Editorial

Back to the future: media and communication studies in the 21st century

It is ten years to the month since the last themed issue of this journal was published on the work of social memory (*MCS*, 2003, 25:1). We now resume the regular publication of themed issues with a special 'bumper' number that looks at the state of the field of media and communication studies at the start of this century. It seemed appropriate to do this by looking backwards and forwards: back to where we began, forwards to what lies ahead. Themed issues were a defining feature of *MCS* in its first 20 years – partly of necessity. We reluctantly abandoned them when the rate of acceptance for non-commissioned articles submitted to the journal had grown so much that they squeezed themed numbers out in order to ensure their publication within reasonable time from acceptance. But to begin with there was no flow of copy from our readership (it did not exist at first; it had to be built, incrementally, through the years) and it fell to the editorial board to generate the journal's content. We did so, for the first 20 years, often through commissioned articles on themed issues, the identification of which was a key editorial task in the journal's formative years. It was a way of keeping up with current work in the study of media and of trying to point the way forward by identifying emergent topics of enquiry and research. To re-launch themed numbers the present editorial board has looked back and tried to identify some topics that have been central to the journal's self-definition and sustained through the years as recurring concerns. After lively discussion we came up with three: identities, globalization and the public sphere. All have been long-running interests for the journal and our readership. We invited guest editors to develop these themes for us and all our contributors were asked to write shorter, more reflective articles, in conversation with each other, rather than the standard length, stand-alone academic articles that we routinely publish. We wanted to take a moment's pause to reflect on the ongoing life of the journal and take stock of where have we come from, where are we now and where are going.

So where are we now – the journal, the field and its academic community? To answer this we must look back to get some measure of the distance travelled and the

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changes along the way since the journal began publication in late 1979. Perhaps the most striking feature of all the contributions to this issue is a taken for granted world-historical horizon within which their topic and the way it is to be thought are situated. A generation ago the horizon within which media, culture and society were thought was the nation-state. What was then meant by (the word) 'media' had a more restricted scope. Television was then the dominant medium of everyday life and its study central to an emerging media studies. The media, as a collective noun, were understood as consisting of the daily press, radio and television broadcasting – these, with a nod towards the study of film, defined the field of enquiry. Today, as the contents of this issue make abundantly evident, the meaning of the word has now extended to include a host of things that simply did not exist when the journal started: mobile phones, the internet, desk and laptop computers, e-readers and tablets, CDs and DVDs, digital games, micro-chip body implants … and more. 'New media' is the now accepted term that covers these developments and the study of their social application, uptake and use. Television – so new and unexplored in the 1970s – now belongs to 'old media' in the minds of a younger generation of scholars. Then it meant two things: the box in the living room and the BBC and ITV if you lived and worked in Britain, or the three networks if you lived and worked in the USA. In large parts of the world it had not yet entered into the everyday life of whole populations – in India, China and the whole of the Middle East to take notable instances. Today the study of television in these countries and regions is central to our field. What television 'means' today and how it is thought has changed greatly in the course of the last 35 years. It is no longer in any self-evident way the central object of enquiry within the field. Now it is but one key tele-technology within an expanded field of enquiry and it is less easy to get some conceptual purchase on how its impact and effect might be studied. Thirty or more years ago we thought we knew!

So let us consider for a moment the world of the late 1970s in which this journal appeared, and how it understood its task of contributing to the study of media and their social and cultural implications and effects. In the introductory editorial of our first issue we staked out a modest position for the journal. We acknowledged that it was a product of British higher education and we noted that the study of media had barely established a toehold within it. It was not for nothing that *MCS* was founded by a small group of people in a department of communication studies at the Polytechnic of Central London (it became the University of Westminster in 1992). Polytechnics were widely (and wrongly) regarded as second-division institutions and so, from the perspective of elite universities, were the things they studied. The department had started an undergraduate degree in media studies in 1975 – the first of its kind in Britain. Four years later the launch of the journal was in part motivated by a simple need for a place to publish emerging research and debate in relation to our teaching. There was hardly anything out there – we had no direct competition. The leading journals that we looked to at the time dealt with film: *Screen* and *Screen Education.* The *Working Papers* of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham were a must-read, though the media were only one of several lines of enquiry pursued by the graduate students there under the directorship of Stuart Hall. But that was it. We had the media to ourselves at first.

Our approach to media studies was shaped by a variety of internal and external factors. Internal to the field itself were tensions – there from the start – within and between humanistic and social scientific approaches. We saw the field as split between:

> on the one hand a largely empirical enquiry into media effects, uses and gratifications grounded in an often unexamined acceptance of liberal versions of social democracy; on the other a more theoretical but unempirical Marxian analysis (structural, semiotic etc) of the media in their economic, political and class determinations. (Editorial, 1979: 1–2)

We identified with neither of these positions while allowing for both. Our own position was, as James Curran (the editor of our first issue and chronicler of what he would later call 'the Westminster School' (Curran, 2004)) has shown, historical in temper and defined by a commitment to developing a political economy of the media. It was, from the start international in its outlook and aim. We wanted to grow a world-wide readership from the beginning and it gives us much pleasure today that we have succeeded in that ambition. We acknowledged an Anglo-American bias to the field and our place within it, and sought to overcome this through translation and special issues on the intellectual trajectories of media and communication studies in other countries and regions. In the 1980s and 1990s we published special issues on Latin America, Japan, India, Africa and Eastern Europe. We were committed from the start to an exploration of 'the complex and dominative relationships of Western media systems to those of developing countries' (Editorial, 1979: 2).

That problem – 'the West and the Rest' – remains with us to this day, as Colin Sparks makes clear in his introductory article to the section on globalization that he has put together for this issue. The word itself appears in the journal in a headline article title for the first time in 1987. 'Globalization and orientalism – the case of TV studies', was written by François Chevaldonné (1987) in a European issue devoted to the examination of 'transnationalism' against the backdrop of nationalism and national cultures. As a topic it is first fully addressed in an issue on the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) put together by Sparks and Colleen Roach (*MCS*, 1990, 12:3). Globalization is an emergent discourse of the 1990s. In his contribution to this issue Sparks traces its development from earlier discourses: American 'development communication' of the 1950s and the cultural imperialism thesis of the 1970s (noting that this critical term applies not only to the USA but also the European imperial powers). Globalization has been articulated in the trajectory traced by Sparks within a political economy frame – this being one of the 'long' discursive formations of the journal. It is touched on by many contributors in other sections of this issue, often within different conceptual frames according to the topic and the issues to which it gives rise.

So, for instance, globalization gets frequent mention in the section on 'The Public Sphere', put together and introduced by Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone. This too, as they note in their introduction, is an emergent discourse of the 1990s. It makes sporadic appearances in *MCS* in the 1980s. The 1989 publication in English of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* by Jürgen Habermas and Craig Calhoun's influential collection of critical responses to its publication (Calhoun, 1992), between them contributed to an upsurge of Anglo-American interest in its thesis in the 1990s. But the

real take-off of the concept in this journal, as Lunt and Livingstone point out, has been in the last decade or so. Habermas himself framed the concept historically in terms of class and politics within the frame of the nation-state and in those terms it was first taken up and discussed. In the 1990s it was cogently critiqued from a feminist perspective for its exclusion of women, their voices and concerns. It was also seen to exclude the 'subaltern', notably ethnic minorities and the working class. Since the start of this century the focus has again shifted – this time to the internet and its potentialities as a public sphere in light of globalization and accelerating mass access to the internet, cell-phone and social media all over the world. The issue identified by Sparks as the crux for globalization theory re-appears within a different frame and emphasis. The focus has again shifted from national to trans-national perspectives. Lunt and Livingstone trace how Habermas himself has responded to the continuing public discussion of his seminal work. But what he continues to insist on are the normative underpinnings of the original historical thesis. The concept of a rational, critical public opinion as the basis of a genuinely deliberative democratic polity is grounded in 18th-century European Enlightenment thinking. At the heart of this thinking was the idealistic vision of a cosmopolitan human rationality through which universal human norms might be identified, agreed upon and promoted by men of goodwill. It presupposed from the start a secular society, a religiously neutral state and a societal morality and ethics uncoupled from any theology. Enlightenment thought to this day is engrained in the self-understanding of the West. Do we need to hang on to or move beyond it in the globalized common era of today? This is the concluding question for Lunt and Livingstone, as it was for Sparks.

Our third theme is curated by Liesbet van Zoonen and speaks to the field's long-standing concern with the role of media in the formation of social and cultural identities. In this section, van Zoonen and other authors invite us to consider how we might think about identities in the context of emerging technological life-worlds – in particular, various online spaces – that growing numbers of people world-wide have come to inhabit over the past decade. Drawing our attention to the deployment and uses of biometric technologies, e-governance initiatives and policies, marketing discourses and practices such as *Customer Experience Marketing* and, broadly speaking, the relentless tracking and profiling of individual media use across various platforms and spaces, van Zoonen argues that this emerging field of 'identity management' challenges established cultural and social theories of identity. The tensions and conflicts that state and corporate practices of identity management generate demand a broadening of this area of research beyond an emphasis on the dynamic, hybrid and performative nature of socio-cultural identities. As van Zoonen puts it, even as we acknowledge the 'cultural diversity and multiplicity that typify us', we now have to contend with the 'tendency towards univocality' that characterizes identity management.

In shifting our attention from identity to identity management, these articles also signal the ways in which this journal's approach to the question of media and identity is strikingly different from mass communication as well as cultural studies traditions. To begin with, this section on identity underscores the focus on technology and its socio-cultural and political implications that has been a core concern for *MCS*. In fact, this is a topic that Liesbet van Zoonen and Colin Sparks addressed in 1992 (Editorial, 1992: 5), in a special issue on gender relations and information and communication

technologies from a feminist perspective. More crucially, the structures and practices of identity management that van Zoonen and other authors describe in this section compel us to move beyond theories of representation, ideology and subjectivity that have dominated media and cultural studies for nearly three decades now. To be sure, the articles in this section do focus on issues of power. But they do so by steering clear of ideology critique, focusing instead on the political-economic foundations of emerging media, policy discourse and regulation, and, crucially, technology. In so doing they generate new questions and provocations for examining the relationship between technology, embodiment and identity.

The dialectic of continuity and change that informs these three sections – 'Identity', 'Public Sphere' and 'Globalization' – is made explicit in the opening set of articles. Ben Aslinger and Nina Huntemann argue that the theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches designed to understand print, radio and television cannot be easily adapted to make sense of digital media. Echoing van Zoonen's call for new approaches to identity, Aslinger and Huntemann invite us to ponder media studies' 'digital futures'. The dramatic changes in media technologies, production cultures and patterns of circulation is also of concern to Pawas Bisht, who links these media transitions to collective memory and the mobilization of publics in ways that transcend the boundaries of the nation-state. Focusing on the case of the Bhopal gas disaster and the work of social movement organizations, Bisht analyses how technological shifts in the media enable the re-presentation of the disaster as a 'global media event' and, in the process, make relevant for the present what had been an 'earlier catastrophe'. Read alongside Lilie Chouliaraki's contribution, which addresses the politics of suffering as a way to think about trans-national publics, Bisht's piece shows us how the development of digital and mobile media enables activists and organizations to reconfigure the memory of the Bhopal disaster in cosmopolitan terms.

Philip Schlesinger's reflections on the increasingly vexed relationship between the academic and policy worlds mark a renewal of the journal's long-standing interest in the sociology of intellectuals. As early as July 1982, he and Colin Sparks put together a special issue of *MCS* (4:3) in which they examined the 'relative autonomy' of intellectuals in the context of a changing British 'public sphere', theories of the intellectuals under capitalism and communism, the market for ideas and publishing in the USA, and political changes in Poland (Editorial, 1982). Anxieties revolving around the attenuation of support for public broadcasting and space for political debate marked that issue of the journal, as did the role of intellectuals in post-industrial societies. While the broader questions concerning the role of intellectuals remain, Schlesinger shows how media and cultural scholars' attitudes towards the market and the state have become more complex and multi-layered. Drawing our attention to discussions surrounding the 'creative economy' and academic involvement in policy circles, he shows us why a straightforward policy-or-critique split is neither productive nor reflective of realities on the ground. Setting this debate about expert engagement in issues of cultural governance in relation to changes in higher education and the growing emphasis on 'impact' in the UK and elsewhere, Schlesinger's article is a timely assessment of academics' struggles to strike a balance between being 'legislators' and 'interpreters' at the turn of the 21st century.

Globalization applies as much to the diffusion of media studies itself as to its object. If the rapidity of the world-wide diffusion of new digital media in the last 30 years is astonishing, the equally rapid global diffusion of media studies is scarcely less so. The full story has yet to be told. But meanwhile the account of its uptake in southern Africa, by Keyan Tomaselli, Nyasha Mboti and Helge Rønning makes clear the European connections in its establishment in that part of the world. Their narrative is complemented by Tawana Kupe's reflections on African media studies today and the possibility of going beyond western normative theory in order to reconnect with African thought and experience.

Finally, for Tarik Sabry the events that we have come to term the 'Arab Spring' are the starting point for rethinking theories of globalization and what media and communications might have to say about revolutions. The impasse that Sparks identifies lies partly in the overwhelming tendency to think of globalization in purely spatial terms, one consequence of which is the erasure of time and history. Sabry suggests we take a diversion by way of philosophy, and try to tease apart the 'interwoven layers of overlaps/intersections in cultural and political temporality' that marked the 'Arab Spring'. He argues that it is urgent, now more than ever, to move beyond linear, stage-by-stage conceptions of time (pre-modern–modern–postmodern) and instead develop new ways of articulating the temporal heterogeneity of our present in which many different historical times collide with each other.

History, Sabry reminds us, is as much, if not more so, about the coming into being of the future as it is about the emergence of the past. Overall, what we hope this issue of *MCS* discloses – if only partially – is the plurality that marks our present, as the growing body of scholarship from around the world about non-western media cultures makes emphatically clear. The challenge that lies ahead certainly concerns the global futures of media, culture and communications and, of course, how we as students and scholars make sense of it. However, that task cannot be grasped adequately until we think about the past as well. It is this commitment to looking backwards and forwards that we hope will resonate with our readers when we say, 'Back to the Future!'

References

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