

Extended abstract:

Out of the imagined centre

Notes on media and the role of media research

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In 2017, the option for media research acting as an ‘outsider’ seems to be outdated. Media has become a saturating factor in social and political life. This ‘central’ role puts pressure on media research. How does this challenge scholars of media and communication? It is possible to tackle this question by selecting three familiar notions found in thinking about the media: seeing the media as representation, as infrastructure or as effects.

1) Media as representation

Many of today’s media scholars grew up learning that important questions about media were about representation. Following the linguistic turn, we saw, correctly, media as an institution constructing shared realities. We learned how active audiences resisted and negotiated media’s claims, and we came to appreciate this pluralism as a critique of power. Media meant a contested site of representing reality for a diversifying set of social groups, identities and their interests. At the same time, an intensive popular debate made ‘the media’ an increasingly intensive bone of contention in social and political life. Today we can see that as universal claims about ‘reality’ were relaxed, the societal necessity of claims about how things really are surfaced with new zeal.

A small illustration of this representational dilemma comes from Finland. On 18 August 2017, an act of terrorism took place in the city of Turku. Several people were killed in a knife attack in the local market place. On the day of the murders, a photo in a news summary in the leading newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*¹ showed Finnish police fencing off the scene for forensic investigation. When the caption described this as the ‘scene of the accident’, the story’s online comment stream had an instant reaction. Some commenters saw this choice of words as an attempt to downplay the role of Islamic fundamentalism (terrorism as an ‘accident’) and by implication as proof of whitewashing by the elite and the media. Of course, it is possible to deny such claims as nonsense and say that this was a slip (and now corrected), but the anti-pluralist’ populist reactionary critique will not stop there. From a radically pluralist argument s/he will say: Yes, a slip, but a telling one, one that reveals the (at best unconscious and naïve) liberal conspiracy. Having entered a conjuncture where representations are exhaustively reduced to power, where is it possible to anchor a critique? How much is this theoretical collateral damage of scholars’ own making?

2) Media as infrastructure

After the breakthroughs of first the internet and then social media, the notion of media as technology has become appropriately central. Looking at the interactive, quickened, all-storing and seemingly fragmented media infrastructure helps scholars to capture something beyond or beneath representations: the importance of the power to control public attention. In a society no longer dominated by mass media institutions, this power has become a key political resource, but a volatile one. Political mandates are short lived and rely on attention grabbing narratives that create loyalty and followers.

August 2017 also provides a telling example of this systemic dilemma. A group of United States climate researchers chose to leak their draft of a major recent report (part of the National Climate Assessment).² Leaks, as such, are a characteristic feature of the contemporary global challenge-opportunity menu of political action. However, the leakers' defence is the point here: they feared the Trump administration would not publish (all their) critical conclusions. This can be seen as a serious symptom: political mandates (here: populist, anti-climate) and knowledge of reality (here: complex but serious predictions of risk) have lost some of their capability to communicate and craft policy. The expert-politician axis, one cornerstone of 20th century representational democracy, is in need of rethinking, as societies face increasingly complex problems. Can media scholars facilitate relationships where the relevant evidence and intelligence about social reality could actually speak to political power? Should they?

3) Media as effects

'Networks' and 'connections' have taken the limelight in media theories. But perhaps the question of media effects is making a stealthy return. True enough, in today's world, people and their choices *are* the network, and their actions structure the channel of mediating of media effects from a 'sender' to a 'receiver'. But instead of seeing this merely as another enhanced upgrade of 'people power', media scholars could also argue for new urgency in studying media through its effects. Participants' choices (on which the network seemingly depends) are not individual but collective. They are not private but instead tracked, analysed and commodified. Targeted messaging has become politically effective and commercially lucrative at a qualitatively new level. The consequent virtual distortion chambers and the politicized media landscapes begin to catalyse each other.

An example of this propaganda dilemma comes from political advertising in social networking sites. In May 2017, observers learned³ that Facebook had recruited former UK political campaign strategists, in order to serve better their (political) advertisers' needs. This micro-targeting seems to have been part of a winning strategy in some key elections of 2016. In fact, serving up fake claims to feed the idiosyncratic concerns of specific voter groups in closed Facebook groups perhaps gave a new meaning to 'native advertising'. In September 2017, Mark Zuckerberg finally had to address this by promising not the end of such advertising but at least more 'transparency' in it.⁴ Several questions remain, however. How is public opinion mediated or political mandate-created? Who has the resources (the data) to build or make use of effective echo chambers? How will the public be able to defend itself in this communications arms race?

Conclusions

These are all examples. The object of concern is the condition the world is in. But even as such this selective inventory points to three things. First, questions about ‘media’ are intensified in times of rapid changes, and media scholars’ agenda becomes ‘central’ as media generates dilemmas in many fields of social life. Second, earlier scholarship offers relevant resources that articulate questions to be engaged. Third, the ‘centrality’ of media research is a fake notion, as problems of democratic communication are always articulated with some ‘carrier items.’

Free speech is never only about free speech: religious freedom and child pornography should be treated differently. News reports about mass surveillance are not just something scandalous but a moral outrage touching the constitutive elements of democratic political imagination. The meaning of Twitter is not just about the grammar and logic of the platform but about uses of these affordances when they intersect with key challenges of politics: racism, inequality, the environment and so on.

There is no media-centric solution to the complex problems that now shape democracy. The responsibility of media scholars has to start from an engagement with other disciplines and other social actors. That is an inspiring horizon: a path that leads us out of an imagined centre but not to a position of an outsider.

Notes

1. “Turun puukotuksia tutkitaan myös terrorismina” [“Stabbing in Turku Is Investigated Also As an Act of Terrorism”]. *Helsingin Sanomat*, 18 August 2017. <https://www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000005331576.html>. When retrieved two days later, the wording of the caption had been corrected to ‘scene of the event’. The story indicates that the last updates took place at 10:58 on Saturday, whereas the comment stream critique took place the earlier evening. The paper, then, corrected the slip quickly.
2. “Scientists Fear Trump Will Dismiss Blunt Climate Report,” *New York Times*, August, 2017.
3. E.g., “Facebook Employs Ex-political Aides to Help Campaigns Target Voters,” *The Guardian*, May 8, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/08/facebook-political-aides-campaigns-target-voters>. See also “Revealed: Tory ‘Dark’ Ads Targeted Voters’ Facebook Feeds in Welsh Marginal Seat,” *The Observer*, May 27, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/27/conservatives-facebook-dark-ads-data-protection-election>.
4. The full remarks can be read at: <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/1010405290725317>.