Searching for Landmarks at the Forefront of Media Research

Horace Newcomb

Identifying innovative and commanding work that directs or redirects research and scholarship in communication studies is more difficult than for many other areas. This is so, I maintain, precisely because ours is not a discipline. Those of us who prefer the concept of a "field" to describe the broad focus of our efforts use the term in two ways. One is the common usage, the conventional sense of an area of study. The other, the one I prefer, is more metaphorical. Used in this sense our activity can be described as attempts to make our way across broad expanses.

Some areas are marked and fenced, clearly bounded. Sometimes these areas are even more severely restricted as in the culture of my youth. Hunters knew that land owners could place signs along the boundaries of their property, identifying it as "Posted." This meant that no hunter could legally cross onto that land, or could do so only with special permission. (To pre-figure some of my later comments, I will suggest here that in intellectual activity, it is often the poachers, those who transgress such boundaries, who end up providing truly innovative scholarship and research.)

Other areas of "the field" are open, however, inviting all who would so attempt to explore, map, and measure. These open areas, of course, are not without their own dangers. Those who venture there may find themselves in swamps or bogs, buried forever in questions without answers. But other areas are well-defined, cultivated, planted, and fertilized. Here, planting and re-planting occurs in familiar furrows. For the most part, successful work in such areas is best described as improvement and refinement, and this is significant, because even here there is no such thing as a predictable harvest.

But our work is not defined by metaphors. Our focus is on hard problems, on issues related to the lived experience of citizens throughout the world. Communication technologies, the messages, meanings and issues carried within them, and the problems and promises attendant to those complex phenomena are among the most fundamental and important in societies and cultures everywhere. At one time, perhaps, many of us felt assured of how best to study those issues, problems, and promises. We could measure and evaluate the content of media messages, consider the effects of mediated material, the policies regulating practices, the economics, both classical and political, enabling and restraining communication. Later approaches challenged these boundaries. They focused on variable responses as well as effects, on forms of expression as well as institutional practices, on cases rather than abstract economic or social functions. The newer approaches were, for the most part, defined by what some scholars considered deficiencies within existing modes of research and analysis. Work was often developed on the assumption that wrong (or put more generously), flawed, questions had been asked. These challenges to received approaches, contributed to what I would refer to as the "theory wars," discussions and debates that wracked many fields of study throughout the 70s and into the 80s. These newer approaches vitally refreshed the intellectual soil in which many of us work, and by definition that is for me one kind of cutting edge.

But there is another way to identify such a boundary. From this perspective we must first acknowledge the existence of problems defined not by us, by the intricacies wound within our assumptions or methods, but rather by circumstances altering the very objects of our study. Shifts and changes in the development, application, and deployment of newer communication technologies now demand, I argue, new approaches in our work. I do not mean to suggest here that our tasks should be "determined" by technology. Rather, I am concerned with how we create truly new questions. For me, cutting edge scholarship and research are most often defined by the questions in which they are grounded. To be innovative we must clear a narrow path between questions defined by prior research and questions defined by those who control the industries, technologies, and applications we explore. Moreover, we must acknowledge that questions from both our own histories and from those working within industries are important aids to innovative work.

The new questions must address developments such as the massive expansion of distribution channels, the consequent shifts caused in both commercial and public service sectors of electronic communication, the policy challenges faced by regulators resulting from these changes, the global convergence of ownership and the creation of media conglomerates dominating the newer media environments. I also refer to potential convergences among technologies, most of which are linked in some fashion to digital transmission via the internet. We must re-examine and perhaps redefine what we mean by very familiar terms such as "mass," "audience" or "media text" or even "media industry." We must rethink what we mean by concepts such as "the public sphere." We may have to invent new formulas for analyzing economic structures and certainly we will have to reconsider our approaches to "political economy." Some aspects of all these factors surely remain the same, but some are new and the overall mix seems at the moment to be in constant transition.

"Cutting edge" research asks, depends on, or suggests the right questions about these changes and the material and conceptual implications resulting from them. This does not always mean, however, that cutting edge research is totally dependent on the "newest" work. Rather, it often indicates an appropriation and a new application of previous work now seen to have unexpected significance. Let me illustrate these propositions with examples related, for the most part, to my interests in television studies.

In order to develop suitable questions for a new wave or research it is necessary to describe and attempt to define the circumstances surrounding our work. This is especially difficult if one seeks to meld questions of technology and economics with complicated issues of aesthetics and expressive culture; story-telling, representation, narration, and technique. Both the difficulties and the promise of such attempts, however, can be found in two works that are, for me, ground breaking. The first is John Thornton Caldwell's 1995 book, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television.*[1] There

Caldwell develops his theory of “televisuality,” or “excessive style,” as a new mode of television production, narration, and programming. He presents televisuality as the outcome of the crisis noted in his title, a crisis caused by increasing pressure on American network television from greatly increased competition: new distribution systems such as cable, satellite, and home video, and other technologies such as the remote control device. Television producers and distributors, however, were fortunate that at the time of the crisis, they were also given access to new technologies of production with which to reinvent (or at least perform cosmetic surgery on) themselves. The Steadicam, lightweight field equipment, digital recording and post-production devices, digital compositing systems and many other machines made possible a stunning range of visual effects and narrational experimentation. Caldwell makes no claim that the “crisis” he cites has ended. Nor does he argue for shifts in the goals and intentions of U.S. network television – the creation of capital through the sale of audiences to advertisers. The point, however, is that he and others have defined fundamental changes in the U.S., and in my view, world television systems. *Televisuality*, then, presents what I consider one of the best descriptions of what Caldwell and others refer to as “post-network television,” a new industrial and cultural formation. One key aspect of televisuality is that we must acknowledge that practitioners, the makers of television, are often as theoretically informed about the consequences of these new devices as we are. This newer configuration of production, distribution, and reception of television alters most if not all aspects of what we have studied in the past and Caldwell’s assessment of the new situation is mixed.

So, too, is that of Michael Curtin who explores similar themes in a recent article in the *Journal of Communication*, “Feminine Desire in the Age of Satellite Television.”[2] Curtin is less certain than Caldwell regarding the passing of the network era, and prefers the term “neo-network television” to describe current conditions. His definition echoes Caldwell in outlining the problems we face and some of the ways in which we should explore them.

> ... two strategies are now at work in the culture industries. One focuses on mass cultural forms aimed at broad national or global markets that demand low involvement and are relatively apolitical (e.g., Hollywood films or broadcast television)... By comparison, those products targeted at niche audiences actively pursue intensity. They seek out audiences that are more likely to be highly invested in a particular form of cultural expression. These firms do not aim to change niche groups. They aim instead to situate their products within them. Among industry executives, these are referred to as products with “edge.” ...
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> We are therefore witnessing the organization of huge media conglomerates around the so-called synergies that exploit these two movements. This is what I refer to as the neo-network era, an era characterized by the multiple and asynchronous distribution of cultural forms.[3]

Curtin also refers to this situation as characterizing an era of “indeterminacy” within media and culture industries, and suggests that “We need to recognize that gaps, contradictions, and inconsistencies are much more characteristic of this era than what might be suggested by more common representations of highly integrated media juggernauts run by powerful moguls like Rupert Murdoch.”[4] Curtin concludes with the argument that “An understanding of the neo-network era asks us to rethink our assumptions about the homogenizing power of global media conglomerates, pressing us instead to explore this terrain as a site of contest, and a productive space within civil society. Such an approach neither denies corporate power or uncritically celebrates popular culture. Instead it suggests how scholarly criticism might help us identify locations in which to construct alternative images of feminine desire."[5] I would add that these newer material conditions also place communication studies in a similar "era of indeterminacy," and that many topics – feminine desire is only one example – are now open to reconsideration in the age of new media formations. What these analyses also suggest is that we must reconsider not only our individual or cultural attention to television from the standpoint of representations and meanings, but also in more formal, political senses.

And this leads to my second set of cutting edge examples. One of the discussions I have found most interesting in recent years is that surrounding the topic of "Cultural Policy."[6] Most strongly put forward by Tony Bennett and other scholars in Australia, the call for a "turn" to cultural policy studies was narrowly focused at an early moment by a phrase Bennett later modified. I refer to his call for scholar/teachers to assist in the creation of "cultural technicians." However unfortunate the phrase later proved to be, it did indicate a primary concern for researchers: how does our work have applied, immediate significance in public life? Addressing this question required a reconsideration of the history of "cultural studies," a critique of cultural studies's focus on "textual studies," and a strong move into areas such as museum policy, arts funding, and so on, areas somewhat removed from the heavy emphasis on "media" that had informed much work done in the name of cultural studies.

The specific debates flowing around the "cultural policy" topic seem to me to have subsided somewhat, but they are, in my opinion, now more fully applicable than ever before in the realm of mass communication studies. They are necessary because of changes in both the European public service and in the commercial broadcasting systems in the U.S. and other countries. Just as the representations cited by Curtin have become unstable in an era of rapid technological developments, so too have policies and economic foundations. In many ways, for the first time, the two types of system are closer together than ever before, because both now face the fact that "policy" is being made not by governments but by corporations. This has long been the case in the U.S., of course, but new forces and events have made it more evident than ever. To deal with such a situation we must reconsider definitions of policy. If "policy" merely refers to governmental actions, there is little to say other than to chart responses and changes. If, however, policy is defined in terms of how boundaries are set, answers to those questions should be found on a cutting edge.

Little research exists in this area, but one probe should be cited here. Patricia Aufderheide's *Communication Policy and the Public Interest* does not always define terms in new ways.[7] But it is a thorough exploration of the implications of the U.S. Telecommunications Act of 1996. In showing how the Act becomes the site of struggle among competing definitions of "public interest" Auderheide begins a new approach to the analysis of policy in the present economic and technological contexts in the U.S. Moreover, that legislation has both implicit and explicit consequences for global communications industries as well.

A third set of questions pointing toward a cutting edge comes from geographic and cultural regions long taken for granted as entirely beyond the fringe, cultures and societies often framed narrowly as on the "receiving end" of mass communication, developing nations throughout the world. These locations have often been figured as victims of global media systems, ripe for homogenization and subjugation. Scholarship from within those regions, however, challenges such easy notions. I will cite only a few examples here. Again, the examples are not particularly new, but the questions they frame have recently taken on new significance.

Néstor García-Canclini's *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*,[8] was first published in Spanish in 1989, and translated only in 1995. Exemplary of a much larger body of his work in Spanish, this text explores specific situations in Mexico and Latin America. Some of the concepts he presents are developed even more fully in work I would add to his, that of Jesús Martín-Barbero whose concept of *mestizajes* captures my point best. First published in 1993, Martín-Barbero's study cites a time ten years earlier, a time when he and other researchers were entering a new stage of awareness as media researchers. His realization is worth quoting at some length.

> We suddenly became aware that virtually nothing of the way people work out the meaning of their lives, the way they communicate and use the media, could fit into our predetermined schema. Put in another way, the social and political processes of those years – authoritarian regimes in almost all of South America, continuous liberation movements in Central America, enormous migrations of the leaders of politics, the arts and social research fleeing into exile – all tended to undermine the old certainties. For the first time, many people came out of the world of academia and government planning offices and had to confront the cultural reality of these countries: the new combinations and syntheses – the *mestizajes* – that reveal not just the racial mixture that we come from but the interweaving of modernity and the residues of various cultural periods, the mixture of social structures and sentiments. We became aware of the memories and images that blend together the indigenous Indian roots with a campesino culture, the rural with the urban, the folkloric with popular culture, and the popular with the new mass culture.[9]

The point I wish to assert here is that even in the single decade since 1989 newer communication technologies and configurations of those technologies have, to a degree, transformed all our cultures into hybrid cultures, that the mixtures described by Martín-Barbero in 1993, in countries and cultures far from where most of us experience our lives, are those we live among. Other evidence of these alterations and adjustments from other regions can be found in the work of David Morley and Kevin Robbins and of my colleague, John Downing.[10] Focusing on Europe, especially on newer national and regional developments since the collapse of the Soviet Union, these scholars illustrate both the inadequacies and new directions for received media research. And lest the argument be raised that none of this cultural blending and mixing is the case for the U.S., I will assert that 50+ channels of cable television have increasingly led to the exhibition of the huge variations of cultural experience lodged in that geographical expanse, that the "edginess" cited by Curtin has become a defining feature of production design and programming strategy. But that is another paper.

Clearly, what I have tried to describe as the general configurations of media industries and contexts in contemporary settings is related to what some would refer to as postmodernism. I do not like the term and do not wish to enter debates regarding whether or not contemporary mass media cause, reflect, or exemplify a postmodern condition. I do, however, find it interesting that even one of the master theorists of postmodernism finds himself somewhat mired in paradox when facing changes in contemporary culture, changes intensified by contemporary mass media. In a recent article, "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue," Fredric Jameson wrestles with conflicting views on the value of high art and mass culture, on the values of nationalism as a unified concept in light of the great variety of differentiated cultural experience enhanced by transnational mass media.[11] Defenders of "nationalism" he suggests often mount their cause, linking certain types of art and politics, in order to conceive of "a great collective or national political project such as was envisioned on the Left and on the Right during the modernist period."[12] Such positions intend to oppose "the encroachments of the world market, of transnational capitalism along with the great capital-lending power centers of the so called first-world."[13] Then comes a problem for opposition:

> That in the process [of mounting such opposition] it must also oppose the dispersals of a postmodern mass culture then places it in contradiction with those for whom only the activation of a truly grassroots culture of multiplicities and differences can oppose, first the national state itself, and then presumably what lies beyond it in the outside world (even though, paradoxically, it is often elements of that outside and transnational mass culture that are appropriated for such resistances: Hollywood films being sometimes the source of resistance to internal hegemony as well as the form external hegemony ultimately takes.)[14]

Jameson resolves his quandary to some degree with a turn to Hegel and an application of the dialectic. Still, his concluding comment, calling on all of us to make a similar turn, exhibits some of the problems we face in the study of communication. I have included this example primarily because it points to the necessity for defining precise questions in order to map our search for cutting edge scholarship. I believe Jameson indicates an excellent set of questions, even if his answers are, if not predictable, somewhat familiar.

Another essay in the same collection offers a related perspective, but also provides, in my estimation, a more powerful indication of the cutting edge.[15] It is not coincidental that the author, Alberto Moreiras, is a Latin Americanist and that his essay returns again to issues echoing those explored by García-Canclini and Martín-Barbero.

Although he is not primarily a media scholar, much of his commentary on relations among regions, nations, and cultures speaks directly to the situations in which we seek a new compass for our field. The problem, as put by Moreiras, is to find a way to discover the "outside" of the global. For if there is no outside, then pessimism – the drowning of cultural distinction in the homogenized ocean of indifference – is the only conclusion. But Moreiras and the scholars and researchers he follows will not accept such a negative conclusion. Instead, they turn the negative critique back onto the dominant order, they locate, create, and map interstitial or peripheral spaces from which to respond, appropriate, and contest. He refers to these cultural spaces as "folds" within the larger global culture, not outside it exactly, but folded into it as valleys are folded into the heavy terrain of mountains, as arroyos and gullies are folded into the flatness of the prairie, as alleyways are folded into urban grids. "This would be a thinking of historical disjuncture," Moreiras says, "where a dialectical relationship between negation and affirmation may not quite obtain. Globality may not be overcome or arsoned by 'interstitial sparks,' but spaces of coexistence may be implemented, folds within the global system, where an exterior to totality emerges as the site of a possible, concrete freedom..."[16]

I will assume that all of us hope that mediated communication and our studies of it will somehow contribute to fields cultivating sites of possible, concrete freedom. I believe we are now at a moment when opportunities for those sites might be realized, though it is also a moment when more and more of them could be closed off. The works I have cited here offer strong pointers for exploring our fields in new ways but few precise markers guide us. We have no detailed maps of the folded landscapes of our cultures. I believe scholarship and research on the forefront should always be like this. The grand moment is always the one when we cannot quite see over the next hill or around the bend in the road – because we know, in spite of uncertainty, that is where we still must go.

Notes

1. Caldwell, John Thornton. *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995
2. Curtin, Michael. "Feminine Desire in the Age of Satellite Television." *Journal of Communication*, Spring 1999, 55-70.
3. Ibid., p. 60.
4. Ibid., p. 62.
5. Ibid., p. 68.
6. See among others, Bennett, Tony, *Culture : A Reformer's Science*. London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1998. Cunningham, Stuart, *Framing Culture: Criticism And Policy in Australia*. Allen & Unwin, 1992. McGuigan, Jim, *Culture and the Public Sphere*. London; New York. Routledge, 1996. Miller, Toby, *Technologies of Truth: Cultural Citizenship and the Popular Media*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
7. Aufderheide, Patricia, *Communications Policy and the Public Interest*. New York: Guilford Press, 1999.
8. García-Canclini, Nestor. *Hybrid Cultures Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. Trans. By Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. Lopez; foreword by Renato Rosaldo. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.
9. Martín-Barbero, Jesús. Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations. London, Newbury Park, New Delhi: Sage, 1993, pp. 1-2.
10. Morley, David and Kevin Robbins. *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes, and Cultural Boundaries.* London: Routledge, 1995. Downing, John. *Internationalizing Media Theory*. London, Newbury Park, New Delhi: Sage, 1996.
11. In Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, editors, *The Cultures of Globalization*. Durham, North Carolina and London: Duke University Press, 1998.
12. P. 75.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Moreiras, Alberto. "Global Fragments: A Second Latinamericanism." In Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, editors, the Cultures of Globalization. Durham, North Carolina and London: Duke University Press, 1998, 81.102.
16. Ibid., p. 94.