

Couldry, Nick:
Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice.
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“That’s the Beijing National Television Building!”, the owner of the Chinese restaurant exclaimed as he noticed the cover of a book my colleagues and I were discussing over lunch. We laughed and acknowledged his moment of recognition – noting that, whereas we had been seeing the cultural artefact to which he referred primarily as the cover photo of Nick Couldry’s book, *Media, Society, World*, he had seen it as a representation of home. And, to some extent, this fleeting moment of connection and difference in recognition illustrates one of Couldry’s key points: that mediated representations are a part of larger social practices that locate us and connect us to one another. Media representations offer the potential for mutual recognition. At the same time, they do not guarantee that we see or experience the same associations because we may be situated differently in our social relations. Those of us who recognize our mismatched interpretations and different situations relative to mediated representations end up puzzled as to what our mutual obligations might be in this or that social setting.

What difference does it make that “representations, power over representations, and how we interact with technologies of representation” are a part of the ordering of our social world? This is the question that Couldry sets out to address in this important contribution, which synthesises insights from media studies and social theory. The book offers an excellent summation of current media theory, presented in a manner meant to be accessible for those in the broader field of sociology.

In what is arguably the book's central contribution, Couldry discusses media practice, providing the scholarly tradition formerly known as audience studies with an important means for re-conceptualizing its focus. Couldry defines "media" with reference to the communication infrastructure that is at the intersection of technology and economic, political, and social forces. Media practice theory is interested in how people incorporate media into their everyday lives in routinized, largely unremarkable, and socially-learned ways, recognising that we engage in such practices in our efforts to meet human needs and that ethical questions about how we should live with one another are implied in such engagement. Although he is interested in how people use media, he wants to differentiate a socially-oriented study of media practices from the uses and gratifications approach, as practices that place socially-informed actions rather than individual choices at their centre.

Couldry also presents a particularly useful typology of media practices related to the Internet: searching and search-enabling, showing and being shown, presencing, archiving, keeping up with news, commentary, screening out, and keeping all channels open (the latter referring to constant connectivity). As Gillespie (2012) pointed out in his early review of this typology, Couldry's focus is largely on consumption rather than production practices. The discussion of media practices might be expanded to include protocol-creation (Galloway and Thacker 2007) and hacking (Coleman 2012), among other things. Nevertheless, Couldry's central focus on practice is a useful lens through which to consider the emergent intersections of cultural production and consumption, or *produsage*, to use Bruns' (2008) term.

Another particularly helpful contribution is Couldry's exploration of the "hidden injuries of voicelessness," which highlights the fact that not being present in media is now experienced as a form of lack or delegitimation. He also highlights the problem of media injustices when people are harmed by media and have no means of seeking redress. These issues come about due to what Couldry terms "media capital," following Patrick Champagne (1990) – a term meant to account for the way in which certain individuals gain status through the prestige of celebrity. Media capital also references the fact that media institutions themselves control the "exchange rate" of prestige and reputation. This is also the point at which his work intersects with the growing body of scholarship known as *mediatisation theory*. Couldry argues that, in light of the media's role in the distribution of media capital, the boundaries between fields, such as those between politics and media or between art worlds and media, seem to have become less important.

Despite its extensive bibliography, there are a few notable lacunae in the book. Couldry's view of practice complements in many ways echoes the work of U.S. cultural sociologists although, surprisingly, culture is a term that is largely absent from this recent work. Culture is implied, of course, in Couldry's Bourdieuan emphasis on the turn to the everyday and to the symbolic power of the media. However, Wendy Griswold (2000, 2004), for instance, has also helped advance sociological thinking about cultural production, exploring cultural objects not as products of an individual's efforts but as collective products or representa-

tions. Like Couldry, Griswold (2000, 2004) is also interested in the ways in which representations contribute to the maintenance of power relations. Moreover, Griswold introduces an analytical device she terms the “cultural diamond”, and Couldry’s pyramid of media theory maps neatly onto this work, since the four points of the “cultural diamond” include cultural object (text and textual analysis), social world (medium theory), creator (political economy), and receiver (audience or socially-oriented media theory). Couldry’s work, thus, begins to open the possibility for dialogue between sociology and media studies, but those in media studies must continue to differentiate the unique attributes of media from other cultural realms in order to interact meaningfully with contributions made within cultural sociology. A discussion of media’s distinctiveness, however, is a project that Couldry’s work helps to advance.

It is also curious that Couldry attributes the turn to the everyday and to interests in media power to the theoretical work of Bourdieu and not to the names that are usually prominent in media and cultural studies, such as Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and Stuart Hall. The cultural studies tradition has long explored the claim that media institutions may be the most important spaces in which justification regimes compete to define value for differing groups within society. Particularly troubling is that, several decades ago, Hall (1992) first credited feminist scholars with moving the scholarly agenda in media studies toward the everyday and toward explorations of power, an insight that is lost here.

These oversights are not damning flaws in the book, but they do raise questions about how Couldry might have characterized the history of media studies differently, taking into account the earlier, influential intersections of media, feminism, and social theory in the work of the Birmingham School and its predecessors (as well as its antecedents), and how he might have drawn upon the work of cultural sociologists in his desire to reconcile media power with the plurality of social life. Both are projects for future efforts.

Couldry closes his book by attending to what he terms the perspective of needs, or the ethical questions that remain unanswered and, in many cases, even unasked, at the level of media, society, and world. It would be futile to hope that every person in the world could listen to every other person, he notes, even if the media seem to make that possible. Yet, contemporary democratic societies start from the position that each voice is important. This leads us to important questions, such as: how are we to assess the extent to which media institutions provide avenues for enabling all members of societal groups to be heard? How could we hold these institutions accountable for this responsibility if we agreed that it was important? These questions dovetail with Couldry’s observation that, despite the early enthusiasm for the Internet’s democratizing potential, the perspective that emerges in and through the media remains largely Anglophone. A photo from Beijing on a lunch counter in Boulder still stands out for its novelty, despite the fact that all of our social contexts become ever more media-saturated.

In sum, this is a dense and sophisticated book that reads like a primer on contemporary media theories and will be provocative for graduate seminars in media studies. It is likely to

become an important work in the developing field of media sociology and is particularly commendable for the way it raises questions about how media fit into our collective conceptualizations of what it means to live a good life.

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