Breaking Boundaries:
Can We Bridge the Quantitative Versus Qualitative Divide
Through the Study of Entertainment and Politics?

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The breaking of boundaries extends to those among different theoretical and methodological traditions. In this essay, I attempt to clarify and critically assess two such divides: those between "positivism," "critical studies," and "cultural studies"; and the related but distinct divide between quantitative and qualitative research. Drawing on and critiquing Anderson and Baym, I make the case that (a) positivism has potential as a complement and supplement to, and perhaps even a collaborator with, critical and cultural studies; (b) quantitative methods, once untangled from some of positivism's more restrictive tenets, can be a useful tool for critical and cultural studies scholarship; and (c) the study of entertainment and politics may provide a unique opportunity for rethinking some of our field's reified boundaries in ways that could produce a more integrated approach to the study of media and politics.

The theme of this volume—breaking boundaries—refers essentially to the lines drawn between "entertainment" or "popular culture" and the presumably more politically relevant genres of "news" or "public affairs." But it also refers to long-standing boundaries among different theoretical and methodological traditions. In this essay, I attempt to clarify and critically assess two such divides: that between "positivism," "critical studies," and "cultural studies"; and the related but distinct divide between quantitative and qualitative research. I argue that while philosophic differences exist among political communication scholars, they do not (or more accurately, *need* not) determine one's choice of methods. I further argue that the study of entertainment and politics provides especially fertile ground for crossing and perhaps even breaking these boundaries.

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To make these arguments, I organize my essay into five sections. First, I briefly document the small but growing body of quantitative research on politics and entertainment. I then characterize the central philosophic divides within communication, drawing on and critiquing Anderson and Baym's 2004 article, "Philosophies and Philosophic Issues in Communication, 1995–2004." Here I suggest that their heuristic mapping of the field overly confines positivism's potential to engage with other philosophic traditions and unnecessarily conflates quantitative methods with positivism.

In the next two sections, I flesh out my argument, first by providing a more detailed "defense" of positivism's potential as a complement and supplement to, and perhaps even a collaborator with, critical and cultural studies; and then by making the case that quantitative methods, once untangled from some of positivism's more restrictive tenets, can be a useful tool for critical and cultural studies scholarship. Finally, I discuss why the study of entertainment and politics may provide a unique opportunity for rethinking some of our field's reified boundaries, opening up the possibility of greater sharing and collaboration, and perhaps producing a more integrated approach to the study of media and politics.

Before turning to these arguments, I will set some initial boundaries even as I try to break them. My focus will be on "empirical" research and methods—that is, research based on evidence gathered through experience, observation, or manipulation, rather than "analytic" theory based exclusively on logical or ethical arguments, or on formal mathematical models.[1] Within this I distinguish research whose empirical evidence is primarily data existing as or converted to numbers and analyzed through statistics (i.e., "quantitative research") from that whose evidentiary base, while empirical, is presented and analyzed primarily through words organized as narratives and/or arguments (i.e., "qualitative research").[2] I focus largely on research designed to understand the influence of media on individuals, groups, institutions, and societies. While my entry point is from the perspective of a (mostly) quantitative researcher who is (loosely) in the "positivist" tradition (i.e., the application of scientific methods to social phenomena in order to identify generalizable, verifiable, replicable, and falsifiable causal relationships), I compare and contrast this approach with both "critical studies" (i.e., research designed to illuminate and challenge social, economic, political, and cultural structures and processes of domination and subordination) and "cultural studies" (i.e., research designed to uncover the ways in which meaning is inferred on and from the artifacts and experiences of everyday life). I also distinguish genres (as well as the institutional norms and structures that support them) whose presumed purpose is to "entertain" from those designed to "inform." Of course these distinctions quickly become muddied when specific research is examined or their underlying logic is interrogated, but that is, in the end, a central point of this essay.

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[1] In focusing on empirical methods, I am arguably restricting my reflections to what Anderson and Baym (2004) call the "empirical hemisphere" of communication scholarship, and to issues of "praxeology." I am also, however, arguing that methods are more implicated in their "analytical hemisphere" and in issues of epistemology, ontology, and axiology than their parsing of the field suggests.

[2] Of course "quantitative" researchers also use words organized into arguments and/or narratives; indeed, central to my argument is that contrary to the "pure" form of positivism, *both* quantitative and qualitative researchers are ultimately making discursive arguments and weaving explanatory narratives (Pavitt, 2000). My point is simply that the *empirical evidence* quantitative scholars use to support these arguments and narratives is based on statistical analyses of numbers.

Rethinking Politically Relevant Media

Let me note at the outset that quantitative research on the political relevance of entertainment has a long (if thin) tradition, though "mainstream" students of media and politics, especially political scientists, have largely ignored even this limited research. Included here is the work of George Gerbner and colleagues on cultivation analysis (e.g., 1978, 1982, 1984, 2002; see also Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2009), research on the political effects of dramas and docudramas (e.g., Adams et al., 1985; Carlson, 1985; Lenart & McGraw, 1989), and research on the political effects of humor and satire (e.g., Brinkman, 1968; Gruner, 1971). In addition, quantitative content analyses of entertainment media (e.g., Oliver, 1994; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Wilkes & Valencia, 1989) designed to assess representations of politics, public issues, and/or demographic groups have been common.[3]

Nonetheless, quantitative political communication scholars have overwhelmingly focused on two slices of the mediated information environment: news, defined as "the report of an event that happened or that was disclosed within the previous twenty-four hours and treats an issue of ongoing concern" (Jamieson & Campbell, 2000, p. 40) and that is produced and disseminated by professional journalists working within news organizations (Gans, 1980); and the communications of political elites, such as speeches, debates, and political advertising (e.g., Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, & Valentino, 1994; Geer, 1988; Peake & Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008).

Illustrative of this relative neglect of popular culture are the articles published in *Political Communication*, the journal sponsored by the Political Communication divisions of both the International Communication Association (ICA) and the American Political Science Association (APSA).[4] Since its inaugural issue in 1980,[5] *Political Communication* has published approximately 600 articles. Even under broad definitions of entertainment (e.g., including opinionated talk radio or general Internet use) and quantitative research (e.g., as studies including numerical tables or figures), at most 37 of these articles (6%) would qualify as quantitative studies of popular culture and politics.

More recently the number of quantitative scholars engaged in research on entertainment media and politics has increased. Again, articles published in *Political Communication* are instructive. From 1980 to 1990, only two of the 125 published articles (less than 2%) could be described as quantitative studies of entertainment and politics. From 1991 to 2000, the number increased slightly to 12 of 236 articles

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[3] Quantitative studies of entertainment media that focus on nonpolitical issues (economics, marketing, health, etc.) are also prevalent (e.g., Albarran & Dimmick, 1993; Cowley & Barron, 2008; Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2009).

[4] *Political Communication* and the associations sponsoring it represent the "mainstream" of communication and political science, which is why I chose it to illustrate my point. Undoubtedly other associations (e.g., the International Association for Media and Communication Research) or journals (e.g., *Media, Culture and Society* or *Critical Studies in Media Communication*) have been more open to entertainment and politics research.

[5] From 1980 to 1991, the journal was called *Political Communication and Persuasion*; the name was changed in 1992 when co-sponsorship by APSA and ICA was formalized.

(5%). And from 2001 to 2012, the number rose to 23 of 252 articles (9%). Papers presented at the 2012 ICA annual conference tell a similar story: Of the 135 presentations sponsored by the Political Communication Division, 14 (10%) were quantitative studies of popular culture and politics, and just one of 26 panels was devoted exclusively to this topic.[6]

Critical and cultural studies scholars have been more open to the study of entertainment media and, to a lesser extent, its relevance to politics. But this has not translated into widespread acceptance by the political science and communication mainstream. Overall only 44 of the 600 articles published in *Political Communication* (7%) could be described as qualitative studies of entertainment and politics, and the pattern over time is similar to that for quantitative studies: 6 of 125 articles (5%) from 1980 to 1990; 14 of 236 (6%) from 1991 to 2000; and 24 of 252 (10%) from 2001 to 2012. And only 9 of the 135 (7%) papers sponsored by the Political Communication Division and presented at the 2012 ICA conference were devoted to qualitative studies of popular culture and politics.

While my simple "content analysis" would likely not satisfy either quantitative or qualitative researchers, it illustrates that the study of popular culture and politics, while never ignored, has been largely marginalized, though it is drawing somewhat more attention in recent years. An in-depth exploration of why this is the case is beyond the scope of this essay, but a few points are worth highlighting. The academic study of "politics" has defined the term in accord with the first set of meanings found in the Merriam-Webster dictionary: "a) the art or science of *government*; b) the art or science concerned with guiding or influencing *governmental* policy; c) the art or science concerned with winning and holding control over *government*" (emphases added). In addition, political communication scholars have accepted the conceptual distinction between "news" and "entertainment" that was institutionalized in print and electronic news organizations (in the latter case, through federal regulations) by the 1950s.[7] Finally, we have at least implicitly accepted the assumption—built into much of the logic underpinning both 20th-century liberal democratic theory and the structure of a privately owned, increasingly

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[6] Other suggestive indicators of increased interest in entertainment and politics include the following: At least three communication journal "special" issues (including this one) published or in the works are devoted to this topic; the recently published *SAGE Handbook of Political Communication* and the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Political Communication* each include at least one chapter on this topic; news outlets such as *The New York Times* now track political mentions by late-night talk show hosts as a regular part of their election coverage; public opinion organizations such as the Pew Research Center include political entertainment media alongside more traditional news outlets as one of the potential sources of election-related information in their surveys; and it appears that more undergraduate and graduate political communication course syllabi include sections devoted to entertainment and politics.

[7] Of course "minority views" have always existed, as evidenced by the sporadic research on entertainment and politics I noted earlier. For example, Mutz (2001) states outright that "the traditional distinctions between news and entertainment content are no longer very helpful" (p. 231). But consistent with my larger point, Mutz makes this statement in the context of arguing that until recently, "what was considered political by political communication researchers could be pretty safely defined as whatever was on the evening news or in newspapers or perhaps in political ads or debates" (p. 231).

centralized media system—that professional journalists function crucially as both watchdogs of government and informers of citizens.[8]

These definitions and distinctions have become increasingly difficult to justify following several well-documented changes in the information environment: the deregulation of the media; the proliferation of media outlets; the blurring both of genres and of media producers and consumers; the rise of 24-hour, partisan, citizen-generated, and satirical news; the declining state of and trust in professional journalism; and the expansion of online and offline ways for citizens to engage in politics, including those occurring outside of elections and aimed at institutions other than government (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). At a minimum, these changes have compelled reexamination of older notions of both politics and politically relevant media (a point I return to in the last section of this essay), but they also serve as a wakeup call, reminding us that even in earlier eras neither politics nor politically relevant media were as limited as had been thought.

Whether truly new phenomena or simply dramatic examples of something overlooked in the past, these changes account for, I believe, the growing interest in the political relevance of entertainment and popular culture. This interest is occurring among scholars trained in quantitative political communication research (e.g., Baum, 2003; Holbert, Hmielowski, Jain, Lather, & Morey, 2011; Mutz & Nir, 2010; Prior, 2007) as well as those representing the more qualitative approaches of cultural and critical studies (e.g., Baym, 2007; Curran, 2010; Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009; Jones, 2010). This is generally a good thing. It shows that scholars starting from very different places are converging on the observation that entertainment matters to politics. "Triangulating" research through various theories, methods, and data is a classic way of producing more valid and reliable results; drawing more robust, generalizable conclusions; and identifying areas of disagreement in need of further research. But for this convergence and triangulation to be productive, scholars from different theoretical and methodological traditions must at least be familiar with each other's research, better yet engage with and draw on each other, and ideally collaborate where possible. Although some scholars see the benefits of "importing" the theories and claims of cultural and critical scholars into their quantitative research (e.g., Holbert & Young, 2013), to date engagement and collaboration across boundaries has been sparse at best. A central reason for this are debilitating assumptions about the incompatibility of positivism and of quantitative methods with cultural and critical studies approaches to understanding the social world.

Philosophic Divides in Communication and Media Studies

Differences in the objects and techniques of research are institutionalized in the academy, most obviously in the organization of schools of arts and sciences into humanities, social science, and natural science divisions. Still, even within these divisions (especially the social sciences) debates over substance and methods are common, resolved, to the extent they ever are, either through the development of separate subfields, journals, professional associations (and sections within them), conferences, and so

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[8] The institutional separation of schools of journalism and communication is arguably further evidence of the academy's acceptance of the distinction between "news" and other forms of mediated communication.

forth, or, as in the case of economics and, to a lesser extent, political science, by "purging" or marginalizing researchers who do not conform to the mainstream.

Communication, in part because of its roots in the humanities (e.g., rhetoric, literary criticism), the social sciences (e.g., sociology, political science, social psychology), and the professions (e.g., journalism, marketing), has largely managed this divide through peaceful coexistence rather than academic genocide.[9] Nonetheless, in the 60 or so years of its existence as a recognized, distinct field (if not discipline), periodic moments of self-reflection and debate have emerged. These moments—most notably the special issue of the *Journal of Communication* entitled "Ferment in the Field" (1983), but also two follow-up issues in the same journal a decade later ("The Future of the Field" I and II) and another three in 2004, 2005, and 2008 ("The State of the Art in Communication Theory and Research" I and II, and "Intersections"); an earlier exchange between Berelson and Schramm in the pages of *Public Opinion Quarterly* 1959–1960); a special issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly* entitled "Directions in Mass Communication Research" (1973–1974); and numerous other individual pieces (e.g., Craig, 1999; Katz, 1987; Nordenstreng, 2004; Pooley & Katz, 2008)—are well known, so I will not revisit the specifics of these debates here.

Rather, I invoke these moments of public introspection to make six interrelated points that underpin the rest of this essay. First, these periodic efforts to delineate the field are indications of more subtle tensions that continue to this day. Second, as understood by Anderson (1996) and Anderson and Baym (2004), these tensions emerge from differences in ontology, epistemology, axiology, and praxeology (defined and discussed below). Third, these tensions have largely been addressed in the field by a kind of détente, a "live and let live" approach. Fourth, this "solution" to the "problem" is unsatisfactory, limiting our collective knowledge of the things we study and of ourselves as an intellectual community. Fifth, the preferred solution is not to "resolve" differences (in the sense of deciding who is "right" or "wrong") but rather to understand and take advantage of them to make communication a more integrated and influential discipline, and a more deliberative, vibrant intellectual community. And sixth, the growing interest in entertainment and politics among communication scholars from very different research traditions presents an opportunity to create such a community.

How realistic are these objectives? Not very, if one accepts the recent parsing of the field by Anderson and Baym (2004). Building on earlier work by Anderson (1996), the authors begin by summarizing the four philosophic "claim components" that traditionally underpin social science theories and at least implicitly inform how researchers approach the study of communication: the way we define the nature of our objects of study (ontology); how we define what it means to "know" these objects (epistemology); the normative values we ascribe to both these objects and our efforts to understand them (axiology); and the methods we use to understand them (praxeology). They then argue that these choices can be arrayed along two dimensions. The first (based on ontological and epistemological choices) is anchored on one end by a "foundational" approach that believes our objects of study exist independently

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[9] It is important to emphasize that this kind of peaceful coexistence is not the same as inter- or post-disciplinarity (Herbst, 2008), which implies not just tolerance of various approaches but the kind of engagement and collaboration I alluded to earlier.

of our perceptions of them and are knowable in an objective sense, and on the other by a "reflexive" approach that believes these objects are socially constructed and knowable only through the meaning attributed to them. At one end of the second dimension (based on praxeological and axiological choices) is an "empirical" approach that believes ideas and arguments need to be grounded in observation; at the other is an "analytical" approach that believes ideas and arguments can be based only on their normative, logical, linguistic, and/or discursive underpinnings. Finally, Anderson and Baym use these two perpendicular dimensions to categorize communication research into four quadrants or philosophic domains: the empirical/foundational (e.g., quantitative media effects); the empirical/reflexive (e.g., ethnographic studies); the analytic/foundational (e.g., Marxian critical theory); and the analytic/reflexive (e.g., postmodern cultural theory).

While Anderson and Baym's typology may be a useful way to categorize *existing* communication research, an unfortunate consequence of their analysis is the mistaken (I argue) "imprisonment" of both positivist and quantitative approaches to communication research in the empirical/foundational quadrant. This is due, I believe, to their treating ontology and epistemology, on the one hand, and axiology and praxeology, on the other, as more linked to each other than is the case. The result is too narrow an understanding of positivism as it is actually applied in social research and the conflation of quantitative research with positivism. If instead we (a) take more seriously Anderson and Baym's own notion that these four philosophic choices are *dimensions* (i.e., that researchers can be "placed" anywhere along the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and praxeological continua; and (b) refrain from assuming that epistemological and ontological and/or axiological and praxeological choices are conjoined (i.e., assume that there are four rather than two dimensions at play), the result is a more complicated and messy but, I believe, more useful heuristic map to guide us.

Consider "positivism," a philosophy of science that seems to epitomize the empirical/foundational quadrant of Anderson and Baym's typology. It originated as an approach to understanding the natural world (Hempel, 1966; Popper, 1961), but has been adapted over time to the study of the social world. In its purest form, it asserts that the natural and social worlds exist outside of our perceptions of them, that they operate under generalizable, reducible, cause-and-effect rules, and that these rules are identifiable through properly designed and executed quantitative research. Such research should be based on falsifiable hypotheses deduced from theory, tested through the use of empirical data that are valid (in several technical meanings of the word) and reliable, and produce results that are statistically significant, replicable, and generalizable to larger populations or circumstances. Finally (and importantly), positivism asserts that one can never prove a theory true, but rather can only increase confidence that it is credible through well-designed tests, repeated under various circumstances, that consistently fail to falsify it. Knowledge, therefore, is progressive and cumulative but always tentative, with the constant possibility that a new theory will prove more consistent with empirical reality.

Positivism's applicability to social phenomena is contentious, subject to the kind of critiques raised in the periodic "ferments" touched on above, but implicitly in more subtle and ongoing ways. While Anderson and Baym intended their "heuristic map" to be descriptive rather than evaluative, these critiques correspond well to their four philosophic decision points (ontology, epistemology, praxeology, and axiology). Drawing where possible on examples from the study of entertainment and politics, in the next

two sections I use their typology (and my complicating of it) to describe and assess these critiques, first to partially free positivism from the empirical/foundational box in which Anderson and Baym (and others) have imprisoned it, and then to liberate quantitative methods from their forced marriage to positivism.

A (Limited) Defense of Positivism

Defending positivism in comparison to critical or cultural theories is a bit like extolling the sonnet relative to free verse, haikus, epics, or limericks: The rules governing the former can feel confining and rote in both form and subject. But there is something to be said for the discipline imposed by sonnets and positivism alike, and in both cases, close examination reveals more subtle variations than appear at first glance.

Consider the criticism, made by scholars in Anderson and Baym's "analytic/foundational" and "analytic/reflexive" quadrants, that positivist research, because of its restrictive tenets and reductionist and "administrative" tendencies (i.e., quantitative approaches to applied social problems identified, paid for, and used by "clients" ranging from foundations to governments to private businesses), limits our research questions, the way they are studied, and thus the results they produce.[10] At their most damning, critics of administrative research see it as complicit in the maintenance of institutions and practices that are anathema to economic, political, and social justice (e.g., Gitlin, 1978; McChesney, 2007). But even more moderate critiques see positivist research (whether externally funded or not) as implicitly accepting the status quo; indeed, this is precisely the conclusion Anderson and Baym's typology forces one to draw. So, for example, research demonstrating that watching entertainment media can influence U.S. viewers' assessments of and/or support for specific parties' candidates (e.g., Holbert & Hansen, 2006; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005; Young, 2004) is seen, from a critical perspective of the foundational or reflexive variety, as missing the larger point that *both* political parties are captured by elite interests.

While there is undoubtedly truth in these critiques, my point is that nothing in the *logic* of positivism prevents its application to questions emerging from either critical or cultural studies. Indeed, a central tenet of positivism is that its rules apply only to the testing of hypotheses, not to the choice of questions asked, which is inherently a creative process of imagination, invention, and induction (Hempel, 1966; Weber, 1918/1946). Consider, for example, a broad research question such as "What, if any, influence do entertainment media have on the public's relationship to politics?" Simplifying, one might approach this question from a Marxist critical theory perspective, theorizing that their impact is to produce and reinforce values consonant with capitalism, serving as one of the mechanisms by which "false consciousness" is maintained. From a more cultural (or neo-Marxist) critical theory perspective, one might argue that since the logic of capitalism contains inherent contradictions, at least some entertainment media may provide perspectives that challenge the very socioeconomic and political system that produces

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[10] In the extreme this critique oversimplifies things. Even Lazarsfeld (1948), who originated the term "administrative research," and more so his colleague Merton (1949), did qualitative research and argued for more exploratory studies leading to "middle-range" theory. Nonetheless, I draw on this critique because of its relevance to Anderson and Baym's typology. For a fuller discussion of challenges to the positivist research tradition in media effects studies, see Katz (1987).

them. A postmodern cultural studies perspective might posit that the influence of entertainment media resides not in the "author" or "text," but in the "audience," who can construct many different meanings from what they consume. And a more "mainstream" behaviorist might hypothesize that entertainment media can act much as the news does, framing issues and priming viewers in ways that influence their political opinions and/or behavior. Each of these propositions is amenable to a positivist-inspired analysis; that is, they are theory-driven, can be restated as falsifiable hypotheses, and are amenable to systematic, generalizable, and replicable quantitative research.

Though uncommon, examples of positivist research that explicitly engages with critical or cultural studies do in fact exist. For example, Holbert, Shah and Kwak (2003), building on critical cultural and feminist theories, tested the effects of prime-time television representations of women on opinions about women's rights. Finding that watching entertainment shows that modeled support for women's rights was positively associated with viewers of pro-women's-rights opinions, while similarly, watching shows that represented more conservative gender roles was associated with conservative views on women's' rights, they noted in their conclusion that "These relationships reflect the insights of several feminist and sociological media studies scholars" (p. 56). And Gerbner's research on cultivation analysis, cited earlier, is explicitly based on a melding of critical and positivist theory. Even when positivist research is less explicitly connected to critical or cultural studies, it can still be relevant to the latter, for example, in research on how watching crime dramas affects public attitudes toward issues such as defendants' rights, criminal justice policy, and even race (e.g., Carlson, 1985; Kort-Butler & Hartshorn, 2011).

Of course much existing positivist research is likely to be considered irrelevant by critical or cultural scholars, and a minority of positivist-oriented scholars are likely to be interested in tying their research to critical or cultural theories. But this is not germane to my point. What I am suggesting is that axiological (i.e., value-driven) and praxeological (i.e. methods-driven) choices are not determinative of this choice; rather they can vary in more complicated and interesting ways than Anderson and Baym's typology suggests.

Thus far I have focused more heavily on the "foundational" quadrants of Anderson and Baym's typology, but what of their empirical/reflexive and analytic/reflexive quadrants? Isn't positivists' presumed ontological and epistemological tenet that there is an objective reality that is knowable beyond the meaning we ascribe to it at odds with the reflexive social constructionism found in these latter two quadrants? My answer is no. Nothing in the social science conceptualization of objective reality *requires* that the "reality" being observed or manipulated "objectively" be material in the same sense that genes or germs are (ontology); all that is required is that they be *knowable* objectively (epistemology). Indeed, few researchers in the positivist tradition would quarrel with the notion that the meanings attributed to social phenomena are socially constructed and contextually dependent. What is open to debate is the extent to which socially constructed meaning can be assessed according to its relationship to material or "objective" conditions (i.e., where on the ontological continua one stands), and the extent to which researchers can remove themselves enough from the object of study to observe it with some degree of objectivity (i.e., where on the epistemological continuum one stands). But these are issues of debate for cultural or critical studies scholars and positivists alike. In short, by allowing choices of ontology and epistemology to be made independently of each other, and by acknowledging that scholars can vary in their location on these

continua, one can imagine a very different, more porous and more interesting mix of research communities than typically imagined.

Finally, what of the axiological critique of positivism's "value free" approach to research (a critique emerging most clearly from Anderson and Baym's analytical/reflexive quadrant)? Here again I believe this divide is less stark than presented, and rests on too narrow an understanding of the positivist meaning of "value free." This tenet refers to the design and execution of research and not to the purpose of the research (which is *always* driven by some value and can be, and often is, driven by an interest in social, political, economic, or cultural change) or (except for the obvious commitment to ethics and accuracy) to how results are interpreted or used; praxeology is not determinative of axiology.

Of course positivists would argue against allowing one's values or ideology to become so dominant as to blind researchers to the possibility of being wrong (Berger, Roloff, & Ewoldsen, 2010), but so too would critical or cultural studies scholars. On this point Althaus (2012) is particularly instructive. He argues that although normative *assumptions* and normative *assertions* are quite common in social science research, the former are often unexamined and the latter often "appear as throwaway lines in an empirical study's concluding discussion or as preparatory throat-clearing before an empirical study is introduced" (p. 97). In place of this he calls for normative *assessment*:

> Normative assessment makes no claim about how the empirical world ought to be. It focuses instead on clarifying how empirical findings may hold implications for different schools of thought that themselves make claims about how the world ought to be. . . . Normative assessment is therefore more like appraisal than argument. (pp. 98–99)

In coming to positivism's defense, I am *not* arguing for its superiority over other forms of knowing. Nor am I unaware of its theoretical and applied limitations. For example, its strong claims of gradually and cumulatively approaching a "truer" understanding of social phenomena (akin to the natural sciences) seem dubious, especially in the "hyperreal" information environment in which we now live (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). After more than half a century of research, competing theories of how media influence human attitudes and actions abound and proliferate with little evidence of the convergence a strong version of positivism would expect (Craig, 1993). The principle of falsification, while systematically applied within individual studies, is at best loosely applied in the aggregate, with null results seldom leading to the rejection of a theory.[11] Statistically significant findings of even the best positivist observational studies rarely explain more than a small percentage of variance, while the sometimes stronger findings of controlled experiments do so at the expense of external validity, suggesting that a good deal of what drives human thought and action is being missed. And while not inherent to positivism, issues of funding, methodological limits, data quality, and so forth can skew research questions in conservative, individualist, and reductionist directions. Nonetheless, these shortcomings do not outweigh the benefits that come with the discipline imposed by a positivist approach

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[11] But it is worth noting that the logic of falsification—that one can *never* prove a theory as "true"—is on reflection an ontological stance that has more in common with reflexive approaches than is often appreciated.

to social research. In many ways, positivism, at least as applied to the social world, is as much or more an axiological choice as an ontological, epistemological, and praxeological one. By this I mean it is aspirational; it is based on a set of beliefs (and rules to keep us true to these beliefs) regarding the value of such things as objectivity, replicability,[12] generalizability, falsifiability, and our role as researchers. It is as much about the values of "truthfulness" and "truth seeking" as it is about finding "the truth" (Williams, 2002).

Decoupling Quantitative Research from Positivism

I have argued that the ontological, epistemological, and axiological boundaries of communication research are more porous than Anderson and Baym's typology allows, and that a positivist orientation can "travel" better and farther than they claim. At a minimum, this suggests that research in the positivist, cultural studies, and critical studies traditions can complement and supplement each other. In this section, I argue that quantitative methods, decoupled from the more restrictive (and questionable) tenets of positivism, can be a useful tool (praxeology) for cultural and critical studies scholars of an empirical/reflexive persuasion, allowing for not just complementary or supplementary research, but true collaborative research.

Quantitative methods (e.g., survey research, experiments, content analysis, aggregate data analysis) all have elements associated with positivism: well-specified rules regarding their design and execution intended to assure (or at least determine) the validity, reliability, statistical and substantive significance, generalizability, and/or replicability of findings. What is *not* inherent in these methods is positivism's insistence on hypotheses deduced from theory, falsifiability as a principle, beliefs that generalized causal processes exist and can be objectively identified, or beliefs that knowledge is progressive and cumulative. For this reason, while it is difficult to imagine positivist research absent quantitative methods, it is not hard to picture the use of quantitative methods from a non-positivist perspective.

Indeed, such research is common under the rubric of "descriptive" or "exploratory" research. And while positivists view these studies as mere precursors to formal hypothesis testing, there is nothing that makes this next step necessary. It requires only a small leap of imagination to see that descriptive or exploratory quantitative research shares an important quality with the nonquantitative methods (e.g., ethnography, participant observation, depth interviews, focus groups, discourse and conversation analyses, audience studies, histography, case studies) employed by researchers in Anderson and Baym's empirical/reflexive quadrant—that is, a grounded, iterative, and inductive approach to data gathering, analysis, interpretation, and theory building.[13] Both approaches use "data" to weave descriptive or interpretive narratives and arguments, and to "generalize" to some larger "population." Both are

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[12] See Benoit and Holbert (2008) on the value/purposes of replication and the possibilities of replicating across quantitative and qualitative studies, as well as on the relative dearth of replication despite positivist claims regarding its importance.

[13] Consider, e.g., Merton's (1949) view, influenced by his collaboration with Lazarsfeld, that exploratory research of the kind I am describing is crucial to developing middle-range theories.

concerned with issues of "validity" and "reliability." What *is* different is the language used to describe these research processes and concerns, understandings of what constitutes appropriate data, and the rules of evidence that guide research.

Consider again the question "What, if any, influence do entertainment media have on the public's relationship to politics?" Imagine two scholars interested in addressing this question as it applies to the HBO cable series *The Wire*. Both agree that this requires considering the "author," "text," and "audience." Both agree that context matters; that is, that one must consider the institutions and processes of cultural production in which authors create texts, as well as the individual and collective experiences and circumstances audiences bring to their interpretation of them. Both agree that political meaning is socially constructed out of this complex interaction (i.e., that both producers and consumers are "semiautonomous" actors). Both agree that some combination of textual and discourse analysis and hermeneutics (i.e., understanding how, if at all, producers and consumers of popular culture ascribe political meaning to it through an iterative, grounded theory approach) is the appropriate method to use. And both are interested in this topic because they believe it might somehow contribute to improving democratic practice.

Imagine that the first scholar approaches this research quantitatively. She develops a visual and textual coding scheme (based on her own viewing of *The Wire*) and trains students to code all or a random sample of the episodes, with multiple students coding a percentage of the episodes to formally test for reliability. She constructs and administers two surveys: one of the writers, directors, and producers of *The Wire*, asking both open- and closed-ended questions about their political perspectives, motivations for the series, working conditions, economic pressures, and so on; and a second survey of HBO subscribers, asking a series of social, cultural, and political attitudinal and behavioral questions as well as demographic ones. Her viewer survey also allows her to identify regular watchers of *The Wire*, whom she asks additional questions specific to the series. She has no formal hypotheses, but rather uses her data and quantitative analyses to construct a descriptive and interpretive narrative. From this narrative emerges an argument regarding the way in which political meaning is embedded in and emerges from *The Wire.* She ends by extrapolating from this example to a larger, if still emergent "middle-range theory" of the political significance of entertainment media and its potential for enhancing or stunting democratic practice, a theory that might be developed (and perhaps even more formally "tested") through replication of various kinds (Benoit & Holbert, 2008).

Now imagine that the second scholar addresses the question from an "empirical/reflexive" perspective. He provides his own close reading of *The Wire*, drawing out generalizations supported by examples in an iterative fashion. He visits with writers, producers, and directors, interviewing them in depth. He also speaks to purposively but nonrandomly selected viewers of *The Wire*, using a loosely structured interview protocol designed to better understand their views about politics generally, about *The Wire* more specifically, and about the relationship between the two. He has no hardened expectations, but rather uses these data and qualitative analyses to construct a descriptive and interpretive narrative. From this narrative emerges an argument regarding the way in which political meaning is embedded in and emerges from *The Wire*. He ends by extrapolating from this example to a larger, if still emergent theory

regarding the potential political significance of entertainment media and its potential for enhancing or stunting democratic practice.

I would argue that that ontologically and axiologically, the two hypothetical scholars are identical twins, epistemologically they are fraternal twins, and praxeologically they are siblings, and that this or other topics of interest to communication scholars can be studied empirically, reflexively, qualitatively, *and* quantitatively. But is value added by combining quantitative and qualitative methods? Yes, because they complement one another's strengths and weaknesses. Quantitative methods excel in systematically analyzing large amounts of data; formally assessing whether patterns and relationships are due to chance; parsing and specifying interrelationships among components of complex systems and processes; identifying factors that may moderate, mediate, or confound[14] relationships of central interest; generalizing conclusions to larger populations and different situations; allowing replication; and limiting or at least making evident the extent to which a scholar's biases might influence results. Qualitative research excels in providing descriptive and analytic depth; problematizing and complicating social phenomena and our interpretation of them in ways that arguably more closely reflect how they actually operate, allowing greater latitude (and thus more opportunities for discovery) in the interpretation of data; addressing issues that may (for practical or conceptual reasons) be less accessible through quantitative research; grasping the importance of context; and more consciously and purposefully acknowledging people as self-aware collaborators in the making of meaning rather than simply "subjects" or "respondents."

Moreover, combining praxeological (i.e., methodological) differences with ontological, epistemological, and axiological similarities seems ideal for effectively triangulating results, thus adding confidence to interpretations and/or identifying areas of disagreement to be resolved. Indeed, if our two hypothetical researchers decided to work together from the start, then their combined project, in its theoretical assumptions, research design, findings, and interpretations, likely would be stronger than the simple sum of its parts (e.g., Baym & Shah, 2011; Curran, Iyengar, Lund, & Salovaara-Moring, 2009).

Breaking Philosophic Boundaries Through the Study of Entertainment and Politics?

The hope that positivists and scholars of critical studies and cultural studies might learn from and/or work with each other, or that quantitative and qualitative research might productively be combined, is not new. Lazarsfeld himself attempted the former (unsuccessfully) through his collaboration with C. Wright Mills and his interactions with other members of the Frankfurt School, and the latter (more successfully) in his collaborations with Merton. More recently the eminent critical and cultural scholar James Curran teamed with Shanto Iyengar, a leading positivist researcher, to explore the relative impacts of public and private media systems on citizens' political knowledge (Curran et al., 2009). More directly relevant to this volume, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) used survey research to argue that preferences for food, music, art, and fashion operate to instill, maintain, and naturalize hegemonic class structures, and

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[14] In quantitative research, "moderators" are variables that help explain the conditions under which a hypothesized relationship is likely to occur, "mediators" are variables that help explain the process through which a relationship occurs, and "confounders" are variables that may be the underlying cause of a relationship between two other variables.

Gerbner and colleagues' research on cultivation theory was a decades-long effort to meld critical, cultural and quantitative research.

The growing interest in entertainment and politics among scholars of different philosophic stripes offers a promising opportunity to again rethink the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and praxeological boundaries in our field. This is so for several reasons. The study of entertainment and politics is underdeveloped enough that no extant approach to the study of communication or politics can lay claim to it, which creates a kind of demilitarized zone for sharing, experimentation, and collaboration. Because popular culture is more obviously and self-consciously an interpretation of social reality than is news, the need for a reflexive, constructivist approach to studying it is more evident. In addition, popular culture embeds politics in what Gamson (1999) calls "the life-world," or a context "that engages the audience on an emotional level, bases truth claims on experiential knowledge, and treats the audience as being physically present within the program" (Holbert, 2005, p. 438; see also Cantor's 1999 work on *The Simpsons*), making it ripe for the insights and methods of "reflexive" scholars. At the same time, the potential for centrally produced and widely disseminated and consumed entertainment to cultivate (à la Gerbner or Bourdieu) worldviews that are antithetical to material facts or enlightened self-interests suggests the need for foundational ontologies and epistemologies of both the critical and positivist variety. This need/opportunity is reinforced by the fact that cultural studies is undergoing a period of serious self-reflection, with some of its founding figures lamenting its move away from the political and the critical, as well as from what Anderson and Baym would call its analytical and foundational roots (Turner, 2012).

Most centrally, however, the current moment is particularly propitious because digital technologies and their interplay with economics, politics, and culture are complicating the relationship between producers and consumers, fact and opinion, fiction and nonfiction, and so forth, in ways that can be politically liberating, imprisoning, and/or distracting. The sheer scope, variety, and hybridization (Holbert & Young, 2013) of popular culture and news genres, and the myriad ways mediated messages flow and morph through society, present unprecedented challenges for *all* our theories and research methods (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010). Social network sites and services (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) blur distinctions between not only entertainment and politics but also interpersonal and mass communication. The "big data" generated from Internet and mobile technologies, coupled with the development of new "computational" and "Web" science methods, many built on hybridized praxeologies, ontologies, and epistemologies (Baek, Cappella & Bindman, 2011; Garrett,Bimber, De Zuniga, Kelly & Smith, 2012; Rogers, in press), provide new opportunities for theory and research that draw on different knowledge bases and skill sets (in the area of entertainment and politics, e.g., see Baym & Shah, 2011). In short, a focus on popular culture in the context of the more complex information environment in which it is currently produced, disseminated, and consumed cries out for collaborative rethinking of how we conceptualize and study not only politically relevant media, but also "politics" itself (Bennett, 2008; Dahlgren, 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011).

Taking advantage of this moment will admittedly be no easy task, but will require a significant shift in thinking among critical, cultural, and positivist political communication scholars alike. Nonetheless, past research such as that by Gerbner provides some evidence that the enterprise I am advocating is possible. Or consider the rich body of research on audience reception. This area of study—a topic of

interest to cultural, critical, and positivist researchers (in the latter case most often under the rubric of "uses and gratifications" and/or "media effects")—is well developed theoretically, has a history of being applied to both news and entertainment genres, tends to be open to a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods, has explored the link between entertainment and politics, and is already engaged in revisiting its assumptions and findings in light of the changing information environment (e.g., Livingstone, 1993, 1998, 2003, 2004; Nightingale, 2011). As such it can serve as a useful exemplar, and perhaps entry point, to a more collaborative, networked vision and version of research on entertainment and politics. Should this effort succeed, I believe it could remix ontological, epistemological, axiological, and praxeological underpinnings in exciting and groundbreaking ways, and in doing so, reap benefits for the collective understanding of the theory and practice of not only entertainment and politics, but also political communication more broadly.

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