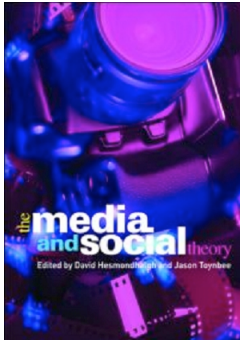


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David Hesmondhalgh & Jason Toynbee (Eds.)

The Media and Social Theory

First Edition

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The Media and Social Theory is composed from a collection of sixteen papers, most of which were presented at a 2006 ESRC conference entitled, 'Media, Change and Social Theory' organised by the ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-cultural Change (CReSC). The book is divided into four main parts which the editors, David Hesmondhalgh and Jason Toynbee, believe encapsulate the 'themes of central importance to media theory': Power and democracy, Spatial inequalities, Spectacle and the self, and Media labour and production (p. 13). The text is targeted towards a broad range of academic audiences, from undergraduate and postgraduate students, to researchers of cultural studies, media studies and social theory. Each chapter provides a unique perspective on how social theory can enrich our understanding of key processes of media change. The editors begin with an opening chapter outlining 'why media studies needs better social theory' (p. 1). They note two current challenges which exist in media studies today regarding the use of theory. The first discusses the differences in how we might understand contemporary developments in media: either as a continuation in the history of mediated communication or as a new chapter with 'unprecedented forms of mediated social relations' (p. 1). The second challenge points to the narrowness in how existing media theory is employed, whereby a single aspect of a theory is discussed and analysed at length, in the absence of the greater social-theoretical agenda in which the theory is embedded (p. 1).

Based on these challenges, the editors conclude 'that media studies lacks theoretical frames which might enable synthesis and in turn transcendence of existing entrenched positions...[, and] that a more explicit address of critical social theory can help to provide such a frame, and enable dialogue to take place...' (p. 9). The overarching thesis of the book then, is to provide a variety of case studies which demonstrate how to engage with critical social theory in a manner that helps us move beyond dualisms (such as empiricist vs. constructionist) and towards integration. In an edited book



Rezensionen

such as this, it can prove difficult to provide a broad assessment of the entire text, as each author has contributed a unique chapter which takes on a specific theoretical approach and case. It is expected that most readers will find particular parts or chapters more beneficial than others based on their own interests and backgrounds. However, after reading the entire collection of well-chosen and edited essays, it is clear that they work together to convince the reader that social theory can create renewed insight within media studies and should be given more thoughtful consideration.

One of the most beneficial aspects of this text is the breadth covered in relation to both social theory and media studies. The editors have selected essays which deal with theoretical approaches such as critical realism, public sphere theory (including post-Habermasian versions), Marxist and post-Marxist theories, post-structuralist approaches, amongst several others while relating them to individual cases within media studies. The structure and inclusion of such diverse perspectives is helpful in demonstrating how social theory can be an important contribution to one's research, whether this involves an analysis of rockumentaries, indigenous media, or the state of professional journalism (to name a few of the essay topics). Contributing authors include both emerging and leading scholars in the field, such as Nick Couldry, Daniel C. Hallin, Bev Skeggs, as well as the editors themselves. Despite the distinct method and approach of each author, there is an unmistakable continuity and clarity throughout the book. Every essay outlines the author's hypothesis, and provides exceptional theoretical and/or empirical evidence to support their view(s). The reader is left with a clear understanding of how social theory can be used in updated and creative ways when thinking about mediated cultures and societies.

While there are no explicit issues with the content of the essays, *The Media and Social Theory* may not be suitable for the wide readership it claims to target. The complexity of analysis and numerous theoretical references require considerable prior knowledge of social theory. This is especially evident when authors are providing a new perspective or interpretation of an existing theory, such as Daniel Hallin's updated account of neoliberalism. In this case one would have to understand the historical application of neoliberalism in order to appreciate his analysis. Given the space requirements for each essay, an in-depth review of the theoretical approaches employed is not always possible to include. However certain chapters strike a more helpful balance between explanation and analysis than others. This is especially well-addressed in Jason Toynbee's concluding essay on 'Media making and social reality', where he provides a cogent description of critical realism and pairs this description with practical examples (in one case, the situation comedy) to reinforce his argument (p. 265). This text should not be considered as an introduction to social theory, and as such it may not be the most helpful resource for undergraduate students. Alternatively, those who consider themselves well-read in social theory will appreciate the critical reflection and innovative analysis included with little complication.

Rezensionen

In the introduction, the editors refer to Derek Layder and his suggestion for conceiving of theory in relation to empirical work. 'We need, says Layder (1993:7), to see theory as partly, but never fully autonomous of empirical evidence' (p. 3). The editors note that '[s]uch an attitude underpins this book' (p.3). This is a very accurate summation of what a reader will uncover in *The Media and Social Theory*. In some chapters, authors have used theory to support findings from their media research while in others, entire essays are dedicated to an exploration of the social theory itself. Both varieties provide compelling, critical perspectives that will enrich and broaden the reader's existing knowledge of media studies and critical social theory.

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