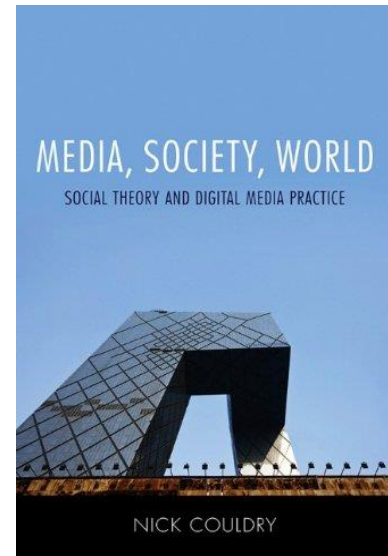


Nick Couldry, **Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice**, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012, 242 pp., \$23.70 (paperback).

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Nick Couldry's latest single-authored volume synthesizes his trajectory in the field of media and communication research for more than a decade and, in doing so, opens up the field for renewed reflection on a central question that was expressed in a book title by one of his mentors, acknowledged in the Preface, the late Roger Silverstone: *Why study the media?* (Silverstone, 1999). While unsurprisingly and unrelentingly critical in its general approach to the study of media and communicative practices, the greater ambition of the book is suggested by its terminology in several instances, including an extended treatment (pp. 162–179) of the "human needs" that media and communication could be expected to address. Per the title, we should study the media to both interpret and change not only contemporary society, but the world, discursively and materially.



Media, Society, World returns to a common complaint in interdisciplinary research over the last two decades, namely, that a general social theory of media and communication has not been forthcoming. Criticisms have been directed both at the present field, which, arguably, has been overly media-centric, and at other social sciences, which have tended to neglect the constitutive role of media institutions and communicative practices in the ongoing structuration of society (Giddens, 1984). To remedy this situation, Couldry departs from a middle-range model of theory development, focusing on the variety of those "media-related" practices (p. 35) that link media and society. His aim is to complement the long critical political-economy tradition with an equally critical account of how politics and economy intersect to constrain the mundane communicative practices that people engage in on a daily basis, with reference to the current digital media environment.

A total of eight chapters offer, on the one hand, a rich and probing overview of classic sources of social theory—from Émile Durkheim, via Norbert Elias, to Pierre Bourdieu, whose conception of different and conflicted social fields occupies a key position in the overall argument. On the other hand, contributors to studies of "new" or digital media—Henry Jenkins, Yochai Benkler, and Manuel Castells, in particular—are reviewed and criticized. Against this background of classic and recent theories, the author presents his own argument in what amounts to three steps.

First, Couldry outlines an understanding of "media as practice," which is a welcome attempt to specify the media-society link for future theoretical and empirical work. At the same time, the treatment

of media-related practices is brief, and appears quite preliminary in its conceptions and operationalizations, moving from "single media-related practices . . . to more complex practices" (p. 44). Rather than any comprehensive typology, the pivotal chapter 2 presents a list of such practices with exemplifications, covering broad individual as well as collective activities such as searching for, archiving, and commenting on information in and through media. One difficulty may derive from the conceptual starting point of the argument: Communication and contestation, evidently, are practices; it is less clear in what sense(s) media constitute practices in themselves and, hence, how other social practices "relate" to media.

In a second step, Couldry couples media-related practices to traditional issues in social theory concerning social structure, in the specific sense of power. Depending on how social structure is articulated and enacted through abstract institutions as well as concrete discourses, with practices as an intermediate concept, it may not serve human needs, but the interests of power, broadly speaking. The author here returns to his own earlier work on a particular notion of "media rituals" (Couldry, 2003). In the volume under review, he helpfully summarizes his definition of media rituals as "social forms that naturalize media's consistent will-to-power, that is, media's claim to offer privileged access to a common reality to which we must pay attention" (p. 66). In a further condensation, this is "the myth of the mediated center" (p. 67). One accomplishment of the latest volume is that it elaborates how it is the categories of understanding of the majority population, as manifested in their everyday practices, rather than any ideology in the sense of a system of false beliefs, which keep in place the social status quo. Recalling the work of Sennett and Cobb (1972) on "the hidden injuries of class," Couldry includes a chapter entitled "Media and the hidden shaping of the social," which might have been called, "The hidden injuries of media."

Like the 2003 volume, the 2012 publication raises questions of what could be the alternatives to the mediated center, and what might be their prospects. Considering much recent research and public debate that has trusted networked media to decenter the (myth of the) mediated center, Couldry worries that events like the Arab Spring, as facilitated by social media, might generate "a *counter-myth* of the mediated center, working against existing state/media relations" (p. 130). Whereas, in the end, such myths pose historical and empirical questions, the author takes the burden of the evidence so far to confirm the original myth of the mediated center. Still, this line of argument would seem to raise a more fundamental question: Is the mediated center actually a myth? Along the way, Couldry seems to both affirm and deny this. While mostly characterizing and critiquing the mediated center as a fact, he also notes the divide between "those with access to media's vast concentrations of representational power and those without such access." And he goes on: "The organization of society around media institutions that benefit from a huge concentration of symbolic power generates a *lack* at the heart of daily life: the "lack" constituted by living outside the world presented to us by media" (p. 89). Humans need access to media; media are necessary conditions of defining human needs, and of working out the social means to the social end of meeting these needs. It is difficult to imagine a society and a world in which media do not serve as devices of centering attention and agendas, however contestable and contingent. As a social theory of media, the very idea of the myth of a mediated center may assign too much presumed power to the media, and too little to the practices relating them to society. It might even serve to reaffirm what it purports to deconstruct. An alternative explanation of the state of the media in the world could be termed

“the myth of mediated power”: Because media are omnipresent mediators of social structure and human agency, it is easy to overrate the importance of both media representations and media institutions in themselves. Media are one of many resources for changing the world through multiple social practices, only some of which are specifically media-related—in the perspective of a general social theory of media and communication.

In what is perhaps the most innovative contribution of the volume, the third step of Couldry’s argument begins to address ethics, justice, and other normative aspects of communication theory. The last chapter goes some way toward substantiating the claim that, “This chapter’s argument, and indeed that of this whole book, is ultimately practical” (p. 182). The chapter diagnoses the absence of sustained theory development regarding both media and media studies as fundamentally normative enterprises, beyond the most common notions of critical research. Once again, the terminology relates media and communication to the reality and quality of “life on earth” (p. 209). While, as always, one may debate the book’s priorities and selections from the philosophical pantheon of politics and ethics, the concluding chapter presents an essential call for media and communication research to reconsider itself as, in part, a practical discipline (Craig, 1989), with potentials and obligations when it comes to explicating and advancing media-related human needs, interests, and rights. This is one reason why one should study the media, and why students of media should read Nick Couldry’s latest work.

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