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Book Review of *A Companion to Media Studies*,
edited by A. Valdivia

Sumana Chattopadhyay

Marquette University, sumana.chattopadhyay@marquette.edu

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*Department of Broadcast and Electronic Communication,
Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI*

Media studies is an interdisciplinary field. It draws elements from established disciplines like history, political science, sociology, psychology, anthropology, linguistics, and literature. It also overlaps with newer disciplines and interdisciplines like cultural studies, popular cultural studies, film studies, American studies, journalism, communication, speech communication, education, and ethnomusicology. Keeping this in mind, editor Angharad Valdivia mentions in the introduction to the book, "*A Companion to Media Studies* intends to provide a broad overview to a generalist academic audience of the dynamic interdiscipline of Media Studies." The very breadth of the field however makes it harder to define media studies as a discipline. *A Companion to Media Studies* with its broad mix of essays written on various topics by major scholars from around the world—who have discussed the theories and methodologies that have brought media studies to its current place and who have also suggested directions for future research—serves as a good vantage point for media studies research.

A Companion to Media Studies is divided into six major sections. The classification of the various sections of the book is quite insightful because the book takes the reader on a journey through the different areas of research conducted in Media Studies over the years. Starting out with the very foundations of media studies research, the book then offers a tour of the four major elements of the media landscape—the production process, media content, media audiences, and media effects. Finally, the book provides a quick overview of what the future of media studies looks like right now and tries to answer the question, “Where can we go from here and where can we not go from here?”

In this review I look at the major theoretical and methodological elements offered by different essays in this book. Wherever required, I offer my critical insights regarding the content covered in the various essays.

Foundations of Media Studies

Among the various forms of scholarship strengthening the foundations of media studies research, feminist media scholarship has emerged as one of the major research areas. In her essay, however, Margaret Gallagher describes that over the years feminist scholars have tried hard to create a space for themselves in the general field of media and communication studies. She reveals how early feminist scholarship emphasized on the commonalities of women’s oppression in general ignoring profound differences between women in terms of class, age, sexuality, religion, race, and nation, leading to a body of feminist work that was predominantly about the oppression of White, heterosexual, middle-class women. This defect in the literature was criticized by African American, Latin, Asian, and lesbian feminists over the years. This led to a shift in types of questions being asked, with the focus of feminist media scholarship moving from concern about how women are portrayed in the media or how many women work in the media to what kind of lives they have, what status they have, and what kind of society we have. This kind of shift is one of the crucial underlying themes of this book. *A Companion to Media Studies* does a good job of highlighting the need—in today’s globalized media landscape—to broaden horizons, shift to novel perspectives, and move beyond media studies scholarship focusing mainly on White, heterosexual individuals in the Western world.

The need for such a shift is also imminent in Denis McQuail's essay on new horizons for communication theory. McQuail argues that it is absolutely imperative in today's New Media age, to change the way media studies research is done. He lists out how the media landscape is changing with the increasing proliferation of new kinds of channels and the new forms of communication organizations emerging as a result of these new technologies and the corresponding delocalization. At the end of the essay McQuail concludes that the basic dimensions of theory concerning media and society won't actually change but that communication systems and social context will become quite different with social control transferring from powerful government apparatus to less centralized power systems in a globalized new media world. Robert Huesca also offers his perspective about international and developmental communication, referring to past critiques of the dominant North American developmental paradigms, especially when applied to other parts of the globe and the new emerging Latin American approaches. He identifies participatory communication approaches as being the most ethical and democratic of all research philosophies today. Huesca's arguments regarding participatory communication are very convincing and have far-reaching implications for research and policy, but his essay just barely refers to the kind of research methods that ought to be applied to conduct participatory research. Huesca acknowledges this weakness at one point in the essay where he refers to how research methods for this kind of research have been neglected. However, the very few general suggestions that he offers in response to such negligence by past research seem to be somewhat sketchy.

The essays discussed so far in this section of the review do provide valuable insights regarding the foundations of the field of media studies and make a strong case for the need to expand research horizons. However, I have reservations about the fourth essay in Part I, written by Robert Sloan. Sloan studies the tensions between popular and alternative music by analyzing the singer from the band R.E.M.; I find this essay interesting, but I wonder why this essay was included in this section of the book, which specifically discusses the "foundations" of media studies research.

Production

Focusing on the production side of media, Sharon L. Bracci analyzes the ethical tensions that have always existed in media studies research with media being expected to fulfill democratic as well as commercial functions. This problem is further discussed by Dan Schiller, who provides a comprehensive account of how concentration of ownership and control of the production of media at the global level affects old media and new digital media even more. Schiller's essay, which elegantly outlines some of the major legislative and regulatory challenges facing media studies research today in different countries around the world, is very insightful. However parts of Schiller's discussion that heavily relies on economics concepts like overcapacity, long-term effects of taxes, subsidies, and so forth, might have benefited from some more description, understanding that the essays were written with a generalist audience in mind.

D. Charles Whitney and James Ettema continue the focus on media production issues by analyzing newsroom practices. Their essay methodically discusses the degrees of freedom that individual, organizational, and institutional communicators possess in their operations particularly in today's quickly changing global scenario. However, their essay's predominant focus on newsrooms is somewhat troubling. Whitney and Ettema do acknowledge that other organizations, industries, and professions and other kinds of media personnel (e.g. broadcast personnel, TV producers, data entry workers) are also important in the digital convergence era, but I think that including detailed analysis of other media environments in their essay would have definitely made it a stronger piece.

Media Content

The essays on media content in *A Companion to Media Studies* focus on a broad range of areas. Matthew McAllister's essay on the television show *Survivor*, which discusses how CBS used some of its news resources to promote the show (when it was first launched), highlights the philosophical and practical outcomes for democracy created by the close connection between marketing and democracy. Sharon Mazzarella, however, explores the concept of "youth" in the media and political landscape and how it has been reconstructed over the years. Instead of adopting an audience-centered approach to this

study, Mazzarella focuses on the construction of particular categories of youth in the mass media and concludes from her analysis, particularly of Baby Boomers, and Generation X and Generation Y members, that these categories are influenced much more by social and adult concerns than by the youth themselves. Including McAllister's and Mazzarella's essays in this section of the book is somewhat problematic because both deal with how the production side affects media content and these are somewhat diverse from the traditional media content research that is documented in the other essays in this section.

Vickie Shield's study on gender and advertising, for example, is a traditional media content study. It highlights how media sells the image of "thin is beautiful" and what kind of repercussions this has had on women's self-esteem and body image over the years. Similarly, Melissa Johnson in her analysis of media content explores an emerging variety of ethnic media (Latin women's magazines in particular) and creates a hybrid typology for pan-ethnic identity that includes pan-ethnic, culture-oriented identity and pan-ethnic consumption-oriented identity. This is a wonderful essay, not only because it deals with a topic such as pan-ethnic identity, which is of great relevance in today's globalized world, but also because instead of merely suggesting why something needs to be studied, it also specifically conceptualizes pan-ethnic identity.

Media Audiences

Studies of audiences involve marketing approaches and efforts to reach the maximum number of people and to understand the interpretive positions and identities of individuals or group members. Radhika Parmeswaran's essay looking at postcolonial theory and global audiences focuses specifically on female readers of romantic English fiction. Through grounded analysis, she unearths complex affiliations that these women seem to exhibit with fiction, nation, class, and gender and argues that easy, simplistic mappings often tend to ignore or obscure the complex embedded realities. This essay makes a valuable contribution to media studies because Parmeswaran manages to convey the argument that (contrary to what media studies researchers are thinking) we have a lot more to learn about media audiences, especially at the global level. Angharad Valdivia in his essay also makes a strong case for redefining audience research. He defines

active audiences as crossing over into the area of production of identity in the context of new media situations and products. With globalization and new technology, Valdivia's call for research to recognize and incorporate this change in the media scenario becomes even more significant. Virginia Nightingale's essay, which discusses past media studies research from an epistemological standpoint, also makes a significant contribution to the field of media studies. It documents how media studies has moved from a predominantly social scientific mode of study to a more cultural studies framework, eventually arriving at a good balance between the two theoretical frameworks. Nightingale's argument that in today's new media landscape there is a greater need to understand both how information is generated and how it is interpreted (which can best be accomplished through a combination of methodologies) is of utmost importance because it helps resolve one of the age-old conflicts in media studies—quantitative research versus critical and cultural research.

Media Effects

The essays in Part V do a good job of outlining a few kinds of media effects research that are being conducted in media studies right now. Mary Beth Oliver's essay provides evidence about how the stereotyping of African Americans as criminals by the media has a strong impact on how African Americans are treated and how Whites perceive African Americans. The fact that recent movies like *Crash* depict similar perceptions regarding race suggests that even the current social scenario calls for these kinds of studies. Michael Casas and Travis Dixon also examine how African Americans and Latinos are stereotypically presented in the news media. Their analysis shows that those who were exposed more to such stereotypical portrayals had a greater fear of crime than those exposed to counterstereotypical portrayals, a combination of portrayals, or no news programs at all.

In their essay, Jennings Bryant and Dorina Miron trace the connection between pleasure and violence back to Aristotelian times. This essay is interesting because it discusses the contentious but contemporary topic of choice between freedom and censorship in the context of sex and violence in the media. Their argument that effects research can help lay out the facts for people enabling them to make informed choices also makes good sense. The essay by Ellen Wartella, Barbara O Keefe, and Ronda Scatlin is also very insightful because it

examines how the interactive component in new media relates to children's cognitive development. The practical point that this essay makes about ensuring there are no disparities in exposure to technology (due to differences in income and social status) is worthy of mention. However, the essay only mentions that access to technology ought to be provided to all students in schools and other venues and does not provide much description about how that would be done.

The essays discussed so far in this section provide the reader with a good mix of media effects studies. But because of the sheer volume of media effects research that has been published over the years, the sample of essays here does not do a good job of representing media effects research in general.

Futures

The essays included in this section are worth reading not only because they investigate elements that are missing in current media studies research but also because they try to assess the likelihood of *actually* being able to pursue such research. John Downing's essay, for example, is critical of the high percentage of media scholarship predominantly originating from the United States, and he also suggests ways to improve this situation. That some of his suggestions have already been addressed in this book—in essays by Gallagher, Hermes, Huesca, Valdivia, Livingstone, and Parmeswaran, all of whom call for research to be conducted at a more global level—is proof that this book has done a good job of addressing some of the problems affecting this field of research. Cameron McCarthy's essay, which focuses on the mutually productive relationship that exists between media studies and education scholarship, also has policy implications because it calls for mass media to disseminate multicultural education. Carrie Rentschler's essay, which explores the different ways in which organizations with their resources and proximity to power could utilize media to convey messages, is also worth discussing. Valdivia decides to end the book with Boatema Boateng's essay, which discusses intellectual property right issues in Africa. This essay describes how philosophical disagreements over the development and sustenance of intellectual property rights have provided transnational corporations with the upper hand instead of encouraging or protecting the creativity of individuals or groups. The Boateng essay makes a strong case for

media studies research playing an active role in challenging regulatory frameworks at the regional, national, and international levels, which is an invaluable contribution to the text.

Despite the few weaknesses mentioned in this review, *A Companion to Media Studies* is a good book to read, especially if one wants to get a quick overview about the nature of current research in media studies, problems plaguing the research, and suggested future directions for research. As the combination of the various subjects covered in the essays suggests, this book serves the purpose of acquainting the reader with important bits and pieces of research characterizing the media study landscape over the years. Because the book is a compilation of individual essays on varied topics in media studies research (most of which have been written keeping a generalist audience in mind), it might be of interest to a wide spectrum of academic audiences.