Towards the Really Useful Media Researcher?

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In this article[1] I want to raise some questions about the 'useful' media researcher and about 'useful' media research. Perhaps it is difficult to talk about the 'useful' in respect of academic work without a touch of irony entering in and, indeed, part of what I say will have an ironic edge to it. However, I think that there are some really quite serious questions of 'use' now being asked about media research and I believe it is important that media researchers themselves become more active in raising them and exploring them, partly to be better prepared to defend their current practice and partly to be able to improve on this practice. I am inevitably basing my comments here on my experiences in Britain, but I suggest that they have wider implications.

I first want to point to some issues concerning the 'uses' of academic research in general, because I think that many of us have not properly come to terms with the changing nature of what we can call the 'academic knowledge economy' and the way in which this economy now relates to larger public and corporate knowledge structures. In doing so, I am partly drawing on my recent experience, first of all as a member of the Steering Committee of a research programme of the Economic and Social Research Council in Britain, a programme called 'Media Economy and Media Culture'. I want to do this because I think that the programme had a number of 'use' problems, many of which derived from what Philip Schlesinger[2], has recently described as the 'new utilitarianism', the philosophy of use, of the academic funding councils in Britain and the expectations, obligations and anxieties which flow from this. A second point of personal

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reference is provided by the recent completion of an inquiry into economic news on television, an inquiry that was conducted in co-operation with Swedish colleagues. The book – *The Economy, Media and Public Knowledge* – has been in hardback for a year, but will be published in paperback very soon[3]. Part of that project involved working with journalists and attempting to relate our research agenda to their professional perceptions and interests. We were I think, quite successful, but the exercise also acted as a reminder of just how difficult this kind of dialogue can be.

I also want to refer back briefly to earlier forms of the 'use' tension. Indeed, I want to go back to what I think can properly be called a classic paper on the topic – Paul Lazarsfeld's 1941 paper 'Remarks On Administrative and Critical Communications Research'[4]. I have enjoyed and benefited from re-reading Lazarsfeld's paper recently and, despite the gap in time and in circumstance, I find that it has some relevance to the present situation.

The Uses of Research and the Academic Knowledge Economy

First, then, let us look at some of the more general issues affecting 'use'. We can start by noting that, with few exceptions, the largest user group for academic research is a) academics themselves. The proportion is much greater for philosophy than for engineering but it would be a mistake to think that research in subjects with a directly vocational dimension (medicine, law, town planning, chemistry etc) has more than a modest proportion of its output directly affecting professional practice or even read by practitioners. There are three other, 'external', user groups and modes of use I would like to identify:

b. Commercial users. Application of knowledge within industrial and market settings. Improving Product and Services.

c. Governmental users. Application of knowledge within policy, regulation and public sector development through 'official' systems.

d. 'Public' users. Diverse application of knowledge by individuals and groups for the advancing of personal and group interests (including those oppositional to Government and Corporate policies).

I think the interconnection across these different user groups is very important for media research, and I shall come back to it later. Clearly, we are often going to be in a situation where there is more than one user and where it might make sense to talk about *primary users* and *secondary users* in terms of their degree of use and the extent to which the work has them in mind, perhaps as far back as its initial design and even funding. So we have a scale ranging from a primary user who has funded the research right through to a secondary user who has made partial, selective use of it having encountered it in one mode or other of dissemination following its completion. Very different criteria are likely to be applied in assessing 'use value' across this scale.

I want now to look a bit more closely at the academic production of knowledge and at the academic user group. One of the most notable features of academic life in the last quarter century has been the huge growth in the number of publications in all sectors of inquiry. There has been an intensive drive to specialisation, producing journals whose range is tightly focused on what might have been considered up until a few years ago to be sub-topics in a sub-field. The specialist academic publishing houses, particularly in Britain and America, have produced monographs and edited research collections on an unprecedented scale. This growth has partly reflected a huge expansion in the student population, at undergraduate and postgraduate level. It has reflected the industrialisation of professional academic life and the consequent requirement to publish as a firm performance indicator to which is related personal status and funding. There have undoubtedly been a number of distortions introduced as a result of the nature and scale of this shift. We can perhaps point to four:

1. Duplication/repetition. People in one sub-field replicating without awareness what other people in another sub-field are doing.

2. Undue circumscription. Tightness of focus has got to the point where the old adage 'all trees no wood' has particular force.

3. Low levels of connected development. Fragmentation and low inter-field awareness encourage many 'cul-de-sac' projects, not taken further either in adaptation or critique.

4. Excessive jargonizing. Specialist and sub-specialist vocabularies, together with citation and reference frameworks, have made it difficult to understand some of the work even in what are convergent or cognate sub-fields.

We can see this situation as developing from the fact that the academic knowledge economy is strongly driven by the *needs of suppliers* rather than the *uses of consumers*. There is a demand-led element at work (one which powerfully includes publishers), but even within the academic user group itself the need to research and publish and the need to earn money to research and publish are supply-side factors which can over-determine the pattern of publishing in a given area. Traditionally, we can see this as part of the necessary character of 'free inquiry', an activity always going beyond the confines of pre-existing frameworks, even in terms of the most general expectations, and not knowing itself what its destination is. I would very much want to preserve such an element but I think it has now become troublesomely entangled with the more doggedly career-based, 'professional' factors at work in the academic production of knowledge, those factors which, for instance, Pierre Bourdieu has plotted so well[5].

Media research has, of course, shown a good measure of these 'distortions' itself. Although it has been a recognised field of inquiry for fifty years or so, in the last two decades it has attracted an increasing volume of scholars and has perhaps a more than usually low level of 'field co-ordination' across its various dimensions. That is to say it has high levels of fragmentation and 'fissuring', although it can be argued that this is a sign of its essential pluralistic health rather than anything bad. That said however, it is clear that in Britain that there have been problems with the public image of such a loose aggregation of work, spread across

very different intellectual traditions, aims and methods, as this is perceived within the terms of the new rationalisation of academic activity.

This returns us to the more general shift. For, at the same time as these internal dynamics have been working their way through academic life, the British academic knowledge economy has been made subject to much greater accountability. Most obviously, this is the form of public audit and selective funding. The absolute freedom of academics to do what they like by way of knowledge production under the heading of 'research' is now being severely constrained, first by Funding Councils acting partly under Government guidelines, and then, secondly, by universities themselves as they seek, within the tighter parameters, to optimise internal revenue and achieve corporate sponsorship and official goodwill.

In many countries, this has to be seen as a broader shift in the positioning of the academic culture within public culture. And it is part of an even broader repositioning of public culture within liberal-democratic capitalism. This phase in the 'modernising' of academic life has been clear in many countries for several decades and it is worth noting that even the term 'research' as the generic category for academic non-teaching activity is a relatively recent one, with what I think are quite reductive and sometimes treacherously pretentious implications. 'Research', whatever excellent work goes on under the heading, is now a key imperative of the bureaucratised and self-consciously corporate academy and the equally self-conscious and anxious academic within it. It is also a principal term for the regulation of academic productivity, though it is still a term which often generates suspicion among the governing and administrative class ('research' as pretext for wasting money) and frequently a degree of derision among journalists and the general public ('research' as, variously, the pursuit of the obscure and the wildly esoteric and sometimes (in social sciences) the blindingly obvious; a kind of mad, academic hobby).

How is media research positioned in relation to these broader changes and tensions?

The Profile of Media Research

Media Research is primarily defined by its designated relationship to a particular field of real world activity. There *are* the media and there *is* media research – so at one level the relationship appears to be simple and a good deal more direct than, say, the real world links of Philosophy or even Psychology and Sociology, with their strong 'internal' identities as longstanding bodies of thought and debate. Constituted as it is as a second-level interdisciplinary construct, Media Research has no deep intellectual hinterland of its own to concern itself with, as a legitimate alternative to addressing real-world concerns. Having said this, it is clear that some parts of media and cultural studies have often faced resolutely inwards rather than outwards, so to speak, both in respect not only of real world concerns (and I acknowledge some question-begging in the use of this term) but also of other academic developments. This tendency has contributed to the formation, in parts of the field, of a dense and rather dangerously self-contained discourse of inquiry, cut off from sustaining connection with other areas of Arts and Social Science scholarship.

It is not surprising then, with these factors in mind, and with the sheer controversiality of most media processes easily admitted, that the two broad, pragmatic orientations which much media research has adopted have been a) inquiries which are designed with the primary aim of helping the media to do better b) inquiries which are designed to reveal just how much criticism they deserve for doing badly. Some researchers have believed themselves to be doing both, but if we allow that a) above can only finally be judged with assistance from those inside the media, then I think that there has been a certain amount of self-delusion on this point. Both aims of course, allow for different mixtures of theoretical and empirical study, although a tendency to see the first as empirically-oriented and the second as theoretically-orientated persists since the 1940s and has a certain degree of justification.

Of course, you do not have to be a linguistic philosopher to note that 'doing better' or indeed 'doing badly' are going to be fiercely contested assessments, hiding a wide range of possible assumptions and criteria. If I can come to my own recent experience of the British E.S.R.C. programme, some of the anxieties that academics had in bidding for funding were to do with judging what kind of approach and what kinds of procedures of inquiry might be seen to be making a contribution to national 'improvement'. Underneath this, it has been widely perceived, and I think with some justice, that a main thrust of the E.S.R.C. programme was to shift the agenda of British media research a little more in the direction of 'helping' and a little further away from 'criticising'. 'Criticising', unless accompanied by large measures of 'the constructive' is not regarded a publicly-fundable goal of

academic inquiry and we should not be surprised that this is so. I think it also worth noting how much economic development of the media figured as an aim of the programme – an improvement in the performance of British media within international markets as well as an improvement in domestic levels of efficiency and 'quality'. In the recent polemical commentary by Philip Schlesinger referred to above, this narrowing of the criteria for nationally-supported work was placed by him in the context of the wider 'audit culture'. At the same time, in a paradox which deserves further pondering, he also noted the relatively poor levels of take-up and use achieved by that work which was, from the outset, strongly use-orientated (e.g. work on policy and regulation).

One criticism of some of the points made above about 'helping and criticising' might be that a good researcher is primarily concerned with collecting data and exploring patterns and linkages and is not overly concerned with questions of orientation or judgement in later use. But we are all now well aware of the way in which particular academic frameworks of inquiry, questions of conceptualisation and research design, even in the most scrupulous of studies, inevitably cut a certain, selective route through the material, with latent implications thereby entailed, variously realized (and variously acknowledged) as factors in the findings. This is far from repeating that silly, relativistic slogan about 'only finding out what you want to find out' but it is much harder now, quite rightly, to claim a completely disinterested position as a researcher, and the various mediators and users of academic knowledge know this well.

In our dealings with economic journalists during the study I mentioned earlier, a frequent point of difficulty was the suspicion that we were trying to help them improve (in which case we were insufferably arrogant) or we were trying to criticise them (in which case we were an hostile force, quite possibly in thrall to weird political views, and to be given minimal information). Often, it seems to me that the obligations frequently placed on researchers to 'help' media practice are not at all reflected in any wish for that 'help' on the part of the practitioners themselves. Too often, the warm encouragement to 'dialogue' and to 'co-operation', radically underestimate the real difficulty of achieving even a rough matching of agendas, never mind about a 'common' one. Such encouragement often appear to be wilfully naive about the institutional conditions of knowledge in modern societies. I would not want to put 'structure' completely over 'agency' –

but the *reverse* error is frequently made, whether through naivety or strategic design.

The Lazarsfeld Connection

Let me turn now to Lazarsfeld, back there in 1941. Lazarsfeld had come to the United States in the early 1930s from Vienna, where he had been influential in pioneering methods of social inquiry. After a few years as a research fellow in applied social studies, he was appointed Head of the Princeton and then what became the Columbia Radio Research Project, based at Newark University. This undertook inquiry into the place of radio in people's lives and produced a series of landmark studies in our field.[6]

Lazarsfeld was an academic very much exercised by the idea of the 'use' of research and also, like many researchers today, by the link between use and funding. Lazarsfeld's disagreements with his emigre colleague Theodor Adorno about the scope and purpose of media research have become a key datum point in the orientation of subsequent media research in America and they clearly inform his earliest writings on the 'critical' and 'administrative' divide, where the latter term indicates a close relationship between research goals and various kinds of media development in policy and practice. During a 1939 dispute between Lazarsfeld and Adorno concerning the orientation of the radio Music Project, Lazarsfeld noted that the Finance Controller for the Project was likely to be of the opinion that 'the real issue is the utility of the study, and that utility must be measured by the effects which can be anticipated for it in remedying the present deficiencies of broadcast music'. It is not hard to imagine just how unenthusiastic Adorno was about the idea of remedying 'deficiencies' at this level![7].

We should note, however, that in his 1941 paper, Lazarsfeld is arguing for the important expansion of purposes and viewpoint which the European 'critical' tradition can bring to a U.S. 'administrative' strand which always runs the risk of being too narrow, partly as a result of its clientistic relationship with industry. Lazarsfeld identifies one common criticism of the 'administrative' strand:

> (It is) an objection directed against the aims which prevail in the majority of current studies. They solve little problems, generally of a business character, when the same methods could be used to improve the life of the community if only they were applied to forward-looking projects

related to the pressing economic and social problems of the time. (p. 8)

Further, he remarks on a broader point of criticism, about the lack of reflexivity in much administrative research. He observes that:

one cannot pursue a single purpose and study the means of its realization isolated from the total historical situation in which such planning and studying goes on. Modern media of communication have become such complex instruments that wherever they are used they do much more to people than those who administer them mean them to do, and they may have a momentum of their own which leaves the administrative agencies much less choice than they believe they have. (p. 9)

It is 'critical' approaches which will bring the broader purpose and the greater reflexivity to the academic study of media impact.

Lazarsfeld's comments are partly strategic, of course. His article is an attempt to get some sense of convergence from positions that have, in practice, developed a strong polarity and hostility. In using the term 'critical' he is thinking primarily of the theoretical perspectives outlined influentially by Max Horkheimer, among others and identified with the Frankfurt School. 'Critical theory' was, here, engaged in the wholesale condemnation of the conditions of contemporary capitalist culture and it was views of this kind which Adorno brought to his cooperation in the radio project. The 1941 paper can be read in part as an attempt at a kind of pact with a troublesome colleague, the mooting of a common new starting point. Part of its strategy is in the way in which it *endorses* by positive description a reasonable, tolerant version of the 'critical' approach. This, rather than attacking the 'unhelpful' versions also in circulation. Lazarsfeld remains self-identified as an 'administrative' scholar, but I find that his sense of the real problems issuing from the impact of media communication upon contemporary U.S. culture convincingly authentic, not just a sop to Adorno. In his paper, he identifies the features of the new 'promotional culture' which has been the focus of concern for many 'critical' researchers, in its erosion of self-determination and basic social values. He notes how ideas of cultural improvement have badly lagged behind ideas of economic and social improvement. He reflects on the internal unease that this can sometimes create in research based on narrowly-framed inquiry:

There will hardly be a student in empirical research who does not sometimes feel a certain regret or impatience about the vast distance between problems of sampling and probable errors on the one hand, and the significant social problems of our times on the other. (p. 14)

Much of the latter part of his paper is given over to outlining the kind of analytic projects – on music, on popular biography, on radio daytime serials, which would combine the two approaches. In their broadly ethnographic interest as well as their focus, they connect with current forms of current media and cultural studies in a way which has the force to surprise us across the 60 year gap.

The particular form of Lazarsfeld's anxieties about how best to be useful, both to an industry which provides funding and a public life to whose improvement a general intellectual obligation is owed, are not just historically distanced from us, they are also distinctly a product of the American context for media research. This context includes a broadcasting system which did not have a significant public service commitment. In the European context, the framing of media policy within more general terms of public responsibility and public debate has tended to give more space to, and be less directly suspicious of, the contributions of the intellectual classes, including those from the academy. It could also be said that the intellectual traditions from which media research has developed in Europe did not suffer from the degree of polarisation produced by the kinds of emphasis given to empirical and functionalist work within US social science, and the particular and sensitive location of the 'critical' (particularly the Marxian) within the broader map of academic inquiry. The effects of this polarisation continue today and can be seen at work behind some aspects of the huge growth of U.S. Cultural Studies and the new forms of tension and polemics which it has produced.

However, it might be argued that for many of us the *objective* situation, at least, is growing a little more like that of the United States, not less like it, as the corporate hold on media systems intensifies and the very idea of the 'public' gets harder to mobilise and even to define. Certainly, although we may find Lazarsfeld's position quite historically specific and may judge that his inherited binary terminology is no longer useful, I hope you will agree with me that reflecting on his commentary has orienting value as well as intellectual interest.

Return to the Present

I remarked above that in many research contexts, there is a new philosophy of use at work, apparent in the workings of funding and accountability systems. This is part of the larger public audit of academic practice, which will undoubtedly have the effect of provoking many scholars and research units into a deeper cost/benefit analysis of their activity. Intellectual freedoms will not be directly constrained, there will be no explicit censorship, *but the terms of subsidy* will be changed.

In saying that media research may find it needs to be more useful by necessity, I am not I hope overlooking the fact that a great deal of work in our field has *wanted* to be 'useful', either out of a genuine desire or a learnt obligation (I shall not attempt further to differentiate the two here!). It has sometimes wanted to be directly useful in the engagement with specific problems of media process. Perhaps more often it has worked with the idea of being indirectly useful by raising the quality of advanced critical debate about how the media function. However, I have complicated the terms of this ambition by suggesting earlier that much inquiry has lost all real sense of public purpose and has to be seen primarily in terms of the academic career goals it fulfils and the corporate good which its funding brings to higher education establishments.

We must note here that even work with a direct use-orientation has often not wanted to prescribe too tightly the terms of its usefulness until the completion of inquiries. It has been interested in what we might call 'take up' usage by different user groups and it has been interested, too, in giving itself space for exploration to the side of its initial main agenda. Such an approach has to be distinguished from the kind of work in which very specific kinds of use are built-in to the research design, often as part of a contractual relationship, and in which any deviation can be seen as 'excess' or 'waste'. It was this kind of work which caused such difficulty between Lazarsfeld and Adorno, of course, in terms of what could be placed on the agenda and what could not, and of what could be said about data and what could not, yet some very fine work has been done even under these constricting conditions.

I would also want to draw a distinction which has been latent in some of my earlier comments. That is the distinction between *the use of ideas* and *the use of data*. Drawing too firm a divide here is unwise, of course, but a separation of some kind always gets made. It might be said, at the cost of simplification, that while within media research, the academic user group ('the research community') has often shown an interest in an excess of ideas and methodological development over data, most non-academic users have by contrast been prone to privilege an excess of data over ideas. Perhaps one example of this would be the long-running debate about media violence, which is importantly mediated to the public through journalistic reporting and commentary. In Britain, certainly, the obsession with reporting the conflicting 'findings' on this issue seems oddly to contrast with the inability even to begin to explore the real complexity of some of the terms, concepts and assumptions which lie behind the collection and use of statistics.

Let me review the position on 'use' then. I have suggested that the new climate of utility poses a threat to the intellectual health of media research. Academic work is generally defined by a scope and a flexibility in its processes of intellection and application. If these qualities are reduced beyond a certain point, the imaginative element, the creative element, the fertility of mind-in-inquiry, starts to disappear. Even the most focused and tightly framed piece of academic study needs to feel some space 'at the sides' as it were, for uncertainty and for response to the unexpected. There is a sense of adventure about many research projects and it is very important to preserve this. We must remember that, in all but a few cases, academic studies will and *should* go well beyond that which is instrumental for non-academic purposes, even if they do find primary users outside of the academy. But I am also suggesting that we cannot simply be content to defend all existing practice by reference to the rights of the academy to autonomy in its knowledge-seeking activities. We cannot be content in this way because in some current academic practice, 'use' of any kind, even in terms of value to students or to other academics, seems to have been displaced by imperatives of production. There is a certain pathology about the present condition of the academic knowledge economy, an element of alienated industrialization, of people writing without any clear sense of readers, of knowledge without defining purpose, not even the fulfilling of a genuine investigative desire. This combines with the rise of the new 'utility' to present us with a double threat to the integrity of our practices – from without but also from within. Both those who wish to conduct work within their own defined, coherent and practical terms of the useful and those who wish to research almost entirely within the terms of an academic free inquiry 'beyond use', perhaps need to

put more effort into getting clarity of orientation within this troubled setting.

I believe that there are two areas where further developments might have the effect of making media research more resilient, by way of being selectively responsive yet also selectively defensive, within the new contexts. First of all, and without any sense of originality, I would want to see more effort being put into getting aspects of media research work across to the general public and to diverse groups within it. In Britain, this is not handled very well. It is often mismanaged at the level of contact with press and broadcast journalists (when a research report becomes a story or when journalists seek advice from 'experts') and it is not given much attention at all at the level of directly writing for the public, either in general publications or through booklets and newsletters etc., or in staging events for the demonstration and discussion of media issues under inquiry. Of course, it is very easy to overestimate the interest that much of the general public will have in, say, inquiry into regional news programmes, on the reception of docusoaps, on the history of television, on alternatives to the license fee, on new forms of music television and on shopping channels. But I believe that a mixture of traditional academic complacency, unduly narrow criteria for career advancement and a simple fear of vulnerability once beyond the agreed 'language games' of academic sub-specialisation, has led to many real opportunities being missed.

Secondly, I do think that the development of a stronger European and then international network for media research will bring the benefits not only of a broader intellectual community (as seen, for example, in many other subject fields) but of those various comparative opportunities which do so much to illuminate both what is specific to certain situations and what is more general and requires, perhaps, broader terms of explanation.

It needs to be recognised that not all media research will have the same kind of relationship or potential relationship with 'use', whether this is by official agencies, corporate bodies or different sec-

tions of the public. Policy studies and audience studies (particularly those concerning 'influence and effect') have traditionally been seen to have the strongest readership among state and corporate bodies, though even here the effective reach is often only to the more peripheral advisory units. However, academic studies into globalised production and the international media economy are now starting to circulate more widely within the industry, if again selectively. Studies of producer cultures (e.g. newsrooms, drama teams) are still treated with suspicion within the industry and are not generally seen to have a strong public use, while studies of output – unless they bear directly on questions of impact – have generally been ignored because of the density of their analytic framing and the perceived insignificance of this kind of 'criticism' to the world of practice. As I suggested earlier, there is no reason to think that there will be any significant change to this pattern. Media research groups may be able to reposition themselves strategically in relation to new knowledge requirements, flows and anxieties (and the way in which questions of 'new media' figure in development will undoubtedly be crucial here) but I expect that opportunities will be competitive and marginal.

All the issues I have touched on concerning 'use' deserve further debate. In particular, questions about the intellectual identity or multiple identities of media research and the modes of its institutionalisation and its internal attribution of status and worth in different national settings are raised. A firmer, more practical sense of the development of public debate and public resources; a more developed sense of international community, the refusal of the tendency towards self-absorption and a lively connection with the best work in other areas of humanities and social science – all these need to be encouraged. By asking some harder questions about 'use' ourselves, and debating our own answers, we should at least be better able to position our inquiries in the changing spaces – academic, public and corporate – within which we will have to design, fund, produce and publicise them.

Notes

1. This was originally written as the script of a keynote address at a conference of the Swedish Association for Media and Communication Research, held at Halmstad in April 2000. I am grateful to the organisers for their invitation. The version printed here is lightly revised, but preserves the style of a spoken address.
2. Philip Schlesinger 'Media Research and the Audit Culture' in Philo, G. and Miller, D. (eds.) *Market Killing*. London: Longman, 2000. (This collection contains a number of essays raising questions about the

aims and defining contexts of current work in the social sciences).

3. N. Gavin (ed.) *The Economy, Media and Public Knowledge*. (Paperback edition). London: Leicester University Press, 2000.

4. Paul Lazarsfeld, 'Remarks on Administrative and Critical Communications Research', *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* Vol 9. 1941, 2-16.

5. Most comprehensively in Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, (English translation), Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988.

6. A very fine account of Lazarsfeld's intellectual career, with illuminating commentary on this early period, is to be found in David Morrison's *The Search for a Method*, Luton: Luton University Press, 1998.

7. Correspondence on this issue is cited on pages 112-113 of Morrison's *The Search for a Method* (see note 6).