### **Reference**

Couldry N (2006) *Listening Beyond the Echoes: Media, Ethics, and Agency in an Uncertain World*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.