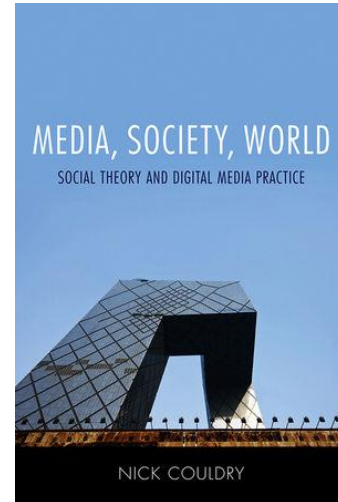


Nick Couldry, **Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice**, Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012, 242 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

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Where many scholarly syntheses of significant media theory remain bound to a media-centric approach, Nick Couldry's **Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice** advocates a socially oriented media theory grounded in the analysis of everyday action and habits of use. Couldry aims to address the question of "what people are doing in relation to media in the contexts in which they act" (p. 35). He contrasts his approach—media practice theory—with other important lenses for media research: media as text, political economy, the technical properties of media, and social use. In detailing a potential new paradigm for media research, Couldry extracts insights from each strand of thinking and retains an emphatic focus on the subtle ways media impacts our lives through the development of practices, complexes of practices, and evolving intersections of cultural production and consumption. Thus, Couldry sidesteps broad hype about the digital revolution by asking concrete practice-oriented questions and using empirical evidence to negotiate the shifts and continuities between mass media forms like television and newer digital forms like mobile phones and social networking sites.



Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Media Practice offers a comprehensive theoretical survey interweaving the fields of media studies and sociology. Its central contribution is its contention that *media* should be understood as "a vast domain of practices, that, like all practices, are social at a basic level through the very acts that stabilize them as practices and distinguish specific practices from each other" (p. 44). In explicating this socially oriented media theory, Couldry aims to provide readers with a conceptual tool kit for analyzing media's imbrication in social space. The book's overarching concern is to improve our understanding of media's contributions to knowledge, agency, and ethics. To accomplish this, Couldry expounds on social theory that privileges media representations, power over representations, and technologies of representation as they enact social order. As such, he avoids a media-centric approach and seeks to complement political economy research by focusing on habit and a practice-oriented approach that is fundamentally concerned with action, relations of power, and social order.

The book is organized into two identifiable sections: the first concerned with outlining media as practice, the second with its consequences for power, social and political change, and ethics. Chapter 1, the introduction, examines six types of uncertainty introduced by "the digital revolution" that media research cannot afford to ignore: namely, identifying media, our media habits, the economic viability of those habits, the sociopolitical status of media institutions, the scale of media's consequences, and the ethical implications of this media-saturated culture. Chapter 2 attempts to move beyond digital media

hype in providing an overview of practice theory to clarify how and why media should be viewed as a heterogeneous set of practices for acting in and organizing the world. Building on this, as does the rest of the book, chapter 3 draws on Couldry's previous work on media and rituals in examining media institutions and the myth of the mediated center. Chapter 4 goes on to describe the consequences of these media rituals, paying specific attention to the symbolic violence done to certain groups through the ways in which invisible institutional practices shape the social. Chapter 5 interrogates the hype about the digital revolution and the claims that it has fundamentally transformed possibilities for political action as well as the kinds of social formation available to us. Chapter 6 examines other fields of practice—such as education, medicine, law, and politics—to illustrate the impact of media, utilizing an original application of Bourdieu's field theory to do so. In its examination of media practice on a global scale, chapter 7 reminds us that we should not privilege a Western viewpoint in our understanding of media cultures. Finally, chapter 8 considers ethics, justice, and what it means to live a good life, as well as the role of media in attaining that goal.

On the whole, Couldry does an admirable job meeting the objectives he sets for the project. Drawing on an extensive bibliography, *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Media Practice* at minimum posits starting points and intriguing questions, as with Ricoeur's limit situation in chapter 8, and at most the book unpacks theoretical frameworks in order to rethink the space of the social, such as the use of Bourdieu's field theory in chapter 6. Chapters 6 and 8 especially offer a refreshing take on media research in their application of field theory and linkage to media ethics, respectively. Chapter 8 presents a broad overview of Aristotelian ethics and MacIntyrean virtues, which propose a moral framework for developing a good character and living a good life. As MacIntyre focuses on practice as the first stage in the development of virtue, this ethical framework is less unexpected than it initially appears. Couldry deftly summarizes ethical theory and applied ethics in media, leading to a conclusion that neither renders judgment nor makes broad claims about the digital condition: Rather, it is satisfyingly open-ended in its suggestion that the real significance of a practice-oriented approach is that it facilitates ethics, justice, and the good life, and that future scholarship ought to account for this as well. The end result is a fully fleshed theoretical framework with real utility for media research.

That said, in spite of—or perhaps because of—its ambitiousness, *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Media Practice* is lacking in certain regards. It admirably summates media theory but seems less comprehensive in its treatment of social theory, sketching initial trajectories for questions it compellingly introduces and sets out to answer. The final chapter exemplifies this, as it is the most interesting twist in the book's self-professed unstraightforward journey, and, given the space constraints of a single chapter, is circumscribed in its overview of ethical theory. Although Couldry himself notes this chapter is merely a starting point, further exploration may have made his conclusion more compelling.

However, these are minor criticisms in a book that impressively outlines a new line of thinking in media research. In keeping with its content aims, the book is accessible across disciplines, particularly the field of sociology on which it heavily relies, and could easily be incorporated into introductory graduate courses in media and sociology, especially given that each chapter concludes with examples of how to apply the concepts at hand.

Ultimately, *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice* productively intervenes in typical theoretical frameworks and is thus a valuable contribution to media theory literature.