Anthropology of Media
Series Editors: John Postill and Mark Peterson

The ubiquity of media across the globe has led to an explosion of interest in the ways people around the world use media as part of their everyday lives. This series addresses the need for works that describe and theorize multiple, emerging, and sometimes interconnected, media practices in the contemporary world. Interdisciplinary and inclusive, this series offers a forum for ethnographic methodologies, descriptions of non-Western media practices, explorations of transnational connectivity, and studies that link culture and practices across fields of media production and consumption.

Volume 1
Alarming Reports: Communicating Conflict in the Daily News
Andrew Arno

Volume 2
The New Media Nation: Indigenous Peoples and Global Communication
Valerie Alia

Volume 3
News as Culture: Journalistic Practices and the Remaking of Indian Leadership Traditions
Ursula Rao

Volume 4
Theorising Media and Practice
Edited by Birgit Bräuchler and John Postill
Introduction: Theorising Media and Practice*

John Postill

This book rethinks the study of media from the perspective of practice theory, a branch of social theory centred on ‘practices’ rather than structures, systems, individuals or interactions. Practices are the embodied sets of activities that humans perform with varying degrees of regularity, competence and flair. Although practice theory has been a mainstay of social theory for nearly three decades, so far it has had very limited impact on media studies. By linking practice theory and media studies, Theorising Media and Practice offers media scholars and students – and indeed anyone with a professional or personal interest in what people actually do with media – a link with the often abstract practice theory literature. It also provides a link for practice theorists wishing to travel in the other direction, towards media research and theory, an area of scholarship largely overlooked by practice theorists. Drawing on case studies of media-related practices from places such as Zambia, India, Hong Kong, the United States, Britain, Norway and Denmark (see Figure 0.1), the contributors to this volume show some of the myriad ways in which humans make use of media technologies. The practices covered in the book include making news, reading newspapers, playing and modifying computer games, watching television, listening to the radio, teaching film-making, sharing videos on YouTube, working from home, using mobile phones to ‘hold things together’, and developing free software (see Figure 0.2). Collectively, these chapters make a strong case for the importance of theorising the relationship between media and practice.

Theorising Media and Practice contributes, therefore, to two bodies of literature: practice theory and media studies. One main source of inspiration for this project has been Nick Couldry’s call for a new paradigm in media research that takes as its starting point the ‘practice turn’ in

*The full introduction is available in the book.

Birgit Bräuchler would like to thank the Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore, for supporting her trip to Bristol and for providing her with a pleasant and challenging intellectual environment in which she could, among other things, pursue this project.

Birgit Bräuchler and John Postill
Frankfurt and Sheffield, July 2009
sociology (Couldry 2004), reprinted here as Chapter 1. This book is also firmly aligned with Shaun Moores’s recent publication Media/Theory (Moores 2005) – discussed later in this Introduction – which builds on Giddens’s theory of practice. It further shares the concerns of David Hesmondhalgh and Jason Toynbee (2008) who, in a recent collection on media theory, stress the need to strengthen the theoretical backbone of media studies, a field of research with an empiricist and positivist track record in which social theory is often used superficially. Like these authors, the contributors to the present book see theories as ‘useful abstractions’ (ibid.: 3) that should not be divorced from empirical research.

The present study approaches media and practice primarily from the anthropology of media, a subfield that has expanded dramatically since the late 1980s. Most contributors to Theorising Media and Practice, including its coeditors, are indeed media anthropologists; in addition, there are chapters by a media sociologist, a semiotician, a film-maker, and two technologists. What marks this volume off from existing media anthropological collections is that rather than being a broad introduction to the subfield, the present collection addresses a single problem, namely how we may go about theorising media as practice.2

In this Introduction I review the relevant media studies and practice theory literature to argue not for a new ‘practice paradigm’ in media studies (pace Coudry and Hobart this volume) but rather to argue for practice theory as a new strand to add to existing strands of media theory. Drawing from the practice theories of Giddens, Bourdieu and

Warde, as well as from my own research in Malaysia, I sketch out a field-of-practice approach to media around three main questions: media in everyday life, media and the body, and media production. I then note some of the limitations of any practice perspective on the study of media, ending with an outline of the book.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Backyard/Indie Wrestling</th>
<th>Bird (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BASE Jump Videoing</td>
<td>Postill (Intro)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Gaming</td>
<td>Ardèvol et al. (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Practices</td>
<td>Bird (4), Helle-Valle (9), Kjaerulff (10), Christensen &amp; Røpke (11), Ardèvol et al. (12), Kelty (13), Greenhalgh (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Media Practices</td>
<td>Postill (Intro), Hobart (2), Helle-Valle (9), Kjaerulff (10), Christensen &amp; Røpke (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film and Video-Making</td>
<td>Postill (Intro), Bird (4), Rao (7), Greenhalgh (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT Practices</td>
<td>Helle-Valle (9), Christensen &amp; Røpke (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet Practices</td>
<td>Postill (Intro), Bird (4), Kjaerulff (10), Ardèvol et al. (12), Kelty (13), Ardèvol et al. (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machinima</td>
<td>Postill (Intro), Couldry (2), Bird (4), Christensen &amp; Røpke (11), Ardèvol et al. (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Rituals</td>
<td>Bird (4), Rao (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile Phone Practices</td>
<td>Peterson (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News-Making</td>
<td>Spitulnik (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper Reading</td>
<td>Ipsen (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio Listening</td>
<td>Kelty (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semiosis (Sign-Making)</td>
<td>Kjaerulff (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Software Production</td>
<td>Bird (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telework</td>
<td>Hobart (2), Bird (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Reporting</td>
<td>Ardèvol et al. (12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 0.2. Main examples of media practices by author(s) and chapter (in brackets). See also Index.
Doing Ethnography through 'Media Practices'

The anthropology of media is an ideal place to start a review of the media studies literature on practice because its specialists have already studied and participated in a plethora of media-related practices around the world. This practical knowledge, though, is strewn across a dispersed ethnographic record where it has been deployed in relation to a broad range of theoretical aims only implicitly related to theories of practice. Hence my use of the preposition 'through' in this section's heading: media anthropologists have regarded media practices not as objects of study in their own right but rather as conduits through which to reach other research objects.

Over the past twenty years or so, media anthropologists have used the notion of 'practices' and its countless variants ('media practices', 'cultural practices', 'discursive practices' and so on) both profusely and to great effect, vastly expanding media studies beyond its traditional Euro-American heartland. The main topics studied by anthropologists via the notion of 'media practices' include indigenous media activism in white-settler countries; media and cultural politics in postcolonial states; mainstream media production in both rich and poor countries; ethnic minority media; ritual, performance and media; and the 'social life' of media artefacts (Hughes-Freeland 1998; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002; Rothenbuhler and Coman 2005).

But what do anthropologists actually mean by 'media practices'? (see also Hobart this volume). A survey of all instances in which the word 'practices' appears in four influential media anthropological collections is revealing.3 The term 'practices' is used in these reference books 190 times in 93 different ways, with a great variety of single qualifiers ('media practices', 'cultural practices', 'social practices', 'symbolic practices') and double qualifiers ('minority media practices' or 'media consumption practices') being employed. The most commonly used of these combinations is 'media practices' (occurring 34 times),4 followed at a considerable distance by 'cultural practices' (8 times) and 'social practices' (6 times). Not only is 'media practices' the most frequently used variant, it is also given pride of place in the edited collections surveyed. Some examples include (italics added):

[W]e have attempted to use anthropology to push media studies into new environments and examine diverse media practices that are only beginning to be mapped. (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002: 1)

[The different kinds of media practices represented in this volume can be placed on a sociopolitical continuum ... On one end are the more classic formations of mass media produced through large governmental and commercial institutions ... In the middle range are more reflexive processes [related to] a variety of subaltern social and cosmological worlds ... On the other end are more self-conscious practices, often linked to social movements, in which cultural material is ... strategically deployed as part of a broader project of political empowerment by indigenous and other disenfranchised groups. (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002: 7, italics added)
Meanwhile, in the same volume, Hamilton conflates 'activities', 'practices' and 'behavior' in a passage about television viewers in Thailand: 'The demeanor of viewers changed during the Royal News; they stopped their other activities and fell silent. This behavior was consistent with other practices expected when ordinary people are brought in conjunction with Royalty' (Hamilton 2002: 162, italics added).

More importantly, there is a general lack of explicit engagement with practice theory. In a comprehensive survey of eighty-five media anthropological chapters I found only four references to practice theory (Schieffelin 1998; Coman 2005; Coudry 2005; Peterson 2005) — all four, interestingly, to Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977).

To summarise, although the term 'practices' and its vast progeny have performed a sterling service for the anthropology of media as research tools, the theoretical promise of this concept remains unrealised. If we are to begin to understand what people actually do with media we need to engage with practice theory.

### What is Practice Theory?

Social theorists agree that there is no such thing as a coherent, unified 'practice theory', only a body of highly diverse writings by thinkers who adopt a loosely defined 'practice approach'. Theodor Schatzki (2001) distinguishes four main types of practice theorists: philosophers (such as Wittgenstein, Dreyfus, or Taylor), social theorists (Bourdieu, Giddens), cultural theorists (Foucault, Lyotard) and theorists of science and technology (Latour, Rouse, Pickering). It is also possible to distinguish two 'waves' or generations of practice theorists. Whilst the first generation, led by some of the foremost theorists of the twentieth century (e.g., Bourdieu 1977; Foucault 1979; Giddens 1979, 1984; de Certeau 1984), laid the foundations of what we now regard as practice theory, the second generation is currently testing those foundations and building new extensions to the theoretical edifice (Ortner 1984, 2006; Schatzki 1996; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina and von Savigny 2001; Reckwitz 2002; Warde 2005). In this section I review the main questions addressed by the more influential members of each generation, concluding with some contemporary trends in practice theory.

The first generation of practice theorists sought a virtuous middle path between the excesses of methodological individualism — explaining social phenomena as a result of individual actions7 — and those of its logical opposite, methodological holism — the explanation of phenomena by means of structures or social wholes (Ryan 1970). Put different-

ly, they wished to liberate agency — the human ability to act upon and change the world — from the constrictions of structuralist and systemic models while avoiding the trap of methodological individualism. These theorists regarded the human body as the nexus of people's practical engagements with the world.8 Thus the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) developed the notion of 'habitus' to capture 'the permanent internalisation of the social order in the human body' (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 130) whilst recognising 'the agent's practice, his or her capacity for invention and improvisation' (Bourdieu 1990: 13). In Bourdieu's theory of practice, the world's structural constraints form 'permanent dispositions'. These are schemes of perception and thought, extremely general in their application, such as those which divide up the world in accordance with the oppositions between the male and the female, east and west, future and past, top and bottom, right and left, etc., and also, at a deeper level, in the form of bodily postures and stances, ways of standing, sitting, looking, speaking, or walking. (Bourdieu 1977: 15, quoted in Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 130)

Bourdieu borrows the Greek word 'hexis' to refer to the way in which social agents 'carry themselves' in the world — their gaze, gesture, postures and so on (Jenkins 2002: 75). He exemplifies this idea with his early research in Kabylia (Algeria) where he observed that men and women carried themselves in markedly different ways. Where women's bodies were oriented down in keeping with '[t]he female ideal of modesty and restraint', men's bodies were oriented towards other men (ibid.: 75). Bourdieu concluded that Kabyle bodies are 'mnemonic devices' that help to reproduce fundamental cultural oppositions and are integral to a cultural habitus learned more through observation than formal teaching (ibid.: 75–76). In Mark Peterson's summary of Bourdieu's account of practice (this volume): 'Social life is a constant struggle to construct a life out of the cultural resources one's social experience offers, in the face of formidable social constraints. By living in a society structured by such constraints, and organised by the successful practices of [others], one develops predispositions to act in certain ways'.

Later in his career Bourdieu added the notion of 'field' to his theoretical vocabulary (see Bourdieu 1992, 1993, 2005; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Swartz 1997; Reed-Danahay 2005). Fields are specialist domains of practice (such as art, photography, sociology) with their own 'logic' that are constituted by a unique combination of species of capital; for example, financial capital, symbolic capital (prestige,
renown) or social capital (‘connections’). An apt metaphor for a field is that of a game. Only players with sufficient ‘know-how’ and belief in the game (‘illusio’) will be willing to invest time and effort playing it. Skilled players acquire over time a ‘feel for the game’ or ‘practical sense’ that allows them to improvise in a structured but seemingly effortless manner. Field agents’ successful strategies may appear to the casual observer rational and conscious but in reality, says Bourdieu, they are only possible when there is a good fit between the habitus and the field. The habitus produces strategies which, even if they are not produced by consciously aiming at explicitly formulated goals ... turn out to be objectively adjusted to the situation. Action guided by a ‘feel for the game’ has all the appearances of the rational action that an impartial observer ... would deduce. And yet it is not based on reason. You need only think of the impulsive decision made by the tennis player who runs up to the net, to understand that it has nothing to do with the learned construction that the coach, after analysis, draws up ... The conditions of rational calculation are practically never given in practice: time is limited, information is restricted, etc. (Bourdieu 1990: 11)

Another fundamental notion in Bourdieu’s practical apparatus is ‘doxa,’ those deeply internalised societal or field-specific presuppositions that ‘go without saying’ and are not up for negotiation (Bourdieu 1998: 66–67, 2005: 37). For Bourdieu, in sum, practice is ‘based on the dispositions inherent in habitus’ and unfolds as ‘strategic improvisations – goals and interests pursued as strategies – against a background of doxa that ultimately limits them’ (Parkin 1997: 376).

A closely related notion to Bourdieu’s habitus is Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘discipline’ (Foucault 1979). Like habitus, discipline ‘is structure and power that have been impressed on the body forming permanent dispositions’ (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 130). In contrast to Bourdieu, though, Foucault laid particular emphasis on the violence through which modern regimes impress their power (or ‘biopower’) on bodies (ibid.: 130). In Europe, the introduction of mental asylums and prisons allowed the replacing of earlier hierarchical and centralised forms of control with more diffuse and insidious forms of ‘governmentality’ and ‘disciplinary power’. Disciplinary power works through the body; subjects learn to self-regulate their bodily practices, making it less necessary for states to intervene directly in their lives (Gledhill 2000: 149).

Like Bourdieu, the British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984) first developed an original version of practice theory in the 1970s, but he arrived there via a very different route. Where Bourdieu prided himself in grounding his theories in empirical research, Giddens is more concerned with the history of philosophy and social theory than with sociological data (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 129). In The Constitution of Society, Giddens sets out to unify structure and agency through the notion of the ‘duality of structure’, the idea that structure is both ‘the medium and outcome it recursively organizes’ (Giddens 1984: 374). Social relations are structured across space and time thanks to the duality of structure – this is what Giddens calls ‘structuration’ (ibid.: 376). His structuration theory demonstrated ‘how principles of order could both produce and be reproduced at the level of practice itself and not through some “ordering” society which impinges upon individual actors from above’ (Couldry this volume). Critically building on Hägerstrand’s (1967) geographical work, Giddens argues that we cannot separate ‘individuals’ from the day-to-day contexts they help to constitute. Rejecting what he regards as Hägerstrand’s weak notion of power as ‘authority constraints’ to human action, he stresses instead the transformational power of human action, which operates both with the limitations and possibilities afforded by societal constraints (Giddens 1984: 116–7). For Giddens, the routinisation of day-to-day life is fundamental to humans who derive a sense of ‘ontological security’ from the familiar contours of the social worlds they have helped to (re)create (ibid.: 23, 50).

Turning now to the second generation of practice theorists, these thinkers have continued to stress the centrality of the human body to practice while paying closer attention to questions of culture and history as well as developing new concepts – such as ‘dispersed’ versus ‘integrative’ practices (see below) – and applying practice theory to new areas such as consumption studies, organisational theory, the material culture of the home, or neuroscience.

In the mid 1980s, the American cultural anthropologist Sherry Ortner published a germinal essay titled ‘Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties’ (Ortner 1984) that is often regarded by anthropologists as marking the discipline’s ‘turn to practice’ (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001; Ortner 2006; Bird this volume). Ortner questioned the three ‘theories of constraint’ that dominated U.S. cultural anthropology in the early 1980s, namely interpretive anthropology (Geertz), Marxist political economy and structuralism. She found that these approaches remained silent about human agency and ‘the processes that produce and reproduce constraints – social practices’ (Ortner 2006: 2). Dissatisfied with this situation, Ortner sought inspiration in Bourdieu (1977), Giddens (1979) and Sahlin (1981), whom she saw as putting actors back into social processes yet without neglecting the larger struc-
tures that enable and constrain their actions.\textsuperscript{11} On the other hand, Ortner was critical of practice theory for lacking ‘a recognisable concept of culture’ (Ortner 2006: 11) and for its limited purchase on questions of power and history. In this regard, she found Gramsci’s notion of ‘hegemony’ more useful than Foucault’s totalising account of disciplinary power, as hegemony, for Gramsci, is ‘strongly controlling but never complete or total’ (2006: 7).\textsuperscript{12} Leaning on Sahlin’s work, Ortner concluded that a ‘theory of practice is a theory of history’ and that therefore social practices can only be understood in their articulations with historical events.

If Ortner’s 1984 essay is still essential reading for anthropologists interested in practice theory, Theodor Schatzki (1996, 2001) is a more central figure among second-wave practice theorists. Schatzki is a Wittgensteinian social philosopher for whom the idea of a ‘total field of practices’ is fundamental (Schatzki 2001). By this term Schatzki appears to mean – though this is not entirely clear – the dense tangle of human practices that spans the globe. In order to be able to work with this massive web, says Schatzki, practice theorists have had to either narrow down the inquiry to more manageable subfields of the ‘total field’ – for example, science or photography – or transform existing subject matter into a practice theory question – such as Swidler’s (1986) notion of ‘culture as practice’ or Couldry’s ‘media as practice’ (this volume). For Schatzki, ‘the social is a field of embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organized around shared practical understandings’ (Schatzki 2001: 3). The maintenance of practices over time depends on ‘the successful inculcation of shared embodied know-how’ (ibid.: 3) as well as on their continued performance (Schatzki 1996). Because activities (or actions) and bodies are ‘constituted’ within practices, ‘the skilled body’ is where activity and mind as well as individual and society meet (Schatzki 2001: 3). It follows that we can only understand actions within their specific practical contexts.\textsuperscript{13}

Most practice theorists, according to Schatzki (ibid.: 2), minimally define practices as ‘arrays of activity’ in which the human body is the nexus. Although he subscribes to this curt definition, Schatzki (1996) also introduces an important distinction between what he calls ‘integrative’ and ‘dispersed’ practices. Integrative practices are ‘the more complex practices found in and constitutive of particular domains of social life’ (ibid.: 98), such as cooking, farming or business. By contrast, dispersed practices include ‘describing ... explaining, questioning, reporting, examining and imagining’ (ibid.: 91), and they can take place within and across domains or subfields (Peterson this volume).

Another contemporary author, Andreas Reckwitz (2002), synthesises elements from Schatzki, Bourdieu, Giddens and other thinkers to build an ‘ideal type’ of practice theory. With Giddens, Reckwitz emphasises the importance of routines – ‘social practices are bodily and mental routines’ (ibid.: 256) – whilst noting that we should not lose sight of ‘crises of practice’ that can bring about significant changes – that is, new routines. Reckwitz also notes that practice theorists have, by and large, neglected the individual (cf. Helle-Valle’s ‘in/dividual’, this volume), even though there is ‘a very precise place for the ‘individual’ – as distinguished from the agent – in practice theory ... As there are diverse social practices, and as every agent carries out a multitude of different social practices, the individual is the unique crossing point of practices, of bodily-mental routines’ (ibid.: 256).

Where Reckwitz is often abstract and philosophical, Alan Warde (2005) – who inspired Nick Couldry’s turn to practice\textsuperscript{14} – approaches practice theory with a far more concrete, empirical aim in mind: the sociology of consumption. He finds Schatzki’s notion of ‘integrative practices’ of more relevance to this research area than that of ‘dispersed practices’ and illustrates his argument with examples from the practice of motoring in Britain. For Warde, the rewards of practice can be of different kinds: they can be social, as in Bourdieu’s social recognition; psychological, as in Csíkszentmihályi’s (1990) notion of ‘flow’; or of other kinds. Complex practices offer practitioners more levels of self-development and a stronger sense of well-being than simple practices, which to Warde may explain why many people appear to be satisfied cultivating low-status practices. Practices are internally differentiated and distinctions among practitioners can matter a great deal, not least in the differing qualities and degrees of commitment to the practice (Warde 2005: 138). No practice is ‘hermetically sealed’ from other practices: innovations are diffused, copying and borrowing are common (ibid.: 141). Nor are practices understandable without regard to the broader political, infrastructural and technological environments in which they are sustained (Randles and Warde 2006: 229).

In the wake of this second wave of thinkers, practice theory is currently being put to numerous new uses across a range of disciplines, such as the study of domestic and leisure practices (Shove 2003; Shove and Pantzar 2005; Shove et al. 2007), social and political anthropology (Nuijten 2003; Evens and Handelman 2006), ecological economics (Røpke 2009), strategy research (Whittington 2006; Zarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl 2007), management accounting (Baxter and Chua 2008), occupational therapy (Lee, Taylor and Kielhofner 2009) and neuroscience (Lizardo 2007).

To summarise, \textit{practice theory is a body of work about the work of the body. With one or two exceptions, this loose network of approaches to social theory takes the human body to be the nexus of arrays of activities, or practices, that agents perform with greater or lesser commitment, dex-
terity and grace. Whilst some of these practices are widely diffused across social space and time, others are found clustered in configurations that change over time through the socially (re)productive agency of practitioners. Practice theory itself has diffused across epistemic space since its emergence in the 1970s and today we find practice-based approaches in subfields as diverse as strategy theory, political anthropology, material culture studies, the sociology of consumption, ecological economics and neuroscience.

Theorising Media and Practice: Prospects and Limitations

In this section I argue that practice theory can be greatly beneficial to media studies, albeit not as the field’s next paradigm (pace Couldry and Hobart this volume). Rather, I am suggesting that practice theory offers media studies new ways of addressing questions that are central to the field, such as media in everyday life, media and the body, and media production. At the same time, we cannot expect practice theory (or any other theory, for that matter) to be a panacea, and in the latter part of this section I discuss one set of media questions that practice theory is not better suited to answering than existing theoretical models, namely questions about mediated processes such as global media events, media dramas or digital epidemics.

Let us first examine the question of media in everyday life. A helpful starting point is Shaun Moores’s Media/Theory (2005). Moores devotes the first part of this book to extending Giddens’s (1984) structuration theory to the study of media. Giddens contrasts the irreversibility of human biographical time with the reversibility (or cyclicity) of modern clock-and-calendar time. For Giddens, the predictability of modern time cycles contributes to people’s sense of ‘ontological security’ – that is, a ‘confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be’ (ibid.: 375). Any major disruption to these familiar cycles can lead to an acute sense of insecurity and disorientation. As they go about their rounds of activities, human agents ‘stop’ and interact with others in what Giddens, following Hägerstrand, calls ‘stations’ – for example, workplaces, schools, homes, shops. Stations can be studied along three main dimensions: how encounters are distributed across space and time, how the station is internally ‘regionalised’, and how these regions are contextualised by agents (ibid.: 135). Thus time-space is ‘zoned’ in relation to the routinised practices of social agents:

[A] private house is a locale which is a ‘station’ for a large cluster of interactions in the course of a typical day. Houses in contemporary societies are regionalized into floors, halls and rooms. But the various rooms of the house are zoned differently in time as well as space. The rooms downstairs are characteristically used most in daylight hours, while bedrooms are where individuals ‘retire to’ at night. (ibid.: 119)

Building on Giddens’s ideas about modern time and space, Moores follows Ellis (1982), Scannell (1988, 1991), Silverstone (1993) and other media scholars to explain how broadcasting in Britain was built on clock-and-calendar cycles through devices such as seriality and scheduling. Thus, fixed schedules made audiences expect an ‘ordered and predictable’ output (Moores 2005: 20). After a historical process of routinisation all but forgotten today, radio and television – in contrast to film – came to be regarded as ‘profoundly “ordinary” media’ (ibid.: 22). Although most programme production is studio-based, from the outset broadcasters ‘attempted to produce programmes that fitted into the domestic sphere and the daily round’ (Scannell 1991: 3, quoted in Moores 2005: 19).

These ideas, firmly embedded as they are in British sociology and media studies, may seem irrelevant to ‘media-poor’ countries in the South. Yet in my own research in the late 1990s among the Iban of Sarawak, in Malaysian Borneo (Postill 2002, 2006), I found the same close intertwining of broadcasting schedules with people’s ‘round-and-round movements in time-space’ (Moores 2005: 34). For instance, in the more urbanised longhouses – the ‘villages under one roof’ where most Iban live – watching television had its own regular evening slot (roughly between 7 and 10 P.M.) and preferred ‘region’ within the geography of the longhouse: the semi-private family living room. Moreover, as in the British case, Malaysian broadcasting is built on modern clock-and-calendar time, and I found no evidence of an indigenous ‘Iban time’ running out of synch with national broadcasting cycles. As Alfred Gell concludes in his comprehensive review of the cross-cultural literature on time:

There is no fairyland where people experience time in a way that is markedly unlike the way in which we do ourselves, where there is no past, present and future, where time stands still, or chases its own tail, or swings back and forth like a pendulum. All these possibilities have been seriously touted in the literature on the anthropology of time ... but they are all travesties, engendered in the process of scholarly reflection. (Gell 1992: 315)

The Giddensian stress on day-to-day recursivity and modern forms of scheduling does not mean, however, that we can take for granted the
creation and maintenance of routine media practices. Moores regards the ‘ordinariness’ of broadcasting as the regular outcome of the ‘seemingly effortless practical accomplishments’ of both broadcasters and their audiences (Moores 2005: 23). But what of media practices outside the ‘typical’ routines of twentieth-century television viewing? Do these ideas apply to today’s far more diverse, mobile and ubiquitous media technologies (see Hawk, Riedler and Oviedo 2008)? Two recent case studies from Denmark suggest that they do.” Toke Christensen and Inge Røpke (this volume) describe how families in urban Denmark use mobile phones to try to coordinate their activities – not always successfully – and ‘hold things together’ whilst individual family members make their rounds through what Giddens would call their day-to-day ‘stations’ (schools, workplaces, shops, car parks, and so forth). By contrast, the rural teleworkers studied by Kjaerulff (this volume) face the opposite challenge: how to ‘keep things apart’, as if were, when ‘work’ and ‘family life’ share the same locale – the home. Both cases demonstrate that under conditions of swift technological and economic change, domestic media-related practices are not always seemingly effortless. Yet regardless of the technologies employed, these practices are invariably tied to the relentless cycles of clock-and-calendar time. Like the Iban families I knew in Borneo, these Danish families have no timeless ‘fairyland’ to repair to, no magical world ‘where time stands still, or chases its own tail, or swings back and forth like a pendulum’ (Gell 1992: 315).

A second key media question that practice theory is well equipped to address is the relationship between media and the body. As discussed earlier, practice theorists have stressed the powerful imprint of the state (Foucault’s ‘discipline’) and the family or kin group (Bourdieu’s ‘habitus’) on the body. Whilst homes, schools, prisons and hospitals are no doubt important stations in which to study the disciplined habitus and its technological mediations, we should not neglect other stations in which people seek to discipline their bodies on a regular basis, such as dance schools, weightwatchers’ groups, yoga sects, fitness centres or boxing clubs (on the latter, see Wacquant 2006).

Let us compare, for instance, the subcultural worlds of BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination/submission, and sadomasochism) and BASE jumping (the illegal practice of jumping with a parachute from fixed structures such as bridges or skyscrapers). At first sight, these two ‘integrative practices’ may seem to have little in common. A closer inspection through a media practice lens, however, reveals striking commonalities as well as contrasts. In two separate ethnographies of such worlds (both in the United States) we find people who are tirelessly ‘working at play’ (Weiss 2006), investing time, money and effort in highly technical, often mediated, embodied practices. Thus growing numbers of BASE jumpers now fit small video cameras onto their helmets and/or bodies to become ‘stars of their own in-flight movies’ which they later replay and share with others. This being a fiercely competitive milieu, becoming a skilled film-maker as well as a skilled jumper can enhance a practitioner’s reputation. However, these relatively new ‘media practices’ (Ferrell, Milovanovic and Lyng 2001) have had some unintended effects as well: what in the BASE scene is customarily regarded as an ephemeral, private and ineffable practice – the jump – is transformed by means of new media technologies into an enduring, public and visible practice. In contrast, although we are told that BDSM practitioners in San Francisco are regular users of e-mail, websites and print media, Weiss (2006) is silent about media uses during their sexual practices. It is fair to assume, nonetheless, that audiovisual technologies will have found their way into these practices as well, with consequences for the wider social field of BDSM that only empirical research can establish (on BDSM practices in the virtual world of Second Life, see Boelstorff 2008: 114, 162).

At any rate, both BASE jumping and BDSM furnish their more advanced practitioners with a sense of self-development and well-being, as Warde (2005) suggests for complex integrative practices in general. The grounded micro-study of embodied practices should not make us lose sight, however, of the wider infrastructural, legislative and political factors that both enable and constrain practice (Randles and Warde 2006). Just as the very British practice of trainspotting is unthinkable in Sarawak (where there are no trains), BASE jumping without America’s colossal man-made structures would lose much of its appeal. The evidence also suggests that both BASE and BDSM leading practitioners deploy the rhetoric of ‘community’ strategically across different public media as they strive to legitimise these ‘alternative’ practices vis-à-vis the authorities and the general public. By analogy with Ginsburg’s (1993) indigenous film-makers’ ‘cultural activism’, we could call this a form of ‘subcultural activism’ that objectifies a set of practices partly for reasons of public relations (see Bob 2005).

Moving on now to the possible uses of practice theory in the study of media production, in recent years a number of researchers working on the media industries have turned to Bourdieu’s field theory for inspiration (e.g., Moeran 2002; de Nooy 2003; Benson and Neveu 2005; see also Peterson 2003). A field, as we said earlier, is a domain of practice in which differently positioned practitioners compete and cooperate over the same prizes and rewards: money, pleasure, recognition and so on (cf. Martin 2003). In his own research on French journalists,
Bourdieu (1998) argued that these media professionals constitute a highly influential field with tangible effects on other fields of cultural production such as science and literature. As Rao (this volume) aptly puts it, Bourdieu insisted that ‘only an internal analysis of the embodied practices of media professionals and their relationships to each other can open up an understanding of the way the social is constituted in the contemporary world’.

A major stumbling block in the development of a practice approach to media production is Bourdieu’s aversion to interactionism – the sociological approach centred on people’s social interactions that informs Giddens’s structuration theory. Whilst Giddens (1979, 1984) was influenced by early interactionist theorists such as Goffman and Frederik Barth (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 129), Bourdieu was adamantly opposed to all forms of interactionism. He argued that interactionists fail to grasp the importance of the invisible objective relations binding social agents’ relative positions within fields of practice and the broader ‘social space’ in which these fields are embedded, such as the social space of France. Thus two professors of sociology living in different parts of France may have never ‘interacted’ but can still occupy neighbouring positions in the field of sociology and wider French social space (Knox, Savage and Harvey 2006; Postill 2008).

In my own ongoing study of internet activists in a suburb of Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) I have ignored Bourdieu’s objections and used the notion of interaction as part of a practice theory framework, for I can see no logical incompatibility between this notion and Bourdieu’s invisible ‘network’ of objective relations binding all field practitioners (see also de Nooy 2003). Moreover, it is hard to envisage an internet without interactivity – think, for instance, of the ease with which users of blogs or Twitter can reply to previous posts. Although the focus of my research is media and ‘the production of locality’ (Appadurai 1996) rather than media production, I believe my analysis also has implications for this latter area of research. In the study I concentrate on what I call the suburb’s ‘field of residential affairs’. This is an invisible ‘field of practices’ in which activists, politicians, councillors, journalists and other interested parties compete and collaborate over issues of concern to local residents, such as traffic congestion, street lighting or crime (Postill 2008). Here I use the plural form ‘practices’ not out of ethnographic habit (as I did in Postill 2006) but to signal that the field is internally differentiated into a plethora of practices: patrolling the streets, posting on Web forums, attending meetings or organising local events. This plurality extends to field practitioners: different agents carry out different arrays of activities at different field stations with varying degrees of commitment, embodied skill and publicness (cf. Warde 2005). As a result, each practice has evolved its unique blend of sociality, ‘mediated interaction’ (Thompson 1995) and articulations with the rest of the field. Additionally, cutting across these diverse practices there are field-wide forces at work, such as the ‘fundamental law’ (Bourdieu 1993) of selfless volunteerism – that is, the doxic expectation that leading residents will freely volunteer their time and labour for the good of ‘the community’ (Postill 2008).

What is the relevance of this practice theory model to the study of media production? First, it allows for more nuanced accounts of field practices and their specific mediations than existing theoretical models. Contrast, for instance, my stress on the plurality of field practices with Wittel’s (2001) dichotomous sociality model in which Wittel posits ‘network sociality’ (as opposed to ‘community sociality’) as the predominant mode of sociality in London’s new media industries. The model I am proposing also enables us to theorise the kinds of skilled embodied practices of media professionals that ethnographers have documented in recent years but which lack a firm grounding in practice theory (see Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002; Peterson 2003; Paterson and Domingo 2008). If we further add a spatio-temporal strand to the model, the result is a frame of analysis in which the agency of media practitioners can be tracked across Giddensian ‘stations’ and ‘regions’ within the workplace and beyond. Finally, as with all other field theory models, the synthesis I am advocating here permits the historical analysis of fields of media production and their changing power relations vis-à-vis other fields (Bourdieu 1992; cf. Couldry 2003).

One neglected area in the study of fields of media production is the dispersal of practices (and elements of practice) to and from such fields (cf. Schatzki 1996; Warde 2005). A few ethnographic examples will clarify this point. In May 1997 I participated in the invention of a media-derived practice during my fieldwork among the Iban of Sarawak. As part of the annual Dayak Festival celebrations, a kind of longhouse quiz show was introduced that year. The woman who dreamed up this innovation had seen many quiz shows on Malaysian television. Her aim was to test the ‘school knowledge’ of local children and publicly reward the more diligent among them (Postill 2006: 179–83). This new practice was scripted and staged ‘as seen on television’, with all the necessary props and impeccable timekeeping. Although this may be a rare case of direct appropriation of a media practice, there is ample ethnographic evidence to suggest that ritual and other performative practices around the world are being influenced by practices seen on television and other media (see Eisenlohr 2006; van de Port 2006; Pye 2008; Bird this
volume). Thus, early 1990s Balinese theatrical audiences 'increasingly expected plays to be as-seen-on-TV and actors to replicate favourite routines from television performances' (Hobart 2002: 377). In some cases a single element of a media practice will be appropriated. For instance, in Zambia the English meta-pragmatic device 'Over to you!' diffused from a popular 1980s radio show by that name to a wide range of practices, including weddings, singing rehearsals and letter writing. Debra Spitulnik (1996) makes the intriguing point that discursive items such as 'Over to you!' may have an inherent 'detachability' and 'reproducibility' that allows them to spread widely across practices well beyond their original contexts. In other cases, the practical elements will migrate in the opposite direction, from domains of amateur practice to the professional mass media. It is important, however, not to draw too sharp a divide between 'the media' and 'the public', especially given the recent proliferation of 'user-generated content' across multiple Web and mobile platforms, these often being shared by media professionals and amateurs (Kücklich 2005; Ardèvol et al. this volume).

To recap: a practice theory approach to media suggests that people use a range of media partly to try to maintain — not always with success — a sense of ontological security in a modern world in which biological death and the predictable cycles of clock-and-calendar time are among the only certainties. In going about their embodied engagements with the world, people traverse and (re)produce a variety of internally regionalised, variously mediated 'stations' (homes, schools, gyms, bars, newsrooms, studios and so forth). This day-to-day and biographical work and play of cultural (re)production and change occurs within and across specialist fields (law, BDSM, journalism, film-making) whose practitioners differ greatly in the degree and quality of their embodied know-how, self-discipline and commitment to the 'games' played in the field. Media practitioners, practices and technologies migrate and circulate across field boundaries unevenly, with some practical elements exhibiting a greater in-built 'detachability' and 'reproducibility' than others.

This sketch of a theory of media practice brings us to the limitations of practice theory for media studies. To reiterate my earlier point, I am arguing that practice theory cannot be a theoretical cure-all. For example, it is unlikely that practice theory will help us to explain the events surrounding the publication in September 2005 of a set of cartoons of the prophet Mohammed in a Danish newspaper (Hervik and Peterson forthcoming). Practice theory is certainly equipped to handle some of the multiple articulations of this global media event with (inter)local practices (posting on a blog, talking on TV, sharing a YouTube video, debating the issue in coffee-shops, and so on). Where practice theory cannot help, though, is with the study of this world-historical moment in its own right, as what members of the Manchester School of anthropology (Evens and Handelman 2006) would call not a social practice but rather a 'political process' — that is, an unpredictable political conflict whose main arenas can shift at great speed across social fields and geographical space (Swartz, Turner and Tuden 1966). These irregular episodes, some of which are known as 'social dramas' (Turner 1974, 1996; Eyerman 2008) or 'media dramas' (Wagner-Pacifi 1986) possess their own dynamics and 'processual forms', not those of regular embodied practices (Bourdieu's bodily hexis). Provided that the empirical data are sufficiently rich, such episodes are amenable to detailed stage-by-stage analysis, but practice theory can be of little assistance here.

Other types of media process that practice theory cannot help us with include global media events around catastrophes such as the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 or the Chinese earthquakes of 2008; the instant formation of 'smart mobs' enabled by new mobile technologies, such as the 2001 People Power II demonstrations in the Philippines that led to a change of government (see Rafael 2003); or the 'pandemic' spread of urban legends, rumours or hoaxes across internet and mobile networks (Cortáz Rodríguez 2004). Again, I am not suggesting that practice theory has nothing to tell us about these mediated processes, only that it does not equip us to study them as processes any better than existing theoretical models. What practice theory can do in all these instances is lend us tools with which to study (especially ethnographically) some of the practical ramifications of these processes — for example, how they can disrupt the daily practical rounds of people affected by them (see Moores 2005: 31) or how certain media professionals and amateurs may use these events to modify existing media practices or invent new ones.

Outline of the Book

Theorising Media and Practice opens with a debate in Part 1 between two media theorists who advocate different 'turns to practice' and regard their own proposals as being 'instrumental' (Coulndry) and 'radical' (Hobart) respectively. Then, in Part 2, a group of contributors argue for the need to retain holistic notions such as 'culture' and/or 'structure' in approaches to media that draw from practice theory. By contrast, the chapters in Part 3 reject any notion of an overarching social structure, placing media squarely in the situated contexts of their practical uses. The last section of the volume, Part 4, considers the implications of new
Media research has been a thing of fits and starts.1 As we look back over more than a century of reflection on media, can we say the subject has now broken into a steady rhythm running in a clear direction? Not yet, because media research remains marked by its episodic history. The time is noneheless ripe to attempt to formulate a new paradigm of media research that can draw together some of the more interesting recent work, but at the same time achieve a decisive break with the unprofitable disputes of the past. This new paradigm sees media not as text or production economy, but first and foremost as practice. Some of the stimulus for this comes from the recent growth of practice theory in sociology; indeed this new paradigm insists on a much closer relationship with central debates in the social sciences than previously in media studies, with the advantage that the major contribution of media research to those wider social science debates becomes clearer.

This is no place for a history of media research. To set the scene, however, it is worth recalling that theoretical discussion about the social consequences of media goes back well into the nineteenth century (de Tocqueville 1994; Kierkegaard 1962), although it remained completely marginal in mainstream sociology until after the Second World War with only rare exceptions (Tarde 1969). The contemporary landscape of ‘media studies’ is the residue of at least five distinct currents of work: first, U.S. mass communications research (Merton, Lazarsfeld, Katz) which was set firmly in the tradition of the experimental social sciences but took its cue from wider intellectual debates on mass media and their consequences for democracy and social order; second, critical Marxist commentary (Benjamin, Adorno) which also took its cue from mass culture debates but within an agenda based on the critique of capitalism (this in turn developed into the political economy tradition);
third, semiotic analysis which in its dominant form developed in the context of European structuralism and poststructuralism and applied the most radical theoretical innovations of postwar literary theory to media texts; fourth, the critical research, particularly on media audiences (Hall, Morley, Ang), that emerged in Britain in close association with semiotics and Marxism but quickly developed into a broader empirical tradition which has continued through the 1990s; and fifth, and most recently, the line of anthropological research into media that has emerged out of postmodern versions of symbolic anthropology (Ginsburg 1994; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002). Needless to say, there is not always common ground between these traditions: for example, the third has developed largely independently of the others with its own extensive theoretical framework drawing particularly on psychoanalysis, while the fourth is sharply critical of the first and second and has only a limited interest in the third; the fifth meanwhile has some difficulty acknowledging how much it has in common with the fourth (Abu-Lughod 1999).

These traditions disagree of course as to their primary theoretical focus: for the first, it is problems of large-scale social effects; for the second, processes of commodification; for the third, the polysemic of the text; for the fourth, the process of interpretation; and for the fifth, open-ended practices of media production, circulation and consumption. At the same time, there are of course cross-currents: so the problems of the U.S. mass communications field with effects have serious implications for critical theory and audience research, even if they are blissfully ignored by semiotic analysis; while the processual complexities uncovered by audience research are irrelevant for anthropological narratives of media practice. With such profusion, why call for a further paradigm? One aim is to put behind us some of the internecine disputes of the past: between audience research and screen theory over the determining status of the text (Morley 1980); between audience research and economic theory over the importance of audience practices of meaning-making (Garnham 1995; Grossberg 1995). Another aim is to help clarify where might lie the epiphenomenon of new research questions, if (as I would argue) this no longer lies directly above the media text or the media's production economy.

The proposed new paradigm is disarmingly simple: it treats media as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media. The potential of this reformulation only becomes clear when we look more closely at recent debates over 'practice' in the social sciences. The aim, however, can be stated directly: to de-centre media research from the study of media texts or production structures (important though these are) and to redirect it onto the study of the open-ended range of practices focused directly or indirectly on media. This places media studies firmly within a broader sociology of action and knowledge (or if you prefer, cultural anthropology or cognitive anthropology), and sets it apart from versions of media studies formulated within the paradigm of literary criticism.

Why Practice?

This proposal needs some unpacking: first, in terms of questions of media analysis; and second, in terms of questions of social theory.

Practice as an Emerging Theme in Media Research

The new paradigm decentres the media text for a reason: to sidestep the insoluble problems over how to prove 'media effects' — that is, a convincing causal chain from the circulation of a media text, or a pattern of media consumption, to changes in the behaviour of audiences. The classic version of this debate concerned cultivation analysis, which has been unfairly vilified for at least being explicit and methodical in its attempt to prove a causal chain between heavy television viewing and cognitive and moral shifts in those viewers, which was extremely difficult to establish at a statistically significant level (Signorielli and Morgan 1990). But hidden assumptions about 'media effects' abound in media analysis and everyday talk about media. Indeed they are hard to avoid if you start from the text itself: outside literary approaches, why else study the detailed structure of a media text as your primary research focus unless you can plausibly claim that those details make a difference to wider social processes? But it is exactly this that is difficult to show. As Justin Lewis put it: 'The question that should be put to textual analysis that purports to tell us how a cultural product "works" in contemporary culture is almost embarrassingly simple: where's the evidence? Without evidence, everthing else is pure speculation' (Lewis 1991: 49). It is better, surely, to focus our research paradigm somewhere else.

A popular alternative has been to start from the institutional structures that produce media, as in the political economy and (more recently) the cultural economy traditions (Garnham 1990; du Gay et al. 1997; Hesmondhalgh 2002). Clearly, the analysis of industrial and market structures in the media and cultural sectors is valid in its own right as a contribution to policy debates and to the analysis of the wider economy, as well as being vital to our understanding of the pressures which
limit participation in those sectors on various scales and also limit the range of outputs they produce. Here, there is no question of speculation (quite the contrary) and in my view such work is important. But in considering what should be the general paradigm for media research and media theory, there is a difficulty in situating it in media production, obvious though that might be in one respect (this is where media products start their life). The difficulty is that the structures of media production, and particularly the dynamics of concentration and conglomerate, do not, of themselves, tell us anything about the uses to which media products are put in social life generally. Even from a Marxist perspective, which insists on the causal primacy of economic relations, it is difficult to make the leap from arguing that economic factors determine the nature of media production to arguing that the (economically determined) nature of media production determines the social consequences of media texts. Unlike the primary case of labour conditions, there is a crucial uncertainty about how media texts (or any texts produced in an economy) causally mediate between the world they represent and the world where they are consumed. This was precisely the force of the challenge to the dominant ideology thesis (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner 1981): Where is the evidence that the holding of beliefs associated with a dominant ideology adds anything to the structuring of social relations by what Marx called the dull compulsion of economic life? The point applies a fortiori if we consider the consequences of media texts, since the relationship between consumption of a media text (however it may be read as reproducing an ideology) and transmission of belief that ideology is also uncertain (Lewis 1991, quoted above). Unless, therefore, you reduce media texts to being a conduit for economic signals (absurd in all but the crassest case), we are forced once again, even within a political economy model, to consider what people do with media.

This, after all, was the point of audience research – to emphasise that consumption is a ‘determinate moment’ in the production of meaning through media texts (Hall 1980). The only problem was that audience research developed in an intellectual landscape in Britain decisively influenced by semiotics, so requiring that all questions about media start from the supposed structuring properties of the text itself. Although the connection of audience research (from fan practices to video use) to the moment of textual consumption was increasingly loosened until the audience become undecideable – undecideable, that is, in relation to the originary moment of textual consumption (Ang 1996: 70) – audience research remained constrained by its primary emphasis on people’s relationships to texts.

It is to escape that constraint that my proposed paradigm starts not with media texts or media institutions, but with practice – not necessarily the practice of audiences (a point to which I will come back), but media-oriented practice, in all its looseness and openness. What, quite simply, are people doing in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?

Like any new paradigm that seeks to resolve a crisis or contradiction in how a field of research is constructed, this paradigm was ‘at least partially anticipated’ (Kuhn 1970: 75) in the 1990s. First, there was important research into the whole range of domestic practices in which television viewing was inserted (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992; Silverstone 1994); this work developed a rich theoretical framework drawing on recent developments in the sociology of science and technology and encompassing the latest developments in the sociology of the family and social anthropology. The focus of this work remained the home, as the primary site of media consumption, although there was a less noticed line of research on the public viewing of television (Lemish 1982; Krotz and Tyler Eastman 1999; McCarthy 2002).

The new paradigm was anticipated, secondly, by researchers who sought to move beyond the specific contexts of media consumption. Having concluded that ‘television’s meanings for audiences ... cannot be decided upon outside of the multidimensional intersubjective networks in which the object is inserted and made to mean in concrete contextual settings’ (Ang 1996: 70), Ien Ang posed the different question of ‘what it means, or what it is like, to live in a media-saturated world’ (ibid.: 72). My own research reflected this general question from the perspective of power, asking ‘what it means to live in a society dominated by large-scale media institutions’ (Couldry 2000a: 6). The shift to a more widely focused research question was anticipated also by the emergence of the term ‘mediation’ (Silverstone 2005) to refer to the broad expanse of social processes focused around media, even if the first prominent use of that term (Martin-Barbero 1993) was concerned, still, with extending our understanding of media consumption to encompass a broader range of cultural participation. It is here that recent anthropological research into media processes, free as it is from any primary attachment to studying texts and their interpretation, has become a promising ally, while at the same time acquiring a higher profile in anthropology itself (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002).

Important also were two explicit attempts to shift the paradigm of media research in the late 1990s. Coming from outside media studies, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) challenged what they saw as a paradigm of media research dominated by ideological questions (the
The Sociology of Practice

The recent shift towards practice in some social science has long philosophical roots (going back to, among others, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty) and is the latest in a series of attempts to overcome the old theoretical division between structure and agency. These is no space to go into this background here. The key question instead is what the notion of ‘practice’ offers to media sociology. There are three important points to be made.

First, as Ann Swidler (2001) explains, the aim of practice theory is to replace an older notion of ‘culture’ as internal ‘ideas’ or ‘meanings’ with a different analysis of culture in terms of two types of publicly observable processes: first, practices themselves, particularly ‘routine activities (rather than consciously chosen actions) notable for their unconscious, automatic, un-thought character’ (ibid.: 74); and second, discourse, which ‘is not what anyone says, but the system of meanings that allows them to say anything at all’ (ibid.: 75). While we might query Swidler’s exclusive emphasis on routine activities (surely a concern with discourse would lead us to be interested in practices that are associated with discourse – that is, which are self-reflexive) and, while we might also query the term ‘system’ in the characterisation of discourse, it would be better, perhaps, to refer to principles or ordering, without assuming that order or system is necessarily achieved in discourse. Nonetheless, this represents a useful, pragmatic shift in the analysis of culture, including ‘media culture’. If recent media research has foregrounded media culture, practice theory translates this into two concrete and related questions: What types of things do people do in relation to media? And what types of things do people say in relation to media?

Second, practice research aims to be as open as possible in analysing what practices are out there, which in turn depends on how people understand what actions constitute a distinct practice – a complex question because actions are linked into a practice not just by explicit understandings but also by being governed by common rules and by sharing the common reference point of certain ends, projects and beliefs (Schatzki 1996: 89). There undoubtedly are a whole mass of media-oriented practices in contemporary societies, but how they are divided up into specific practices, and how those practices are coordinated with each other, remains an open question.

We cannot resolve such questions here. What matters is taking this question as our starting-point, since it distances us from the normal media studies assumption that what audiences do (‘audience’) is a distinctive set of practices rather than an artificially chosen ‘slice’ through
daily life that cuts across how they actually understand the practices in which they are engaged. If we live in a media-saturated world, then it is reasonable to expect that how that world is carved up into recognisable practices may no longer correspond to categorisations formed in a ‘pre-saturation’ world (when audience could be assumed to be a discrete activity). But – and this is the point which practice theory makes clear – in order to establish what are the new principles by which practices orientated to media are demarcated, we cannot operate simply by our instinct as media researchers. We must look closely at the categorisations of practice that people make themselves.

Third, the space of practices is not as chaotic as might appear for the crucial reason that practices are organised among themselves. How this works is the fundamental question that Swidler addresses: ‘how [do] some practices anchor, control, or organise others’ (Swidler 2001: 79)? Put in these stark terms, this is a surprisingly difficult question. Swidler approaches it first from the point of view of definitional hierarchy: some practices are defined as part of a larger practice which provides their key reference points; so, for example, political marketing, lobbying and campaigning are part of the wider practice of politics. Secondly, she approaches it as a question of dynamic change: some practices ‘anchor’ others, because changes in the former automatically cause reformulation of the latter’s aims. For the second case, Swidler makes an interesting suggestion that ‘public ritual’ has a crucial role to play in ‘the visible, public enactment of new patterns so that “everyone can see” that everyone else has seen that things have been changed’ (ibid.: 87). Some practices, in other words (although this is my gloss, not Swidler’s) work to enact new forms of categorisation and distinction relied upon in other practices.

One of Swidler’s examples is how the public performance of identity based on sexuality in San Francisco’s Lesbian/Gay Freedom Day Parade (from 1971 onwards) changed the conditions in which sexual identity in San Francisco could be claimed and performed more generally. Swidler argues that anchoring practices are associated particularly with the management of conflict and difference, but that, once established, the principles enacted by those practices become part of the social ‘structure’ itself.

As Swidler herself makes clear, these suggestions are tentative, and much more work in this area is needed, but this practice-based approach is suggestive for how we might understand the relation of media-oriented practices to social practice as a whole. What if one of the main things media do is anchor other practices through the ‘authoritative’ representations and enactments of key terms and categories that they provide? A question, then, if we theorise media as practice, is: How, where and for whom does this anchoring role work and with what consequences for the organisation of social action as a whole?

Media as Practice: The Theoretical Challenges

Having now set the scene, I want to explore (inevitably schematically) what a theory of media-as-practice might be like, and what its key questions might be. As we have seen, this new paradigm is not fundamentally new, but it is distinctive in being formulated without any reliance on textual or political economy models and with enough generality to be open to wider developments in sociology and anthropology. As John Tulloch (2000: 19–32) has argued, media research and theory needs to be more closely integrated with the wider social sciences (although this requires some rapprochement on their part as well!). This is much more productive, I would add, than relying on the abstractions of philosophy or philosophically generated theories about media, whether in Scannell’s (1996) use of Heidegger’s philosophy of Being or the extensive use across media studies of Baudrillard’s polemics or Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptual explorations. Media theory has no independent value as theory; it is only valuable when it helps us formulate better questions for empirical research.

To flesh out how a theory of media-as-practice affects the priorities of media research, I want to discuss three consequences of an emphasis on practice: anti-functionalism; openness to the variable and complex organisation of practice; and a concern to understand the principles whereby, and the mechanisms through which, practices are ordered. At this general level, media theory is no different from any other area of social theory, although media’s role in representing the social world from which media are generated adds to the complexity of how their workings can be understood on a large scale. Media represent other practices and so have direct consequences for how those practices are defined and ordered.

Beyond Functionalism

I do not want to dwell long on this point, since I have covered it extensively elsewhere (Couldry 2005). Functionalism is so long dead in sociology and anthropology that it is embarrassing to find it alive and well in areas of media research. Functionalism is the idea that large regions of human activity (‘societies’, ‘cultures’ and so on) can best be under-
stood as if they were self-sufficient, complex, functioning systems. Depending on taste, the metaphor of functioning can be biological (the natural organism, such as the human body) or technological (artificial systems, such as the machine). Societies, or cultures, are conceived in functionalist accounts as complex ‘wholes’ formed of a series of ‘parts’, each of which ‘functions’ by contributing to the successful working of the ‘whole’. Action at the level of society’s or culture’s ‘parts’ has no unanticipated effects, and even if it does it is quickly absorbed back into the ‘whole’s wider functioning through positive feedback loops.

There are many problems with functionalist attempts to model the multidimensionality of social and cultural practice, including media. Looking back from the beginning of the twenty-first century, one obvious problem is the difficulty of conceiving of any ‘society’ or ‘culture’ as a self-sufficient system, given the huge range of forces operating across societal and cultural borders. The main problem, however, lies with functionalism’s underlying claim that there are such totalities as ‘societies’ and ‘cultures’ which ‘function’ as working systems. The problem becomes clearer when this claim is applied in detail. We need go no further than Steven Lukes’s (1975) classic deconstruction of functionalist accounts of political ritual, which analyses political rituals in terms of how they contribute to society’s political ‘stability’ by affirming certain central beliefs and values. But even if there are such centrally held beliefs and values, which Lukes questions, this account begs deeper questions about ‘whether, to what extent, and in what ways society does hold together’ (ibid.: 297). Is there, Lukes asks, a functioning social ‘whole’ of which political rituals could be a ‘part’?

Yet functionalist explanations continue to crop up in media research in some surprising places. The standard positions in debates about stardom and celebrity culture assume, at root, that the industrial production of celebrity discourse ‘must’ contribute to some wider social ‘function’, whether we call it identity-formation or social integration or both. Here, for example, is McKenzie Wark: ‘we may not like the same celebrities, we may not like any of them at all, but it is the existence of a population of celebrities, about whom to disagree, that makes it possible to constitute a sense of belonging’ (Wark 1999: 33, emphasis added). Where is the evidence that people ‘identify’ with celebrities in any simple way, or even that they regard ‘celebrity culture’ as important, rather than a temporary distraction, let alone that celebrities ‘make possible’ everyone’s sense of belonging? The absence of empirical work here illustrates how functionalism blocks off routes to open-minded research.

An advantage of starting with practice – what types of things do people do, say and think that are oriented to media? – is that there is no intrinsic plausibility in the idea that what people do (across a whole range of practices and locations) should add up to a functioning ‘whole’. Why should it? In the past, an apparent reason was that, without the ordering presence of ‘society’ as a functioning whole, the meanings and mutual relationships of practices could not themselves be understood, agency being incomprehensible without structure. Giddens’s structuration theory (Giddens 1984), whatever detailed problems it raises, was a convincing move beyond that problem, since it showed how principles of order could both produce and be reproduced at the level of practice itself, social order, in other words, is ‘recursively’ present in practice and in the organisation of practice (Swidler 2001: 78). Practice theory, indeed, seeks to develop this insight by insisting that ‘there is no reason to think that social life can exhibit [ordered] features only if it is a totality’ (Schatzki 1996: 10) and by exploring other ways of thinking about social order.

One good reason, however, why functionalist ideas might still appear plausible at least in the area of media research is that media institutions, like governments, work hard to create the impression that they are at the ‘centre’ of the functioning whole of ‘society’, in the sense of a value centre (Shils 1975); not just as an administrative centre for practical purposes. Media studies (and incidentally also political science) must work hard to avoid, indeed to undermine, the pressures towards functionalism inherent in its topic. For the same reason, media studies (and political science) should resist the temptation to see the actual institutional centres of media (and political) culture as ‘all there is’: they must avoid the ‘centrism’ (Couldry 2005) which distorts the breadth of the actual field of media (and political) practice beyond these claimed ‘centres’. The simple starting point of practice (what is going on and where?) provides a useful counterweight to functionalist tendencies in media research.

The Varieties of Media Practice

The value of practice theory, as we have seen, is that it asks open questions about what people are doing and how they categorise what they are doing, avoiding the disciplinary or other preconceptions which would automatically read their actions as, say, ‘consumption’ or ‘being an audience’, whether or not that is how the actors see their actions. One possibility we need to be ready for – anticipated in the quotation from Ien Ang (1996: 70) already given – is that, in many cases, ‘media consumption’ or ‘audienceing’ can only be understood as part of a practice which is not itself ‘about’ media: what practice this is depends on who we are describing and when.
Watching a football game on television might for one person be best analysed as part of their intensely emotional practice as a football fan or fan of a particular football team; for another, perhaps that person’s partner or child, it may be an obligation or pleasure of their relationship to share the first person’s passion with them; for someone watching in a public space, it may be part of a practice of group solidarity; for a fourth, it may be something done to fill in time, instantly ‘put-downable’ (Hermes 1995) as soon as a friend rings the doorbell or the person gets the energy to go back to some work. Pointing this out is hardly new of course (see Bausinger 1984; Morley 1992). What it demonstrates, however, is that the main priorities for media research cannot be the varieties of how people read the text of this televised game (since ‘watching football on TV’ is not the practice we are interested in analysing) nor can it be the structure of the televised game’s text considered in itself. It is more interesting to consider, first, the range of practices in which the act of watching this football game occurs and, second, the consequences of that common feature for the relationships between those practices. As to the first question, it will only be in the case of the football fan that the way they read the game’s text is likely to be of research interest, since it is only here that the watching of the game forms a central, non-substitutable part of a wider practice. Political economy approaches are an important background in all these cases, but again probably only an important background in the case of the football fan, where economic pressures have had a major effect on both the places where televised games can be watched and the structure of the game itself. As to the second question, the fact that people performing a huge range of practices (from fandom to family interaction to group solidarity at a community centre or pub to just waiting for something else to do) should all be doing the same thing at the same time is, however, significant for our understanding of the time-space coordination of practices through media. Similar questions could be asked of watching a prime-time news bulletin, and here there might be more commonality around the practice of ‘watching the news’, an inherently general activity that is, perhaps, a distinct practice for many people. By contrast, if we took the activity of reading a celebrity magazine, this is much more ambiguous. Is it just passing time, a deliberate search for humour, or information seeking? The answer can only be given for particular individuals and groups in the contexts of their everyday practice, which must take into account the contexts, if any, where the contents of that celebrity magazine are later put to use.

Clearly this only begins to track the variety of media-oriented practices, and media-oriented actions that form part of other practices. Large areas of this terrain have, of course, already been explored in media research, but there remain large areas that are still little known. To name a few: practices of using media sources in education; individuals’ uses of media references in telling stories about themselves, their family or historical events; the uses of media in the legal system and indeed in work practices across the public world (so far, most research has focused on politics, but there are many other areas worth investigating). There is also the larger question of how media products and references to media are, over time, affecting practice in all production fields, which I have begun to explore elsewhere, drawing on Bourdieu’s field theory (Couldry 2003b). Focusing on practice is a more radical adjustment to our research agendas than might at first appear. It is commonplace to study talk shows, for example, as texts, but much less common to study them as a social practice whereby particular groups of people are brought together to perform before each other in a studio. The resulting text is only a facet of the overall practice.

At this descriptive level, media consumption at least (media production is different, since it is generally a rationalised work practice) may seem frustratingly heterogeneous rather than an ordered field. Its principles of order only derive, at least initially, from the order to be found in the various practices in which media consumption (and its uses) are inserted. But, as already suggested, media consumption (and production) may quite independently be important to understanding the commonalities between other practices. It is to questions of patterning and ordering that I wish to turn next.

The Ordering of Media Practice and the Media’s Ordering of Other Practices

We return here to the difficult question posed by Ann Swidler: How do some practices anchor other practices, producing a hierarchy of practices and also contributing to the ‘structure’ within which those other practices occur and take on their meaning? The case of media-oriented practices, however, raises a specific question: Do media practices have a privileged role in anchoring other types of practice because of the privileged circulation of media representations and images of the social world? This is quite apart from questions about the internal hierarchies among media practices which, at least in forms such as the privileging of ‘live’ media coverage over other types of media coverage, are relatively familiar. Instead I am interested here in the more difficult question of the potential hierarchies between media practices and other sorts of practice. How can we investigate such a relationship and what concepts do we need to clarify it?
Here we need to draw on another area of (this time, classical) social theory: Durkheim's concept of social categories (Durkheim 1953). A social category for Durkheim is a concept which is involved in articulating a society's order, and these categories are put to work in formulating certain core understandings of how the social world works and of the values on which it is based. A fundamental difference between Durkheim's theoretical framework and practice theory is that Durkheim assumes 'society' as the fundamental entity underlying any sociological explanation, whereas practice theory does not. However, as I have shown elsewhere (Couidy 2003a), it is possible to draw on Durkheim's insights without subscribing to his functionalist assumptions in order to understand the categorical force of certain terms as they are mobilised in the rhetorics which media use to represent social 'reality' and their privileged role as communicators of it. A non-functionalism approach may be able to explain the binding authority of certain media practices in relation to other practices via the notion of 'ritual' (which, as we saw, Swidler herself introduces to explain how some practices anchor others, but does not explain). In ritual practices, patterns of meaning are recognised as being enacted, although not necessarily intended or articulated, by the performers (Rappaport 1999: 24). Indeed ritual is one important way in which the legitimacy of assumed wider values can be confirmed or communicated. Ritual practices are able to 'frame' those wider values and thereby reproduce them as follows:

1. The actions comprising rituals are structured around certain categories (often expressed through boundaries).
2. Those categories suggest, or stand in for, an underlying value.
3. This value captures our sense that 'the social' is 'at stake' in the ritual.

As a result (linking to Swidler) ritual practices may 'anchor' all sorts of other practices which deal in the same categories and values.

On what does the particular power of media-oriented rituals depend? There is no space to explain this in detail here, but it is based on the fundamental categorical distinction between what is 'in' the media and what is not 'in' the media, which enables media representations to be seen as standing in for, or speaking authoritatively about, the non-media practices they represent. The 'as seen on TV' label still used on some supermarket goods is just the simplest version of this distinction in use, but it illustrates the anchoring role of media practices at work. The pervasiveness of 'celebrity culture' (discourse about celebrity inside and outside media) is another example of such anchoring: even if, as already noted, it is uncertain how important celebrity discourse is in individuals' articulations of their identities, the idea that celebrity actions demand special attention is continuously reproduced. In that sense celebrity actions can be said to 'anchor' other practices by comprising a constant point of reference within them. These are just two examples of how the ritualised dimensions of media practice may have an anchoring role in relation to other practices. The difficult question is how far this anchoring role extends across social practice in general.

Clearly, we are at just the start of a large area of research. The point is that these research questions only open up once we redefine the aim of media research as the analysis of media’s consequences for social practice as a whole, studying the full range of practices oriented towards media (not just direct media consumption). It is important, however, to emphasise that, in researching the role of media practices and the products of media practices (images, representations, patterns of discourse) in ordering other practices across the social world, we are not giving up on the important concerns of historical media research with questions of representation because the study of how particular media texts embody claims about the social world in regular ways will remain important for our understanding of media’s consequences for social practice generally. Similarly with the question of media ‘effects’ and media power: reorientating the media research paradigm as I am proposing does not mean abandoning such larger questions, but on the contrary attempting to answer them in more precise ways based on the details of everyday practice and its organisation. The aim then is not to abandon the interests of previous media research, but to displace and broaden its focus from questions based on the consideration of texts (and how texts are interpreted) to questions based on media practices’ role in the ordering of social life more generally.

This of course is to put considerable weight on the term ‘ordering’ (or in Swidler’s language ‘anchoring’). I have already glossed this one way in terms of categories and rituals which are structured through categories. There are also other ways in which we might understand how certain practices order or ‘anchor’ others. First, we might look at the coordinated networks between agents and things that network theory analysed. Think of the practices which together make up the ‘media profile’ received by a major business corporation. They have an ‘anchoring’ role in relation to the business strategies of that corporation – because of the ‘network’ that links the actions of its executives, press office, key media contacts, major investors and so on – when an announcement of new strategy is made and the executives wait to see what media coverage it receives. Bad media coverage, because it is read
by investors as negatively affecting the corporation's value as an investment, will constrain the corporation's future actions. Such actor networks involving media practices with an anchoring role have been little studied, but they are an important part of how many fields of practice are ordered. This is just one example of how the detailed study of practice (including actor networks) might illuminate our understanding of media's role in the ordering of social life more generally.

Other conceptual links might be made here, for example to Bourdieu's concept of habitus which seeks to explain the underlying determinants of the practices that are available to different agents (Bourdieu 1977; McNay 1999). There are no doubt still other concepts that might be useful for specifying how 'anchoring' might work that draw on alternative theoretical perspectives — for instance Foucauldian perspectives — but there is no space to pursue this here.

The point, rather, is that we need the perspective of practice to help us address how media are embedded in the interlocking fabric of social and cultural life. This question, as I have suggested, cuts deeper than our sense of how it feels to live in a media-saturated world, since it covers both cognitive and emotional dimensions to how practices are ordered; and in turn, through the link with cognitive questions (ways of thinking and categorising the world), it links to the question of how practices (possibilities of action) are differentially ordered for those with ready access to media resources (whether as media producers or as privileged media sources) and for those without. Through this, we can perhaps hope to develop a different approach towards understanding media's consequences for the distribution of social power.

Conclusion

I have tried to open up a direction for media theory, rather than map anything definitively. I have been interested throughout in theory not for its own sake but because it clarifies what questions are interesting for media research and because of the structuring processes it can disclose. Much of my argument has involved contextualising a new research paradigm that theorises media as practice, rather than as text or production process: What range of practices are oriented to media and what is the role of media-oriented practices in ordering other practices? This is, I believe, a more open and inclusive paradigm for media research than previous ones.

It draws for its theoretical tools much more on general social science than on media research — unsurprisingly since it addresses questions that are no longer questions about media as such, or even about the direct consumption of media, but rather questions about the contributions media practices make to social practice more generally. No 'new' paradigm can, as I noted, be wholly new. Indeed we return here to the spirit of Lazarsfeld and Merton's (1969) exploratory remarks about mass media, made entirely within a social science perspective. For them the first, if the most difficult, question of media effects was: What are 'the effects of the existence of media in our society' (ibid.:495, emphasis added)? This is the (admittedly vast) question to which we need to return with all our theoretical energies. Practice is perhaps the only concept broad enough to help us prise it open.

Notes

1. This article was originally published in the journal Social Semiotics 14(2):115-32, 2004, and is republished here with permission. Thanks to Taylor and Francis for their consent to republish; the full version of the original article is available from http://www.informaworld.com.
2. A few years ago, I expressed this in terms of the study of 'the culture of media belief' but this now seems to me too limited in its selection from the wide field of media-oriented practices (Coulöry 2000a, 2000b).
3. See, e.g., Bourdieu (1977), and for authoritative overviews of the term 'practice' as a whole, Schatzki (1996) and Reckwitz (2002).
4. Also implied here is studying what people believe and think, as evidenced by what they say and do.
5. Editors' Note For a media studies introduction to Baudrillard, see Long and Wall (2009:327-28); on (media) anthropological uses of Deleuze and Guattari, see Spitalnik (this volume) and Kapferer (2006:135-37).
7. The social 'centre' to which media implicitly claim connection is therefore doubly mythical: it is not a centre of value and it is not as much of a practical centre as media would like us to think (see Coulöry 2003a:37-54).

References


CHAPTER 2

What Do We Mean by ‘Media Practices’?

Mark Hobart

Who needs a collection on theorising media and practice, and why? Except for the few malcontents who stray into academia, media practitioners and policy-makers are mostly too busy doing media to have time for scholars whose grasp of the intricacies of a fast-moving industry is often rudimentary. Have media and practice not been endlessly and largely repetitively theorised already? And has not the phrase ‘media practices’ been used so promiscuously as to be a cliche? Perhaps our time would be better spent doing something else.

The frequency with which media practice is invoked though suggests that it is an attempt to address a perceived difficulty. So I shall review the case for analysing the mass media in terms of practice. Such a review requires us to reconsider what is the object of study in media studies. Should it, for example, be media practices or media-related practices? Granted the prevailing naive realism (rather than empiricism) in media studies, what are the theoretical and philosophical implications of such a change? And how might a thoroughgoing account of practice affect what and how we research?

Existing Conditions Are Unlikely²

Most approaches to media studies, despite claims to the contrary, encounter two problems: how to address the relationship between academic models and actuality (whatever that is); and how to address the practices of which media production, distribution, reception and commentary arguably consist. So, is it possible to devise an account of practice that will meet the intellectual requirements of media studies and reflect recognisably the activities of practitioners? And, as Western scholars often