Media Studies 2.0: upgrading and open-sourcing the discipline

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Abstract
This paper argues that media studies needs to be upgraded to reflect contemporary changes in digital media. It argues that media studies was a product and reflection of the broadcast-era of media, being formed in and analysing a specific historical period of media production, distribution and consumption. The rise of digital media, the transformation of ‘old’ media into a digital form and ongoing developments in digital technology take us into a post-broadcast era, defined by new alignments of productive and distributive power and media consumption and use. This requires an upgraded Media Studies 2.0, marked by the revision and updating of existing disciplinary knowledge; the foregrounding of contemporary changes and the development of new categories and concepts to understand these, and the open-sourcing of the discipline itself – laying open its foundation, assumptions and biases to enable its public to continually rewrite and improve its knowledge, to ensure its continued relevance in a rapidly changing era.

‘We march backwards into the future …’


Responding to his critics, in his 1968 Playboy interview, McLuhan acerbically commented, ‘for all their lamentations, the revolution has already taken place’ (McLuhan and Zingrone 1995: 266). Whether his critics ever grasped that is a moot point but everyone in media studies today faces an equivalent challenge: something is happening and the only important question is do you know what it is?

I began to notice it when reflecting upon my son’s world. The only difference between the media world I grew up within and my parents’ childhood was a few more radio stations and two more TV channels. Wealthier classmates had colour TV and soon after video-recorders too, but we had to wait for prices to drop before either entered our home. This was a world of separate and limited forms: the family telephone, that you didn’t even own, was screwed to the wall and couldn’t take photographs; you couldn’t get radio on your television; films didn’t have special features and no one tried to hack into your television to steal your money or identity.

My son, born in 2000, is part of a different world. He has grown up within a fluid, connected, always-on, digital ecology of hybrid intercommunicating forms, messages, content and activities – personalised and individually and immediately available: controllable and manipulable at
will and feeding-into, promoting or giving rise to personal production, content and meaning-creation. He is a child of the digital ‘post-broadcast’ era and his media world and experiences are radically different from my own at his age. He may still be watching Star Wars and Doctor Who, but a chasm separates our childhoods.

My son’s world is also my students’ world. I realized this a few years ago when a student came to see me about their essay and handed me a USB stick – the first I’d seen. I held it up to the light and joked about a weak introduction and poor referencing but in truth I had no idea what to do with it. It brought home the absurdity of being a media studies lecturer when your students know more about media than you do. We know the discipline, the texts, ideas and arguments but many of our students surpass us in their knowledge, use and navigation of the contemporary media world: they’re at home in it; we’re always playing catch-up. We used to be able to follow that media world: very little happened in film, TV, radio or print that we didn’t know about or couldn’t comprehend. Now most lecturers rely on their students, children or newspapers to keep them informed of the latest developments. Whilst traditionally lecturers have bemoaned the cultural and historical ignorance of their students, our ignorance of their world is just as important. There are entire worlds of media, information and activities out there that we’re struggling to keep up with.

At the heart of the changes lie digital media and their contemporary impact. Recent decades have seen the development of ever-cheaper and more powerful computer processing, its insertion into and control of a range of technologies and the popular dissemination of these forms. The resulting movement of most forms of content into the digital form, the emergence of entirely new media forms and possibilities, and the interconnectivity and intercommunication of devices have left few media unaffected. Today almost every ‘old’ broadcast-era medium has been transformed in their production, distribution, reception or use by digital technology, as have all existing technological, institutional, political and economic media structures.

Add to this the pace of change. Broadcast-era media evolved separately and slowly, with technological improvements having either a limited or a gradual impact upon the consumer. Today, rapid commercial technological invention and innovation, combined with the interconnected nature of contemporary technologies, means that developments impact upon a range of forms, constantly remaking their relationships. Inter-linked digital media forms, competing for space, attention and market-share (and regularly releasing new upgrades with new applications and capacities) impact upon everyday life and media use, constituting, in the critical mass of their popular success, an ongoing revolution that continually remakes the media ecology. Changes now become visible on a daily basis, and we can follow entire forms and industries shift and transform as they struggle to remain relevant or succeed in the digital world.

But this isn’t simply a technology-driven transformation, it is also driven by ourselves, as new generations embrace these technologies and discover and create new uses for them. What is fundamental is the way in which these users are reconfiguring their own social relations and expectations and producing entirely new modes of experience and knowledge.
This is where the gap lies: this is the world we no longer share with our students.

I first tried to think about these issues in November 2006. I began posting a blog, mostly comprised of links to news stories about digital media as a resource for my own lectures and for my students. Following the terminology of software upgrades I called it ‘Media Studies 2.0’ and used the first post to argue that media studies itself needed upgrading (Merrin, 2006):1 ongoing changes in digital media needed to be placed at the core of the discipline; backward-looking perspectives needed to be left behind; and the historical basis of the discipline needed to be opened up to critical scrutiny. For those claims to have any validity what was needed was a clear, defensible analysis of what ‘Media Studies 1.0’ was and its limitations; a description of the changes that were forcing a rethink of the discipline, and a statement of what an upgraded media studies should be and the challenges it faces.2

Media Studies 1.0
Defining Media Studies 1.0 is exceptionally difficult. There is no written history of media studies and the interpretations and experiences of its members vary considerably. Although we can trace the broad movements, perspectives and authors who have been popular at any time, this doesn’t necessarily tell us much about the discipline. What media studies is has as much to do with its origins, its development in particular institutions, the people who taught in those institutions and their ideas about what they were doing. It involves considering what they thought was media, how they analysed it, what texts were considered canonical, where they drew the limits of the subject and how they positioned themselves in relation to other disciplines and departments: in short how they created the discipline. It involves the struggle to establish the study of ‘media’, the different origins of each of its parts (print, journalism studies, film studies, television studies etc.), the personalities who drove it, its route through the academy, the economic and political history of Higher Education and the internal conflicts it experienced between theory and practice, and between different theoretical approaches and methods. It also involves the history and experience of all of us who have come to the subject in the last decade – a period of remarkable expansion which has seen a proliferation of departments and degrees and a huge increase in student numbers. This has brought in a huge number of new lecturers, many of whom have no media background, coming from sociology, cultural studies, English and the languages. Each of these lecturers has their own understanding of the discipline and different personal and institutional experiences of teaching it. Add to this each lecturer’s specialised research, the essentially interdisciplinary nature of the subject and the vast literature that it potentially encompasses and we could legitimately ask if it’s possible to know, with any certainty, what media studies is and what it means to its members today.

So how can we identify a Media Studies 1.0? Some attempt to sketch the field is necessary but using too broad a brush risks oversimplifying the subject and the diversity of work within it. The simplest way to negotiate this problem is to approach the subject historically.

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1. Soon after this David Gauntlett developed the same phrase in his own article, ‘Media Studies 2.0’ (Gauntlett 2007). He was kind enough to reference my blog and contact me and we set up a forum to discuss the issues raised by the idea (Gauntlett and Merrin 2007).
2. After several smaller blog and forum postings discussing my ideas, in January 2008 I posted a full-length essay discussing my view on Media Studies 2.0 which is the basis for this paper (Merrin 2008).
Media studies is an academic discipline that first emerged in the early–mid twentieth century, at the same time as the rise of what Dan Gillmor calls 'big media' (Gillmor 2006). There is obviously a considerable and important historical literature discussing media prior to this time (especially language, speech, interpersonal communication, images and written and printed forms) but this played little or no role in the formation of the discipline and has rarely been included since. The textbooks indicate that media studies traces its lineage back through the early twentieth century sociology of Cooley; Dewey’s philosophy of communication; Lasswell’s post-World War I propaganda analysis; Lippmann’s discussion of public opinion; the work of Park and the Chicago School; Lazarsfeld and the empirical, behaviourist school of communications research of the 1930s–1940s; and the information and communication theory of the war years that emerged from the work of Weiner, Shannon and others (see Czitrom 1982; Hardt 1992; Mattelart and Mattelart 1998 and Williams 2003).

In short, media studies was an academic product of the broadcasting era. It developed out of a concern with mass society, mass communication, mass-persuasion and the formation and control of public opinion. It emerged in an era in which newspapers became major commercial enterprises, central to political and public culture; in which cinema was consolidating its position as a major commercial entertainment mass-producing its products for public distribution; in which radio swept America and Europe; in which the music industry mass-produced records for the masses and in which early experiments with television were beginning to yield results that would produce the dominant broadcast medium of the second half of the century (see Briggs and Burke 2005; Gorman and McLean 2003; Williams 1998, for an overview of the historical development of broadcast media).

Media studies 1.0, therefore, was a historical product: a historical response to and reflection of one historical model of media. The ‘broadcast model’ was later extended back to include earlier print media, with the era of mass media and mass communication coming to be defined as the Post-Gutenbergian era and this definition handily set the limits and concerns of the discipline. Media studies would study post-Gutenbergian mass communication, focusing on a small number of media forms – the printed book, newspapers, cinema, radio and television – employing twentieth century approaches and methods. Although the discipline has undoubtedly developed through the twentieth century, it has retained this central broadcast focus. Its different emphases, chosen at different times, represent only the varying fortunes of its constituent elements (empirical communications research, sociology, Marxism, Screen theory, Feminism, Culturalism) as they have been applied to mass communication.

In practice, of course, media studies has always been more open and interdisciplinary, with lecturers using texts and sources from a range of disciplines as they’ve constructed their modules. What is important, however, is that lecturers have had to go outside media studies texts to do this as the disciplinary texts retained a mainstream, broadcast core. This conservative core has been reinforced by the late twentieth century explosion in textbook publishing – serving the growth in student numbers and proliferation of courses – and by the disciplinary, methodological dominance
of a limited audience studies focused on the consumption of popular film and television.

This core can be easily identified in the textbooks we produce as the public-face and point-of-entry to the discipline. These employ a remarkably similar classificatory scheme with a near-standardised list of topics (audiences, institutions, representation, effects, semiotics, advertising etc.), an emphasis upon a small number of broadcast forms and their history (print, radio, cinema, television) and a near-identical selection of acceptable ideas, perspectives, debates and content to interpret these forms. Whilst this disciplinary classification once appeared natural, retrospectively it can now be seen as a product of its era, reflecting back the values and organization of the broadcast model.

If Media studies 1.0 studied broadcast media this doesn’t mean that it did so successfully: for once it is the Emperor’s old clothes that offered less coverage than we thought. As an arts and humanities-based subject, media studies ignored media transmission and distribution, showing little interest in the engineering or scientific principles of its media and displaying overt hostility to the question of technology. Media production fared worse. The strong sociological analysis of media economics, industries and power in the discipline serves to cover up the fact that there have been very few detailed studies of media production. Media industries have shown little appetite for allowing media lecturers to follow their day-to-day production processes, and the discipline’s separation from this sphere has been compounded by the fact that few staff teaching the theoretical discipline have any practical knowledge or experience of the industry.

This goes a long way towards explaining what media studies became. Disinterested in technical issues and unable to study production, film and media studies focused instead almost exclusively upon what was left to it: content and reception. As analyses of content and its meaning, and investigations of audience activity took off, ‘say what you see’ and ‘ask the audience’ became more than television catch-phrases: they became the dominant working methodology of the discipline. Even then it was a method geared towards the present: problems of recording or collecting film, TV, radio and newspapers or getting access to archives have limited what was studied (problems, ironically, that digital media and archives now help to solve).

Although mainstream media studies has not ignored digital media it has, however, largely treated it as a topic that can still be understood through its broadcast-era concepts and categories: as an addition to the broadcast media ecology rather than as a fundamental transformation of its systems of media production, distribution, consumption and use. Digital media is too often included as a last chapter of textbooks: a location simulating contemporary relevance whilst ignoring the impact of digital technologies and use upon all the preceding chapters. It is also still seen as an optional knowledge within the discipline for lecturers and for students – best positioned as a final-year specialist module students may work their way up to, having been tutored in the core of the discipline. Despite growing up within and living in a digital media environment, and despite their excitement at that environment driving them to the subject, first-year
students are rarely allowed near digital media in their introductory modules. New media is considered something students should only approach after years of training in the basics of the discipline.

If, that is, their lecturers have even noticed that digital media exist. Dan Laughey adds a fascinatingly bad-tempered coda to his 2007 book *Key Themes in Media Theory*, rejecting Media Studies 2.0 and claiming there has been no digital revolution in media production, distribution and consumption (Laughey 2007). For a media studies lecturer to make such a wrong-headed claim today is astounding, highlighting the mind-set of a discipline that would rather set itself, Canute-like, against media itself – against the entire contemporary media environment – than change its treasured and banal assumptions. In appearing in a student textbook and in dismissing their media worlds and knowledge it also demonstrates an explicit hostility to their media experiences and use. Undergraduates reading that will only come away confused by and alienated from the discipline they have chosen to study.

What we have to understand is that our students think they are applying to study the media when actually they are applying to study media studies. In the broadcast-era the two were linked but today the discipline and our student’s media worlds are increasingly diverging. Our students arrive to discover a subject that is ill-equipped and unwilling to deal with their own media environment, instead serving up introductory modules and textbooks that bear little relationship to their own media experience and knowledge. The result is a discipline that feels lifeless and anachronistic at its point of entry and self-definition: at exactly that point at which it should be engaging with and using these new minds to help understand the digital worlds they inhabit. Broadcast-era media studies doesn’t work in a post-broadcast era.

*’It’s Behind You!’*

The broadcast-era media studies was born in has changed. Digital media are transforming our social, political, cultural and economic worlds, and media studies has to transform itself to understand this environment. As their un-invention is unlikely, the continued development and increasing impact of digital media can be assumed. As Gillmor (2006), Anderson (2006), Benkler (2006) and Jenkins (2006) point out, digital media fundamentally challenge big media’s ‘broadcast model’.

The broadcast-era was dominated by large organisations mass-producing information and products for mass-distribution and mass-consumption. Today, in place of the top-down, one-to-many vertical cascade of products from centralised industry sources we discover bottom-up, many-to-many, horizontal, peer-to-peer communication. ‘Pull’ media challenge ‘push’ media; open structures challenge closed structures; micro-production challenges macro-production; open-access amateur production challenges closed-access, elitist, hierarchical professional structures; economic and technological barriers to media production are transformed by cheap and easy to use technologies with the means of immediate global distribution; post-scarcity economics with post-production filtering challenges scarcity economics with strong industry pre-production filtering; the single, expert voice is threatened by ‘the long tail’ of expertise and new modes of
'collective intelligence'; the 'lecture' is replaced with the 'conversation'; the individual as receiver and consumer is complemented by the individual as producer and user; and broadcasting to a mass market is transformed by niche and nano-publishing.

No one is arguing that broadcasting has disappeared or ended. The television, print, cinema, music and radio industries remain powerful and significant but they have been transformed by digital technology in their production, distribution and consumption, and they have had to adapt their business model to find new ways to monetise their products and reach audiences whose behaviour and expectations have fundamentally shifted. The rise of me-casting, my-casting and me-media represents a real transformation of the media ecology such that the ‘broadcast model’ no longer explains how broadcast media work, let alone the wider media ecology. This is a post-broadcast era defined by new alignments of productive power, technological mastery and media consumption and use.

What makes this especially important is the interconnected nature of the changes: digital intercommunication between devices increases our capacities and accelerates these processes, continually breaking down the fixity of the broadcast era. Today, therefore, the idea of fixed, separate media forms becomes problematic. After a period of experimentation the broadcast era refined and was dominated by a small number of broadly-standardised, fixed and separate commercial forms, whose slow evolution did not challenge their essential form and rarely changed the user-experience (exceptions such as FM radio, colour TV and commercial VCRs are memorable precisely because they were rare). In contrast the post-broadcast era is marked by a permanent process of invention and innovation in which media forms are continually re-made, reconfigured, obsolesced and revolutionised. This is the era of the permanent ‘beta’ in which all digital forms are tested in the market and continually improved and upgraded. The result is a new, almost-unchartable, fluid, hybrid ecology, in which even the identification of particular forms collapses as they are re-made and cross-breed as vehicles of digital content.

Once the terms ‘print’, ‘cinema’, ‘radio’, photography’, the ‘telephone’ and ‘television’ referred to separate physical technological forms carrying specific content. Today these terms are historical hangovers used for convenience-sake to refer to types of content accessed across a range of digital devices. What was form in the broadcast-era has become the content of a digital device. As a result the form-barrier – the physical differences between forms that made it difficult (though not impossible) to translate content between media – has effectively collapsed. The ‘television’ that was once a box in the corner of the room has now become a type of content I access on my TV, my PC, my phone and even my ‘music-player’. The defining device of the digital era is the ‘media-player’, a generic device that simply plays any digital content without discrimination. This fluid, cross-platform content requires us to radically rethink our broadcast-era specialisations. When we consider how many lecturers have built their careers upon research into particular forms (film, television, radio, print journalism etc.) and how many departments rely on similarly defunct and anachronistic form-based discriminations (‘Film and Television Studies’) we can see the extent of the rethink that is required.
Changes in content are also significant. The common culture that marked the broadcast-era has changed. It is more difficult to find films, TV programmes or other content that all students have heard of. In an era in which students don’t necessarily have a knowledge of contemporary media, we’re going to look back nostalgically upon the days when we only complained about their knowledge of the past. This isn’t simply about audience fragmentation: it’s about a fundamental shift in production and consumption. In the broadcast-era, media industries produced massive quantities of content for us. Today they’re still producing that but so are we. If we consider the origins of the content our students actually consume, they probably spend more time each day on their own and peer-produced communication and content than with traditional broadcast products. This is a very different personal and peer-centred content that includes messaging services, texts, videos, media sharing, social networking and virtual relationships and worlds. Much of this content isn’t held in common, open to view or publicly published – a fact that has huge implications for our future teaching, research and analytic methodologies. The content that characterised the broadcast-era is being supplemented – perhaps even supplanted – by a different type of content, with different processes of production and distribution.

All of this leads us to fundamentally question the continuing value of the concept of the ‘audience’. Concerned with the implicit passivity of traditional conceptions of the receiving audience, media studies developed an opposing idea of the ‘active audience’, valorising a range of behaviours towards media distribution and content. For many in the field, interactive digital media appear to realize this active audience, confirming the discipline’s claims of their activity but this interpretation is backward-looking, still trying to understand the post-broadcast world through broadcast-era categories. Whilst we still spend time as audiences (of both peer and mass produced media) the term itself only describes one portion of our contemporary media experience and use. Adding the term ‘active’ merely qualifies a role that no longer exists in many contexts. When we hear the complaint that our students no longer watch anything we should take the hint: that is because in their messaging, sharing, tagging, twittering, Faceooking, gaming, chatting, commenting, reviewing, editing, posting, uploading and creation they’re not watching: they’re doing. Whatever else this is, it isn’t simply ‘reception’.

Whereas broadcast media were concerned with communicating with, informing and uniting ‘the social’ – with the abstract social body formed by the population conceived of as ‘the public’ or ‘the masses’ – today’s ‘social networking’ media derive their name from ‘social life’. Peer-relationships become central and professional journalism is replaced by a peer-journalism in which we become self-journalists, investigating and reporting upon our own lives, delivering our own news-feeds to our subscribed peer-publics. Today’s students make their social, and their embrace of the networking technologies that enable them to do this is a defining phenomena of our contemporary media age.

This isn’t simply about differences in media use. What we’re seeing is the rise of optional media worlds: the fractal proliferation of entire, personally created, chosen and managed media environments – modes of preferred
interaction, communication, mediation, experience and information. And, as in social networking, whilst some worlds interlink and intercommunicate, others receive no invitation, sliding past without a hint of recognition. Hence media lecturers can continue their trade, ensconced in their broadcast nodes, attending their broadcast conferences and circulating their self-refereed papers, barely noticing their student’s worlds. Whatever path this optionalisation takes in the near-future it is certain that it will only have less not more in common with the broadcast model we’ve lived with for the last century.

Where once we expected students to move into our media world (into grown-up, serious media, taking a newspaper every day), today we’re pouring into theirs, signing up to Facebook and dabling with Second Life. Where once lecturers would expect to know more as their careers progressed, with Professors representing the apex of knowledge in their discipline, today that has been inverted: the older we are the more our qualifications and knowledge rest upon the past. Both students and lecturers, of course, vary in their technical competence and interest, but the general pattern is difficult to deny: new technologies, applications, content, activities, behaviours, modes of consumption and new relationships with older forms are reconfiguring our media worlds, and academics are having to work harder than their students to keep up. And this isn’t going away. Our student’s contemporary media use isn’t a phase – it will follow them through their lives and new generations will only push this further. If you want to see the broadcast-era, it’s behind you.

What Media Studies 2.0 isn’t...

This only begins to sketch the changes and challenges of the post-broadcast era. It offers enough, however, to suggest that the transformation of the broadcast model requires a corresponding transformation of the broadcast-era discipline. Before we consider what shape a Media Studies 2.0 might take, it is worth clarifying what it isn’t, as there is an obvious temptation to assume its emphasis upon digital media ties it into certain positions.

Firstly a Media Studies 2.0 isn’t a rejection of print, radio, cinema and television. These forms remain with us and an MS2.0 is interested in the ways in which they have been transformed in their production, distribution, reception and use; by their changing economics and business models and new relationships with other forms. An MS2.0 foregrounds and explores precisely these changes and their implications.

Secondly, MS2.0 isn’t a ‘celebration’ of new media or an uncritical expression of faith in its inherently positive and democratising power. McLuhan recognized long ago that ‘many people seem to think that if you talk about something recent, you’re in favour of it’ (Benedetti and Dehart 1997: 70) and discussions of new media are inevitably assumed to be in awe of new forms and their possibilities. An MS2.0 presumes no particular critical position: its starting point is the necessity of recognising, confronting and exploring the changes caused by the move towards digital technology. These media are as important for the new forms of surveillance and control of the individual they allow, as for the new modes of empowerment they produce.
Thirdly, MS2.0 isn’t a call to separate off a ‘new media studies’ as that erroneously implies that media studies can exist without any consideration of digital media or that digital media can exist as a separable topic.

Fourthly, MS2.0 isn’t ahistorical. Discussions of new media are often criticised for claiming as ‘new’ developments that have a longer history. Modern computing, for example, traces its roots back to the mid-nineteenth century, before the invention and refinement of many of the broadcast media forms it is claimed to be replacing, whilst elements of ‘new media’ such as digitality, networked communication, mobile telephony, gaming etc. have their own complex histories, all of which undermines a simple technological periodisation of MS1.0 and MS2.0. The simplest answer to this is provided by Lev Manovich who traces the parallel histories of mass media and computing from the mid-nineteenth century through the twentieth century, to the point where the two traditions meet and merge with media becoming computing and computing becoming the basis of our media (Manovich 2001: 20). Here a historical perspective combines with the recognition of fundamental contemporary changes.

A lot also depends on how we use media history. Used negatively it is a defensive, conservative force, historicising contemporary developments to conjure away the new and any need to engage with it. A more positive history recognizes that historical processes extend into the present and thus that contemporary changes are part of its remit. This history understands that new media forms not only have continuities with the past but also display genuine discontinuities: following Schivelbusch (1986) and Standage (1998), the railway and telegraph can inform our understanding of the internet and its cultural impact but we also have to recognize that the internet is different – no prior medium offered its real-time, personalized, interactive, multi-media experiences.

We also have to recognize that although every technology has a history, they only become socially transformative at the point of their popular dissemination, social take-up and everyday use. This is what we saw at the end of the twentieth century as cheaper computing; networked communication; the take-off of the Internet; the take-off of digital mobile telephony; the replacement of video with DVDs; the rise of peer-to-peer file-sharing and the consumption of music as music files; the availability of commercial digital photography and digital camcorders, digital television and digital radio, plus ongoing developments in digital cinematography and publishing all combined to transform the existing media ecology. Developments in each area fed into other forms creating a critical mass whose superflusive waves continue to re-make our media worlds.

Just as important, however, is the counter-claim that it is Media Studies 1.0 that has proven itself to be ahistorical. As a product of the broadcast era it has privileged the history of broadcast forms, primarily focusing upon a small number of these (print, newspapers, radio, cinema, television), ignoring the diversity of broadcast media. Entire media worlds such as the eighteenth–nineteenth century screen and imagic commercial entertainment industries produced for the mass, urban audience, and the nineteenth century commercial broadcast industries that emerged around the magic lantern, stereoscope and photography are erased from its textbooks. To even find out about and teach these media one has to turn to the
hobbyists, the collectors, the collectors clubs and collectors presses that produce and share their history.

The situation is worse for pre-broadcast media. Media studies has ceded any interest in this area to other disciplines. Early image-making is discussed in archaeology and anthropology; linguistics covers language; psychology covers interpersonal communication; early religious image-making is in theology; historical western ideas about images and mediation are found in philosophy and theology: manuscript culture is history; aesthetic image-making is art history, and photography is found in photographic studies. The divisions are logical but what is not is a ‘media studies’ that cuts itself off from most of its own history. This has significant implications for what we teach and how we understand it.\(^1\)

The reason for this separation of forms is obvious: media studies had to fight to establish itself within the academy and to constitute an essentially interdisciplinary field as a distinct discipline with its own approaches, methods and knowledge. Its focus upon mass media, mass communications and reception gave it a specific identity but this came at the price of a limitation of its subject matter. Whilst this was beneficial in the broadcast-era, today these limitations are a fetter to the discipline’s development. Fortunately, in revealing to us that the broadcast-era was only one phase in the history of media, digital media open up the opportunity to rediscover pre-broadcast forms, to disrupt the linear broadcast histories, to find new insight in older forms and to write new histories of media. Facebook has more in common with cartes-de-visite than with television and Second Life has more in common with the stereoscope, the zograscope and the panorama than with radio, cinema and newspapers. An MS2.0, therefore, can be more historical than the media studies it replaces.

Finally MS2.0 is not simply a study of the West and the privileged. As Africa’s take-up of the mobile phone shows, the success of technology is not necessarily linear – different technological ‘divides’ exist within and between countries, cultures and classes. Even if some countries don’t have access to digital technology that doesn’t invalidate an interest in it, just as the continuing existence of pre-literate tribes doesn’t demand that we renounce any interest in literacy. However, given that today no country escapes the impact of digital technologies, being subject to the electronic information, surveillance and weapons systems of the major powers, then an MS2.0 is not invalidated by global inequalities. On the contrary, it helps to explain them.

**Media Studies 2.0**

So, what is Media Studies 2.0? MS2.0 is an upgraded media studies. If MS1.0 was a product of the broadcast era and a reflection of its dominant forms and processes then MS2.0 is a reflection of a changed media environment, exploring the post-broadcast digital era and its implications. If MS1.0 was a media studies for the twentieth century then MS2.0 is a media studies for the twenty-first century: a media studies radically receptive to the present and informed about the past, following and deciphering the media worlds our students live in. MS2.0 is a call for every part of media studies to recognize and open itself up to the changes caused by digital media. It is a call for media studies to broaden and update its

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3. Our treatment of media ‘representation’ is typical here. This is one of the most important theological, philosophical and political problems in western civilisation but you wouldn’t know it from our textbooks. These focus upon twentieth century media forms (films adverts, magazine images), approached through a limited theoretical framework (semiology, ideology, feminism) and methodological analysis (discourse analysis, content analysis). In the process the entire history of images and their role is elided. To understand the history use, power and function of images in western culture we need to turn to the historical, theological, philosophical and anthropological literature on images. Yet we don’t: the history of images is instead considered part of other disciplines and media studies constitutes itself with little or no reference to these histories, leading to an artificially circumscribed definition both of media and its history. In contrast an MS2.0 understands that Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, Dionysus Areopagiticus, John of Damascus and Theodore of Studion are as important as Stuart Hall, Saussure, Pierce, Barthes, Jakobsen, and Dyer. In MS2.0, Plato is at least as important as Mulvey.
4. Whereas in sociology or cultural studies students receive a training in the historical development of theory in their discipline, this is rare in media studies. Media studies lacks any agreed canon of thinkers/movements and simply teaches concepts (narrative/ideology etc.) it fails to teach its own history, with thinkers who dominated the field two decades ago (such as Althusser and Gramsci) now ignored, and it is highly selective about what theorists are considered acceptable. Hence whilst some theory is popular – semiology, feminism, audience theory, public sphere theory – there are huge gaps in the coverage. Much contemporary media theory is better taught in sociology, cultural studies and cyberculture (such as Baudrillard, Virilio, Kittler, Castells, Deleuze, Zizek, Hayles, Levy, Benkler, Lessig, Moravec, Drexler, Madish, Kuraswell), leading to a remarkably circumscribed conception of theory in the discipline.

Unlike in sociology or cultural studies, few media lecturers study theory in detail, plus there seem to be fewer working in theory and many texts are published with very little theoretical content or analysis.

knowledge and references and to test its ideas, assumptions and arguments against the contemporary world. Above all it is a call for media studies to remain relevant.

The starting point is a return to, systematic revision and updating of the discipline and its constituent areas, approaches, methods, ideas and arguments in the light of changing media technologies, worlds, social uses and experiences. This requires a discipline-wide recognition of these changes that, as yet, we’re lacking. Whereas our students, the wider population and media professionals and producers are all aware of, and deal directly with, the digital world, media studies itself seems to deliberately lag behind in its recognition of the changing ecology, its appreciation of the significance of these new forms and its ability to think and analyse them. We still privilege broadcast media, failing to comprehend that for a major part of the population throwing sheep, dressing avatars and swapping mobile phone pornography is infinitely more important than public service broadcasting.

We have to do two things. Firstly we have to rethink the content, categories and concepts of broadcast-era media studies, dispense with aspects that no longer help us and radicalising our ideas and arguments to better capture the present. Secondly we need to foreground new aspects of media use and develop new classification systems and new concepts, categories and ideas to understand them.

Today questions of reality and virtuality have become central, as have issues of identity and personalisation; individual production, creation and craftsmanship; the new processes of digital labour and its ownership; the hybridity and fluidity of form; media ecologies; the materiality and architecture of media; the operation of digital code; new modes of interface and interactivity; new modes of connectivity; the processes of information organisation, collection and retrieval; digital archiving; copying, copyright, IP rights, pirate cultures and activities; virtual politics and economics; the role of pleasure, fun and games; simulation, immersion, ubiquitous media, mobile media and modes of hyperrealism; new bodily and sensory experiences and the new wirings of the social body. Topics that have never been part of media studies – topics such as privacy and surveillance and crime and security – now urgently demand a place in any critical analysis of contemporary media.

This rethinking of the discipline allows the rediscovery of elements marginalized by the dominance of audiences, effects research and ethnographic study. Issues surrounding politics, the political economy of media industries and institutions and media power, for example, all deserve renewed attention, as do media theory and technology. To date media studies’ willingness to deal with theory (and its very definition of ‘media theory’) has been limited but there is a huge historical and contemporary theoretical literature — found in theology, anthropology, philosophy, social theory, cultural studies, cyberculture — that media studies needs to be more aware of and employ.

The issue of technology may pose the biggest problem for the discipline. The digital ecology cannot be understood without a renewed emphasis upon technology and a consideration of the historical relationship between human life, society and technology, but media studies is poorly placed to
deal with this. Raymond Williams’s 1974 critique of McLuhan established ‘technological determinism’ as the cardinal sin of the discipline (Williams 1992: 120–22) whilst Stuart Hall’s ‘Encoding/Decoding’ model dating from the same year emphasized audience reception above production, transmission or technology (Hall 1980). Together these led to the marginalisation of technology and the rise of contemporary audience studies and its variants. Whilst these mined a rich seam, the exclusion of any debate on technology and resistance to newer continental theoretical paradigms sweeping the social sciences through the 1980s–1990s meant media studies was unable to deal with accelerating developments in new media from the mid-1990s. Instead the most innovative and theoretically informed explorations of new media were found in sociology and cultural studies in debates around the information society, Post-Fordism, postmodernism, globalization, cyberculture and cybertheory. Media studies came late to digital media, ignored the existing theoretical literature and approached it instead through its own broadcast paradigms, focusing especially on the new media audience.

Contemporary media studies is still hampered by its remarkable hostility to technology, with any mention still being met with the reflex charge of ‘technological determinism’; this functions as a miraculous word-of-power conjuring away any need to deal with the deeper issues raised and with more complex historical processes and theoretical debates we don’t want to read. The ‘philosophy of technology’ is one of the most popular and important emerging fields, formed from the confluence of philosophy, information studies, cultural studies and computer studies – and yet again media studies ignores it, ceding any interest to other disciplines.

So we are left with the ludicrous situation of a discipline that attempts to think the historical processes of communication, mediation, connectivity and shared experience with no reference to technology; that displays no knowledge of, or interest in, the historical debates on the relationship between culture and nature and the organic and mechanical that have been central to western thought and civilisation; 5 that knows little or nothing of the historical writing on technology or even the work of nineteenth–twentieth century theorists of technology (expunging all these from its limited definition of ‘media theory’); 6 and a discipline that – even in the middle of one of the most remarkable technological transformations in recent media history – still refuses to consider the question of technology, refusing it any role in human society. This is no longer intellectually credible. We need a much more historically and theoretically informed debate about technology, recognising in particular its metaphysical and epistemological implications. All the developments in real-time electronic presence and communication, in interfaces and haptics, in our bodily and sensory relationship to our media and our images, make it essential we take the issue of technology seriously.

Our fears of technology also extend to our personal use of it. Whereas in the broadcast-era we broadly understood the technical principles of our media and their use, sharing that knowledge with our students, today lecturers are increasingly left behind in their knowledge of what media exist, their functions and capacities, how they work, how to use them and how others are using them. Unless we can keep up with these changing

5. For the best discussion of historical western debates about technology see David F. Channell’s The Vital Machine: A Study of Technology and Organic Life (Channell 1991). Not many media studies texts make reference to any of the material this book covers – especially those that rely on the simplistic dismissal of technology with the phrase ‘technological determinism’.

6. With the rare exception of texts such as Van Loon’s Media Technology (Van Loon 2008), media studies doesn’t teach technology; limits the teaching of the history of technology and ignores the history of theoretical work upon our relationship with technology and the relationship between technology and nature. Writers like Carlyle, Ure, Butler, Kapp, Engelmeier, Dessauér, Sombart, Junger, Spengler, Marinetti, Mumford, Heidegger, Giedion, Wiener, Innis, Ellul, De Chardin and Illich etc. are almost entirely absent from media studies texts as are the contemporary discussions of technology taking place in other fields. In addition, the available books on the history of technology aren’t being written within our discipline. Most are written by journalists, IT specialists, science-writers, historians and specialist collectors and are more likely to be found in the ‘popular science’ section of bookshops than on the media studies shelves. Even if media
technologies, and unless they become as central to our lives as they are to our students, we’ll lose both the ability and the right to teach them. In an era in which we watched TV we had the right to teach it: in the future unless we’re downloading, sharing, videoing, tagging, texting, ripping, burning, messaging, networking, playing, producing and building then we’ll lose that right.

All of this points towards the necessity of a new holistic appreciation of media. In a fluid world we need to develop a greater ability to understand, follow and use our technologies, to grasp the inter-related totality of media. Long-standing academic specialisms need to be overcome and the interdisciplinary promise of media studies needs to be realized at its core. We need both a scientific and an arts-based knowledge to even grasp digital media and understand what is happening today. McLuhan famously said that he didn’t try to predict the future as anyone could do that: he tried to tackle ‘the really tough one’ – he tried to predict the present (Benedetti and Dehart 1997: 186–7). In the age of the permanent beta we have to be radically receptive to the changing media world, embracing the threat to our assumptions and our much-loved lecture notes and modules.

We have to realize that the study of media has already escaped media studies. Whilst its broadcast bias helped set the boundaries of the discipline and establish its scope, these are now holding it back. Discussion of the media, and of digital media especially, is becoming part of nearly every arts and humanities discipline and many of the human sciences too. Most of the major academic and popular books now being produced about digital media are not being produced by authors with a background in media studies or working in media studies departments and, for the most part, these books make no reference to the traditional academic discipline of media studies and its accumulated knowledge. Media studies is playing little or no part in producing this new knowledge.

A new field is emerging in these popular texts and within it entirely new paradigms about the masses and their behaviour are becoming popular – ideas of ‘collective intelligence’ (Levy 1997) and ‘the wisdom of crowds’ (Surowiecki 2004) that challenge traditional ideas about the audience in media studies. These paradigms are being developed outside our discipline (from the confluence of science, computing, psychology and business studies) making no reference to it and finding no place in our textbooks. It is essential that media studies rectifies this, not only including and critically exploring these ideas but also taking that critical exploration back out into these new arenas to foreground its own position. None of this can happen whilst the broadcast-paradigm remains dominant in the discipline and its lecturers have little interest in these developments and texts.

But digital media do not just impact upon our discipline and knowledge, they also have the potential to transform how we teach and transmit it. As I’ve argued elsewhere (Merrin 2008), the current model of academic publishing is problematic. The preference of publishers for textbooks rather than monographs has lead to a predictability and conservativism in the field, a decline in original output and a simplification of content. Print journals have their own problems: functioning today as vanity publishing for CVs and research exercises, as most social science and humanities
articles go almost entirely unread and unnoticed. Then there is the problem of the referees, readers and reviewers that filter content for publication. As every academic knows, their comments are often ignorant, pointless and uninformed, typically promoting their own work or favoured interpretation and controlling what can be read.

With web-publishing we eliminate the scarcity economics that made referees so vital and with the ‘long tail’ of knowledge we eliminate the need to hang off their every word. Today we should simply publish and trust each other, our students and the public to decide what is of lasting value and what survives. This would have the value of promoting more original work and newer ideas that push the boundaries of fields rather than satisfying the conservative experts that patrol them. Web-publishing allows more to be published, making it immediately available to everyone for free, instead of only to those who can afford the increasingly expensive books or who have access to subscribing libraries. We need to give up our desperate collusion in the academic evaluation of the worth of publication outlets, embrace the web and take our ideas out of the academy to a global audience.

Web-publishing also overcomes the biggest problem of traditional publishing: its obsolescence. By the time a book has been written and passed through a series of readers, editors and proofreaders to make it to the shops where it is eventually noticed, bought, read, reviewed and quoted, years can have passed by. Today the media world moves too fast: publications are always years behind the student’s experience and knowledge. In contrast web-publishing allows for cheap, instant, global publication. It allows for faster, updateable commentary, for freer expression, more original ideas, more debate, real feedback, rapid responses to the world and ongoing critical dialogue. Even if it doesn’t replace books we should be using it more to take our subject to the world, to throw out faster, draft responses to developments, to engage more directly with each other, and to challenge and push the field forward.

Open-sourcing Media Studies

As David Berry has argued, one way to think about Media Studies 2.0 might be through Thomas Kuhn’s idea of paradigm shifts (Berry 2007). Although his 1962 book, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, dealt with the physical and not the social sciences, the argument remains relevant; both progress not through the accumulation of facts and knowledge, but through periods of upheaval in which older paradigms are challenged by new paradigms. As Kuhn says:

Scientific revolutions are inaugurated by a growing sense ... often restricted to a narrow subdivision of the scientific community, that an existing paradigm has ceased to function adequately in the exploration of an aspect of nature to which that paradigm itself had previously led the way.

(Kuhn, 1962)

The result is a polarisation into camps, each of which uses its own paradigm to argue its case. What is ultimately decisive is the increasing number of ‘anomalies’ that the older paradigm struggles to incorporate and the
gradual movement to the newer, more successful paradigm until it finally receives ‘the assent of the community’ (Kuhn 1962).

This disciplinary paradigm shift is what we are dealing with today. Developments in digital media aren’t a cumulative ‘add-on’ to media studies that can be adequately explained through its existing classifications, concepts and categories. They take us beyond both the broadcast-era and the broadcast media studies that developed to reflect and study it. Today, only a post-broadcasting, digital paradigm can explain our contemporary media experience.

As the established paradigm, Media Studies 1.0 has an institutional and ideological investment in the status quo, hence its hostility to change. There is nothing new in this – computer pioneer Howard H. Aiken once acerbically warned, ‘Don’t worry about people stealing an idea. If it’s original, you’ll have to ram it down their throats’ (Frauenfelder 2005: 65), and McLuhan had the measure of academia in his definition of the sociologist as someone who ‘permits himself to see only what is acceptable to his colleagues’ (McLuhan and Carson 2003: 370–1). Developments in digital media, however, have placed sufficient questions in the minds of many in the discipline. The idea of ‘Media Studies 2.0’ is an articulation of this awareness.

I argued earlier that students who think they will be studying media find they are studying media studies but in an important sense they aren’t even taught media studies. Its history, rationale, development, biases, assumptions and omissions aren’t addressed or explained. Our textbooks and courses transport students into a proprietorial world – into the values, organization and ideas of the discipline without any questioning of these and their validity. The upgrading of media studies, therefore, must go hand-in-hand with its open-sourcing.

As in open source software, where the underlying code is made available for public knowledge and improvement, the discipline needs to open itself up, allowing our students to see upon what basis it is built and to rewrite and improve it. Our students are not only living through one of the most remarkable periods of transformation, as an entire model of media and the institutions built upon it is replaced, they themselves are in the forefront of this transformation: the digital ecology is forming today not just around them but with them, through them and because of them. Media Studies 2.0 believes that those responsible for the media environment should have a role to play in studying and understanding it. Media Studies 2.0 will be an active, ongoing collaborative project created by all those with relevant experience and knowledge. There is evidence that this may already be happening as our students join this debate. Only when this project develops will we have a discipline that reflects their experience and the media worlds out there.

Works cited


**Suggested citation**


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