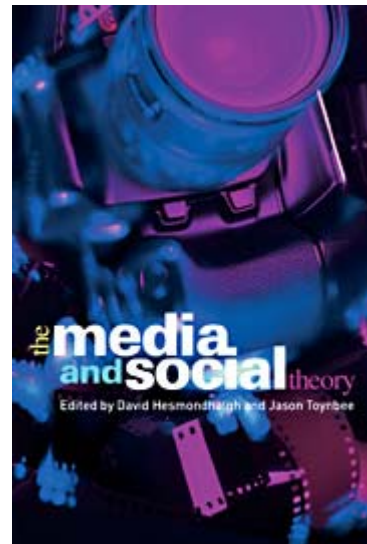


David Hesmondhalgh and Jason Toynbee (Eds.), **The Media and Social Theory**, Routledge, 2008, 312 pp., \$180.00 (hardcover), \$51.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Emily West
University of Massachusetts Amherst

The Media and Social Theory (Routledge, 2008), edited by David Hesmondhalgh and Jason Toynbee, takes as its premise that media studies lacks sufficient attention to social theory, and as a result, has thus far failed to construct a comprehensive theoretical understanding of how media relate to, or rather operate as part of, society. The editors' parameters for what they mean by media studies is roughly equivalent to research informed by British Cultural Studies, critical theory, and political economy with roots in Marx. Effects research is not included in the scope of media studies, and indeed, is dismissed none too carefully in more than one chapter, as is the so-called "active audience" tradition in cultural studies, which is arguably caricatured and used to misrepresent the entire tradition of cultural studies more than once. The contributors, for the most part, hail from British and American institutions, with some contributions from Canada and Finland. Indeed, many of the contributors were in attendance at the CRESC (Center for Research on Socio-Cultural Change, sponsored by the ESRC) Conference on Media Change and Social Theory which took place in the UK in 2006.



The social theories of interest here are, for the most part, from European sociology and political philosophy. The Frankfurt School, particularly newer members such as Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser, are given their due, as are Pierre Bourdieu, David Harvey, Chantal Mouffe, Anthony Giddens, John B. Thompson, and Roy Bhaskar. This is not to suggest that the volume, which consists of contributions from 16 scholars, including both established and emerging voices, is univocal in its vision for how media studies should speak to, and better incorporate, social theory. However, there are certain themes and topics that the volume points to as requiring more research and more nuanced theorization.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, neoliberalism is a running thread throughout much of the volume, across the thematic sections which include Power and Democracy, Spatial Inequalities, Spectacle and the Self, and Media Labour and Production. It is the organizing theoretical foundation to many of the chapters in the Self and Labour sections of the book, including Helen Wood and Bev Skegg's argument that the makeover impulse of reality TV must be understood through the lens of class and the production of neoliberal subjects; Alison Hearn's tracing of the branded self across management literature, reality TV, and social networking; and Toby Miller's concern with the imposition of flexibility and precariousness on the workers who produce the media and culture we consume. Matt Stahl fleshes out Miller's concern with

a close reading of the rock documentary *Digi!*, in which he argues that the struggles of the rock musician to “walk the line” between creative autonomy and market success is a metonym for the transformation of labor relations brought about by neoliberalism.

In his chapter, David Hesmondhalgh continues the focus on cultural labor with his attention to how, through the regime of copyright, neoliberalism and its attendant capitalist imperialism privatize and commodify forms of culture and knowledge formerly belonging to the commons. His chapter is in implicit dialogue with Faye Ginsburg’s, in which she highlights how indigenous media practices challenge the way capitalist imperialism commodifies cultural knowledge and creativity, as well as conventional formulations of the “Digital Age.” While Ginsburg urges us to rethink the Digital Age by de-centering our sense of communicative and cultural power away from hegemonic centers and forces, Annabelle Sreberny argues for a “new communicative spatiality,” one in which a global level of public opinion can exist for the first time, responding to events and messages in ways that hegemonic powers may not anticipate.

While a number of chapters trace the detrimental impacts of neoliberalism on the autonomous, laboring, creative self, Daniel Hallin traces the impact of intensified market forces on journalism across Europe, the United States, and Latin America. He uses these historical case studies to note that the development of neoliberal economic policies has had different outcomes for the role that journalism plays in democracy, depending on the other historical and structural forces at play. Where he ends up is, I think, worth quoting at length here:

. . . we need to avoid dichotomous understandings in which the forces discussed here — the market, new social movements, individualization and secularization, professionalism — are placed neatly into camps of good and evil. The market is not consistently pro- or anti-democracy; neither is journalistic professionalism; neither are social movements or the political culture of populism; they are all deeply ambivalent in their relation to democracy, in part because of the ways they have mutually shaped each other. We also need to avoid the trap of assuming that a critical analysis needs to posit a Golden Age and then to analyze social change as a unilinear decline from that Golden Age . . .
(Hallin, 2008, pp. 55-56)

What Hallin addresses is a call that the editors make in their introduction — that media scholars be careful and explicit in the normative assumptions or premises from which they work. Some of the previously mentioned chapters informed by neoliberalism might productively take up this call, making more explicit how the self-market relation has changed from previous economic formations, and what kind of self-market relation is envisioned as the normative good against which contemporary relations are being compared. The project of interrogating normative premises is taken up by other contributors, such as John Downey, who argues in his chapter for using Honneth’s principle of mutual recognition as the normative basis for studying the media in society, and Kari Karppinen, who challenges the tendency to assume that “pluralism is always good” by arguing for Mouffe’s conceptualization of radical pluralism as a theoretically and ethically sound normative foundation.

There is an interesting pushback against conventional ways of thinking about cosmopolitanism and transnationalism in two chapters. Philip Schlesinger reasserts the relevance of national public spheres against the assumption of a growing cosmopolitanism in the European Union. Purnima Mankekar, while reaffirming the connections between media, mobility, and transnationality, concludes that an important function of media for mobile audiences is to reproduce nationalist affect and nostalgia from a distance. Another connection across three chapters that appear in three different sections of the book is about the construction of media and journalistic authority. This theme is addressed by Hallin; explored by Nick Couldry, who argues eloquently for using ritual theory to explore how representations construct media legitimacy; and by Christopher Anderson in a concise summary of “three strands” in journalism studies, including Bourdieu’s field theory, which he argues will be the most useful as journalists’ cultural authority, as well as political and economic power, undergoes rapid transformation.

The chapters vary in the level of theorizing for which they aim. While the editors are keen that media studies develop a comprehensive meta-theory of the media in society, many contributors focus their efforts on theories of the middle-range, refining concepts and theoretical frameworks by putting them in dialogue with social phenomena. Couldry captures this more modest goal for what theory can do for us when he writes

. . . theory is useful only if through its relative generality it enables us to engage better with the particular, that is, for better tools with which to practise our *suspicion towards* totalising claims, whether by academics, politicians, or media executives. (p. 161)

A few chapters aim for the development or promotion of a grander sort of media theory. However, it’s never made clear how any theory can comprehensively and satisfactorily address the micro and macro, the dynamics of structure and agency, the sites of production, institutions, and reception, and developments all across the globe in one fell swoop. These calls for expansiveness are on more solid ground when they call for greater attention to under-studied aspects of media or of relations between media and the social, as a way to transform the ruts and routines of media studies as it is too commonly done.

While the editors hope for the incorporation of the best theories, or the development of an integrative and comprehensive theory of media and society, this reader came away from the volume thinking less that there is a particular theory or theories that can “save” media studies, than that there is an optimal balance between theory and data. The most compelling pieces here engage seriously with both, making the relevance, purchase, and power of any particular theoretical framework or concept evident in the work that it does for a particular social puzzle or problem.

While the book’s back cover suggests that undergraduates might be part of the volume’s target market, it is much more suitable for graduate students and faculty who are interested in keeping up with emerging debates and theorists in this part of the media studies field. For the most part, the contributors deliver clear positions in remarkably short chapter lengths, making this volume useful as a series of entry points into broader intellectual debates.