



The Media and Social Theory

FORUM ISSUE:

In the U.S. and worldwide, changes linked to information based technologies, the rise of multiple public spheres, and globalization have raised pressing questions about the relation between the mass media and social theory. To what extent do changes in the mass media and mass communications require a rethinking of the meaning and structure of social theory and social knowledge? And how do, and should, current perspectives and debates in social theory make sense of these changes?

Telecommunications and Social Theory

by Patricia T. Clough

Since the 1980's, deregulation has led to intense competition in the development of telecommunications. Cable services, satellite systems, interactive CD and video games, VCR innovation and camrecorders all have moved the apparatus of television beyond a broadcast model. Zapping, time shifting, multiple forms of storage and replay have become reference points of a vision to interface high density television and the Net, making use of what is described as push-pull programming. Push programming means a transfer of television watching to the computer as the activity of browsing the Net is drawn back into the machine moving it further from the user's consciousness. It means cascades of information, across various sites--phone, PC, wrist watch, miniature TV monitors. Without waiting for the user, he or she will be informed

about traffic and how to get around it, the stock market's ups and downs, shopping opportunities, updates on personalized information needs, world wide reporting of disasters and local news. There still will be pull programming which the user chooses, the option to turn to old movies, reruns of TV sitcoms, video games and sources of various

abstract knowledges. Part of this vision is the availability of banks of information about each of us--not only demographics of all sorts but also the more general treatment of individuals as ontologically specific databases of genetic information that can be exchanged among agents that may just as easily be computer programs as people.

Such a vision is part of the accumulation of capital in the speed of Information-transfer, connected to globalized flexible production in postmodernity, when television images directly intermingle with the turnover times of world-wide economies of data, labor, populations and money. But the

vision of telecommunications is not only driven by capital. In fact, telecommunications makes more apparent that a will to record and transmit everything everywhere to everyone all of the time has been driving the technological development of mass media from the start. It is the will to power/knowledge. Our criticism of telecommunications, therefore, must be tempered by an awareness of our complicity with its will to power/knowledge. For this reason, telecommunications presents social theorists with meta-discursive questions about the assumptions informing the sociological project tout court. In so brief a statement, I can only touch on two such questions. The first concerns the discourse on democracy.

In modern western thought, the discourse on democracy has leaned on the assumption that private needs of family members are socialized through the public sphere which is distinct from state and civil society and therefore can be both sensitive

to these needs and shape them into a consensus with which to stand against what is judged to be illegitimate deployments of force by the state. Given the development of mass mediated cultures and mass consumption, the discourse on democracy has been theoretically reshaped, giving the educative function over to civil society in keeping with a 'consumerist-humanism'—part of a history of theoretical discourse, with Hegel at its start, and first aimed at socializing the working class for participation in the state. While Gramsci theorized that the educative function of civil society would lead to extended democratic processes, Foucault imagined the state's power reaching each of us through disciplining institutions of civil society—the family, labor union, the school. But, both of these elaborations of Hegel's thought now seem politically ineffectual, when information rather than labor is central to production and the socialization of labor is no longer urgent or when telecommunications makes it possible for there to be many points for the application of power/knowledge with something other than socialization as the aim.

Of course, western feminist theorists, who have questioned the place of women in all of this, already have made the configuration of family, private and public spheres, state and civil society tremble. But where political presents are being (re)structured in the wake of colonialism, this configuration assumed in the discourse on democracy has been more severely challenged. In these contexts, it may not be enough to think that the configuration assumed in the discourse of democracy has been frustrated and needs only to be

encouraged. Instead other ways of thinking about freedom, rights, self-determination and resistance may be altogether necessary. The point is that just when telecommunications may make questions about democracy pressing, the configuration assumed in the discourse on democracy seems both too rigid and too fragile a standard for assessing political institutions locally and globally. Even recent treatments of multiple public spheres, or 'subaltern publics,' to use Nancy Fraser's term, seem to me not to cut away enough from the configuration that has informed discourse on democracy.

Furthermore, given that it is based on recent demands for recognition made by those of the new social movements, the thought of subaltern publics hurries to address the unequal distribution of resources for self-representation, without taking into account the shift to the network of telecommunications. While access to telecommunications is politically urgent, telecommunications is not primarily about representation. It is not a subject system. Telecommunications no longer allows technology to be perceived only as a perfecting of the human being while maintaining the intentional knowing subject at its center as its agency; the subject is only one node in the network, and not necessarily the central node. Whatever its ideological function, telecommunications is no longer thought to be functioning ideologically by interpellating the subject to idealized versions of a culture or personal identity. What's more important is that users can and do perceive the assembly of images, meanings, voices, sights and events as belonging to the

technology, itself. I would even argue that technology should no longer be thought of as opposed to nature but must be thought of as nature deferred and therefore having agencies other than human agency. We might even come to realize that the deconstruction of the Subject is thought meant to touch the ontic—to give the same ontological status to techne as has been given to Being in western modern philosophy. Cultural criticism of technology must rethink itself in these terms.

Let me turn to a second question, which follows on the recent development of cultural criticisms of science—from science studies to feminist criticism of technoscience to the critique of ethnography and the flowering of experimental writing in the social sciences. In so brief a statement, I can only share my intuition that the drive to cultural criticisms of science registers changes in technology, especially the becoming seamless of science and technology (including writing technologies), culture and technology, society and technology, all of which makes it difficult to go on grounding social science in the self-reflection of a researcher, regarding the impersonality of his or her descriptions in the display of his or her measurable distance from the subject matter.

With telecommunications, the effects of the reflexivity, or the embeddedness of the knower in the representation of the known, are produced with such speed that to retrace them may be impossible or uninteresting. Everything already is a reflexive repetition or iteration: both the knower and the known are images in the network of information. I think experimental writing of social science presumes

reflexivity and the effort is to find a way to play with the direction and speeds of reflexivity, cutting into loops of images, adjusting the speed and direction of information off and on bodies and lives. This, of course, is to leave off obsessing over the difference between copy and the really real and to develop a whole other way of critically grounding science in the ability to intervene in the material-semiotic apparatuses of information. We might even recognize the poststructural provocation of a "crisis of representation" as thought to touch the ontic, to give the same ontological status to the image as is given the real in modern western philosophy.

The challenge which telecommunications poses for social theory is to rethink ontology and to experiment in formulations of information, which turns out to be for democracy in the refusal of, or the interference with, its already given idealized configuration.

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by Herman Gray

From the beginning, the theoretical practice through which the discipline of sociology articulated its project faced a condition of impossibility. It sought to represent, explain, and intervene in the very condition—modernity—that produced it in the first place. Social theory was very much a product of the social forces and (changing) cultural understandings of its time.

As the new theoretical practice moved into the new

century its insights about and representations of the modern world found a measure of institutional stability, professional legitimacy, and cultural authority. As Robert Connell shows, its cultural authority was so formidable that despite challenges, social theory's account of the modern world helped to underwrite and legitimate some of modernity's key projects including conquest, practices of regulation and social control which were intended to render some of modernism's most unruly aspects manageable.

The power of the sociology's early theoretical interventions stemmed from its attempt to grapple with the very conditions of impossibility that created the necessity for it in the first place. As the new science of society found a measure of institutional stability and professional legitimacy, it's social theory managed to sustain a distinct and separate relationship to the new media and developing technologies of communication. Social theory effectively staked its project of representation and derived its authority in a manner sufficiently different from the press, literature, and mass communication such that the respective terrains of discourse with which it contended were neither threatening nor confused with it.

Today, social theory still faces a condition of impossibility with respect to the social terrain it occupies and the social world it seeks to represent. Its terrain, claims to representation, and authority are seriously challenged, encroached upon, and in some cases enabled by the new technologies, media, and process of globalization. Packaged, marketed

and circulated as it very often is through the venues and circuits of global publishing, conferences, talk shows, and the Internet—the authority of social theory and the special claims to description and explanation that it once enjoyed has eroded. In the era of new media and technology social theory faces the prospect of trying to represent a rapidly changing and reconfigured social world that seems to have left it behind. As an expression of its contemporary condition of impossibility and with so much punditry, free access to opinion on almost anything, and pervasive talk (about almost anything) in the media, could it be that social theory is increasingly muffled and therefore inaudible in it attempts to make distinctive claims on the social world?

Part of the problem may well be, as Charles Lemert and many others have noted, that modern social theory remains committed (perhaps even trapped) by categories which are no longer productive for the present. Categories like nation, subjects, geographically based populations and citizens as well as social theory's original alliance with modernity continue to inform its accounts and representations. Theories of performativity have replaced socialization, interpellation has replaced internalization, subject positions have replaced agents, and discourse has pushed social structure to the margins of contemporary theory. Post-structuralists, post-modernists, and cultural studies' scholars have variously proposed replacing modernist formulations with conceptions that are spatial rather than temporal, territorial rather than geographic, fluid rather than stable.

In this period of media saturation and new technological capabilities it seems that the project of social theory is in a crisis of representation. Representations once generated by social theory are now taken over by global media and technologies which have transformed its products (including social theory) into cultural commodities.

How then is social theory to represent a social world which it also seeks to explain, to constitute and to transform? It seems to me that the crisis of representation and the loss of authority that confronts social theory is not just about the world which it aims to represent. The crisis to which I point also goes to its very mode of representation as well. It is exacerbated by encroachments and incursions into the domain of social theory by modes and means of representation that were once objects of theoretical attention and interrogation.

Where industrialization, urbanization, migration, nation states, alienation and so on were once social domains and processes in need of theoretical representation and explanation, new technologies of representation have changed all that. Given the sheer omnipotence, increasing global saturation, and ease of access (the inequalities which they continue to structure notwithstanding) these media have steadily increased their claims and asserted their authority to represent the social world. (One illustration of this force and authority is the advertising phrase "As seen on TV") Where the new media was once the object of theoretical interrogation, social theory is very often the object of the new media. Just as often, the

new technologies are the modes through which any number of social theories circulates (e.g. Court TV is perhaps the most explicit example of this). Talk radio, reality television, the Internet and other media are the new venues where a certain kind of theoretical practice is generated. Where theory could once derive some measure of authority from claims to generalizability, in the face of the opinion polls, anecdote, the confession, the testimonial, and the journalistic expose, even such claims on behalf of social theory faces some stiff challenges and serious disbelief. (Some of this erosion of authority derives from critical challenges within the field by critical theorist, feminists, and scholars of color that demonstrate that many of claims made in the name of an impartial and disinterested social theory are in the end politically and socially interested constructions which sustain and produced forms of power and social regulation.)

Feminist theory, ethnic studies, and cultural studies have successfully persuaded many of us of the veracity of taking seriously the shadows of our past and the traces in the present as a way into the "real". In particular, Avery Gordon has offered the metaphor of "haunting" as a productive way out of the crisis of representation which social theory faces. Gordon examines the social spaces (literature, memory, absences) where social theory has feared to tread as a way of engaging theory's crisis of representation and its erosion power.

The crisis of representation is not the only problem which the new media and technologies pose for social theory. The emergence and pervasiveness of the new media

also construct and organize social space differently. The idea(l) of a stable, accessible public sphere no longer seems either viable or salient. There are many publics and spaces which are unevenly distributed, hierarchically ordered and structured by different logics. The rationality and technology which some hope(d) would lead to clearer communication and more equitable participation has instead lead to acceleration of new public spaces that are accessible only to those with resources, capital, and the knowledge required to function in them effectively. Despite (and in some cases with the aid of) new technologies and communication media those left out resort to practices of disruption, transgression, and, yes, even noise to get a hearing.

While politically undesirable, it may be analytically necessary to acknowledge the power of and the complicity with the representing machine through which social theory is produced and circulates. Such a position is neither a return to the base/superstructure model of ideology nor a capitulation to the hegemonizing power of the new global media/technology complex. It is rather a critical challenge to social theory to interrogate more vigorously the terms and conditions of this global complex's operation, to search for the vulnerabilities and soft spots of its structure and to recognize its inability to represent the totality of the social world.

If social theory is to make a critical difference, then it must make sense first and foremost of its own practice, it must understand just when, where and how its own interests, objects, and moves are complicit with the constructions and

conditions it seeks to explain. It must attend to the processes and relationships by which its own strategies of representation and practices contribute to the relations of power which it seeks to describe and disrupt. At the same time social theory must also reaffirm its commitment to a critical project which recognizes that by itself social theory is not a potent enough social or cultural force to produce such interventions and transformations. Hence, it must align itself with historical forces and social interests that in the end are transformative.

If social theory is going to reckon with its conditions of impossibility and reconstitute itself as a productive site of knowledge, the force of cultural incursions (e.g. talk shows, biography, journalism, and popular culture) into realms formally occupied by professional and academic social theory must be taken seriously. Otherwise in the face of the global movements of the new media and technologies and the public spaces which they constitute (and transform), social theory will simply become one more arcane and marginalized sub-specialty in the isolated ivory tower.

The very practice of social theory as a site and form of knowledge is always already a critical project; one whose potential for self reflexivity, political commitment, and a transformative practice is still its defining character. If this is indeed the case, then the flip side of its attempted incorporation by the new media is its potential for interruption and disruption, for revealing the shadows and gaps, for representing and interrogating the world in which it finds itself.



Cyberspace as Sub-Social

by William Bogard

Social theory today is witnessing the elusion of its object. "Society," as usual, has mutated and left it behind, stuttering. From a technological point of view, one reason for theory's abandonment has to do with the development, over the last fifty years, of cybernetic and computer-based communication systems, another with closely related developments in the biological and medical sciences. Increasingly, our everyday lives are spent inhabiting "cyberspatial"--and cyber-temporal--worlds, digital environments regulated by complex steering and feedback mechanisms. Cyberspace is not just a name for the internet, nor is it some pop cultural fad. It refers, rather, to a whole bio-informational matrix, a cybernetic order that increasingly aligns and integrates bodies and machines, organic and inorganic forms. From its origins, this was an order in which the very idea of society was at stake. The first use of the term cybernetics, by Norbert Wiener shortly after World War II, was already in reference to "human engineering," to the discovery of common principles of control and communication in human beings and machines (cf. Pfohl 1996; Bogard 1996). In sociology, Talcott Parsons, and later Walter Buckley, recognized that Western societies were increasingly organized on cybernetic principles. For them, the idea--or the possibility--of a cybernetic "society" was never in question. They took for granted that cybernetic societies *were* societies, and that one could still construct a "social" theory of them.

My own view, however, is that it's not at all clear that cybernetic spaces are in fact social spaces, or that bioinformational systems are social systems. If they are, it's in a special sense that has not been captured theoretically up to now. I want to propose a new category for theorizing the social dimensions of cyberspace--the idea of the sub-social" or of "fractal society," a space that is less than social but more than non-social, in all different possible meanings of that concept.

In geometry, fractals occupy a dimension greater than n and less than $n+1$, where n equals zero or some whole number. The Mandelbrot set, probably the best known example, "infolds" between two and three dimensional space--while the planes of the set divide internally and infinitely, they never fill a volume. Fractals are not mathematical "fractions." The sum of the parts never constitutes a whole, a unity, or an identity. Fractals belong to the broader class of what I would call "sub-phenomena"--the class of the "almost," the "imperfect," "partial" or "mixed." Or, from another point of view, they are "substitute" phenomena (cf. Virilio), stand-ins or replacements for something else. Sub-phenomena include things like simulations (the almost real), virtual identities (stand-in personas or roles), or "cyborgs" (part human, part machine, organ-intotech mixtures). In this sense, the fractal planes of the Mandelbrot set generate substitute or simulated volumes (everyone is familiar with the "tunneling" or depth effect of successively generated Mandelbrot images). Cyberspace, essentially, *is* a fractal or sub-space. This means, for one thing, that the idea of a "global" communications network is

misleading, if it implies a holistic or unitaristic reading of the system. The "global" net, if anything, is more like a branching rhizome, continuous internal division that lacks the unity of a center or a well-defined border. Nor is cyberspace exactly a "hyper-space," if that means "more than space," or a hyper-reality, if that means, as Baudrillard often implies, "more than real"; cyberspace, as we experience it everyday, for example, on our computer screens, is certainly *less* than a "space," not more. The best virtual reality images today are still poor simulations or substitutions of reality. Things like "hypertexts" should perhaps more appropriately be called "subtexts," since they only simulate referential systems (hypertext lacks the unity and identitary logic of a system of reference).

What, however, can it mean to talk about a fractal society, or a sub-social form of cyberspace? It would be equivalent to saying that relations in cyberspace—for instance, relations of communication or power or meaning or class—are "almost" social, or only "partially" social, or a simulation of or substitute for the social. But what, in turn, do these ideas mean? Baudrillard (1981: 169ff.) has argued, to take one example, that the mass media are not really "communication" systems at all, since they do not allow "response." Symbolic communication, in his view, involves a reciprocal space of speech and response, a personal and social exchange. But the media functions to exclude response—they "speak," and speak incessantly (i.e., information saturation), but they "always prevent response, making all processes of social exchange impossible, except in the various

forms of *response simulation*, themselves integrated in the transmission process, thus leaving the unilateral [and abstract] nature of the communication intact" (p. 170). In other words, the media does not communicate, but is a replacement for communication, a substitute for symbolic speech. It is a fractal form of communication, which means a continuous eruption of information that never attains the synthetic unity and reciprocity of a social form. For the mass media, the social is always something "outside" it, to which it can only simulate a connection, like a fetish standing in for desire.

Donna Haraway's popular image of the cyborg (cf. 1995; 1991), which she applies to ecological processes in general, also captures something of the fractal social qualities of cyberspace. The cyborg is not an "agent" or an "identity," but a constantly mutating network of bio-machinic connections. Cyborgs, in the classic sense, are sets of interconnected nodes or interfaces, but they do not form "groups" or societies in the normal sense. Cyborg nodes are not "members" of a collective. Like holograms, each node offers a perspective on the whole, but no one perspective contains the whole. Nodes are "individuals"—a cyborg is a multiplicity of individuals—but there is nothing in or about a cyborg that might constitute "the" individual, as an identity or synthetic unity. There are no "in-groups" or "out-groups" in a cyborg order; nor is there such a thing as "social distance." Or rather, the cyborg must simulate all these things, have them coded into its system. A cyborg is only social to the extent that it can mimic the social processes of inclusion and exclusion.

These processes, ultimately, are symbolic, not informational.

All this will sound like science fiction to anyone who insists we can and must analyze the evolving cybernetic order in conventional sociological terms. I think, though, that social theory *needs* more science fictional images—even if actual technical developments in bio-communications will never follow exactly the imaginary paths laid out by science fiction, those images nonetheless structure the form of those developments and propel selected lines of research. Social theory also needs a new vocabulary sophisticated in the language of chaos/complexity studies and poststructuralist philosophy. The language of fractals, singularities, strange attractors, etc., is standard in the technical discourse of cyberspace, but it has yet to find a central place in social theory (this is changing—although slowly—among others, T.R. Young (1992; 1991) has advocated the use of chaos concepts to describe the emerging socio-cybernetic scene for years). The most fascinating thing about cyberspace is how it resists all the main categories of social theory, all its big concepts—communication, action, power, class, even humanity. If it doesn't catch up to developments soon—not by abandoning these concepts, but by redefining them in view of fundamentally changed conditions—social theory, in the not so distant future, will find itself obsolete.

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Mass Media and the Boundaries of Public and Private Life

by Bruce A. Williams and Andrea Press

Current changes in the configuration of the mass media particularly in western, industrialized societies (but of course affecting non-western societies as well) are central to many of the issues discussed in recent social theory. In particular, the mass media are central to redrawing the boundaries between private and public life, and to the continuing debate within social and political theory over the configuration and operation of civil society in all its manifestations. Examining changes currently taking place at breakneck speed in the mass media are central for feminist

theory as well, which has long been interested in boundaries between public and private life.

In this limited statement, we will try to interrogate only a small part of this topic. We are currently involved in a study of the way children, adolescents and their families negotiate the new media environment. Part of this study involves analysis of the "new news," forms of media which challenge the strict boundaries between news and entertainment media (e.g., Internet, MTV and its various news shows, "narrow-casted" cable television shows, daytime talk shows, news "magazine" television shows, alternative forms of print journalism including tabloids and explicitly labeled "entertainment" journals, rap--which rapper Chuck D calls the "CNN of black America"--and other popular musical forms, and some Hollywood films dealing with race, gender or politics). Our study has highlighted for us the ways in which new forms of media are turning traditional distinctions of public and private "on their head." Issues formerly confined to discussion in the private realm--gender-related resentments, for example--find expression in this newly created public realm of discussion. These developments are particularly important for expanding the possibilities for publicizing and politicizing gender-related issues. Debates in the new news media over the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings, the OJ trial, the Paula Jones case, or over Ellen's "coming out" on television, are incidents dramatizing the possibilities for the new news to publicize, and politicize, discussions of issues not formerly fodder for debate outside the living room. Internet chat rooms, cable TV

shows, and other new media forms have played a prominent role in these debates.

Talk shows, chat rooms, and other forms of the exploding "new news" give voice to those previously unheard in the major mass media. They allow the voices of those essentially disempowered--women, members of ethnic and racial minority groups, youth, the poor, the homeless, criminals--to speak to a fairly broad audience. The topics these voices choose to discuss often pose major challenges to our consensual definitions of what are "appropriate" topics for public speech. What was formerly relegated to the private realm of discussion, or dismissed as trivial or not worthy of public conversation, is commonly debated in public now within the structures provided by these new news media. Everyday life in American urban ghettos, for example, or class struggles within African-American communities, not widely covered by traditional news media organs, are now highlighted for public debate by new media coverage of topics such as Tupac Shukur's death, the OJ trial, Spike Lee films, or the films of the "young black directors" such as John Singleton, Leslie Harris, or Julie Dash.

Traditional notions of media hegemony are seriously challenged by this development. The traditional monopoly that political and economic elites have exercised in the dominant American news media is questioned, either directly or indirectly, by this new plurality of voices. In the new news media, this diversity of voices are testing new ground and learning new modes of expression for perspectives often critical of the hegemony. Our analytic dependence on this notion

for theorizing the impact of the media on politics and political debate must be rethought in consequence. New news coverage of the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings or sexual harassment in the military is a perfect example of the impact of the new media on the forms of discourse characterizing debate in American political rhetoric occupying the space between public and private rhetoric. While in the former case the decision went against Hill, and network coverage of the debate was clearly biased in favor of elites, debate in these less official realms was extremely polarized, continually energized (indeed, perhaps made possible) by new media form which exacerbated and prolonged it. In the latter case, the actions of military elites against Kelly Flynn precipitated a public discussion about sexual harassment in the military which led to criticism and legal actions against military leaders at the highest levels. In both cases, a debate which once might have been highly structured by hegemonic media forms overflowed their boundaries, exploding into rhetoric often critical, even subversive, of values hegemonically supported.

On the other hand, these discussions are constrained in particular ways by the commercial formats most often underlying these media forms. The search for audience and concomitant profits often leads to a highlighting of the sensational aspects of these topics in these media (witness public fascination with the possibility that Paula Jones may force a genital examination of the President of the United States). In addition, the underlying individualized, privatized frames characterizing the way issues are couched according to the

steadfast conventions of American journalism often (although interestingly, not always) penetrates the new news media as well. This individualization of essentially political issues most often precludes serious discussion of the political in most manifestations even of the new media. Discussions on serious topics of the utmost political importance are often "domesticated" by this privatized rhetoric still hegemonic in virtually all accepted media, both new and old. This is the paradox of the challenge the new media pose. While they seriously challenge existing boundaries between the rhetoric of public and private, this challenge itself is domesticated by a deeper level of media hegemony which remains largely unchallenged and unextirpated. What results is a discourse still largely politically impotent, a language in which politics and political activity are made to seem irrelevant to life's most pressing problems and concerns.

In addition, and perhaps ironically, while the heyday of network television may also have been the heyday of media hegemony as we traditionally interpreted it, media's formerly more centralized broadcast technology gave rise to a more unified public sphere perhaps more amenable to public, political debate, were this potentiality ever actualized. The plethora of voices and the fragmentation of the audience characterizing our current more decentralized media era may make such debate even more unlikely. Political thinking and activity may occur in more and more fragmented forms, precluding the possibility of any reasonably far-ranging political conversation.

Essentially, even in many of the new news media, the political as a category of American life remains unexamined, uncriticized, and unchanged; it is still conceptualized in these media largely in traditional terms, and therefore often dismissed as irrelevant to issues of private concern, even as the latter category is exploded and significantly expanded. What is needed if a new politics is to result from these cultural developments is a more nuanced definition of the political, one which takes heed of the energy and critique infusing these overtly privatized discussions. This hopefully will follow on the heels of our current refiguring of the dimensions of the private realm, which itself has resulted from the challenges and interrogations of developments in the new media. The almost postmodernist explosion of voices in the mass media is currently defused by this lack of political focus. Only if it can regain such a focus can these new developments within mass media be seen to foster an expansion of the real of critical and political debate in contemporary societies. Ironically, this increasing fragmentation of American media outlets may be coupled with the increasing concentration of ownership and the expanding power of American media in a global context. Not only CNN, but rap and heavy metal music and other new media forms have become increasingly common world-wide, consumed at times in the most anomalous contexts. While of course the impact of these imports is difficult to assess, it may be that while the American public sphere becomes increasingly fragmented with its absorption of such varied media products, exposure to

American media world-wide at least makes imaginable the idea of global political debates formerly inconceivable.

The contradictions and challenges inherent in these developments pose particular challenges for contemporary social theory. How can we theorize a situation in which new media technologies create the possibility of a more open and diverse public sphere while at the same time cementing the dominance of American media corporations, and their version of American culture, worldwide? Consistent with much of postmodern theory, new media technologies seem to facilitate the local exercise of voice and power (while opening to question what we mean by "local" given the new sense of place which occurs in the wake of these technologies). At the same time, the increasing concentration of ownership of media technologies, and the growing corporate control of the Internet (i.e. the increasing concern by governments and corporations that the Internet be made "safe for business"), raise the possibility of the emergence of new and unified forms of economic/ social/political hegemony on a worldwide basis. The impact of these developments pose central questions for social theorists seeking to understand the possibilities for democratic politics in the next century.



▼▼▼▼▼▼▼▼▼▼▼▼ Raced Ways of "Seeing" and the "Complicity" of Essentializing Difference

by Darnell M. Hunt

Postmodern theory, it seems, has been both a boon and a bust for media studies. While useful for conceptualizing the unique qualities of the television medium or the hypermediation of media texts, it often clouds our understanding in at least one important respect: the role that race plays in audience meaning-making processes.

On the one hand, postmodern theory correctly prompts us to take heed of the fractured and multiple nature of subjectivity. We are all indeed socially positioned according to numerous structures. The structure of race, for example, co-exists with those of class, gender, and sexuality -- not to mention generation, nation, region, or religion. The resulting "subject," then, necessarily becomes the fluid intersection of often contradictory positions. That is, it is never a "sutured" totality. This central insight, of course, has been cogently articulated in the work of scholars as diverse as Stuart Hall, bell hooks, Herman Gray, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe.

On the other hand, to end our analysis here implies that subjectivities exist out there in social space like ideas in some mythical free market. They do not. The same structures that give birth to our multiple subjectivities also work to *pattern* them from moment to moment into hierarchies of salience. In the United States, race is a structure that plays a central role in this patterning process. When we

ignore the resulting patterns we embrace what amounts to a form of radical individualism, one that misses the social forest for the individual trees.

Which brings me to the concern that prompted this essay: To paraphrase Nancy Hartssock and other standpoint theorists, I am particularly suspicious of theories that announce the end of the socially identifiable subject just when those who have been silenced gain a voice. An article from the May 1997 edition of *Communication Theory*, for example, fans my suspicions. In the article, Mark McPhail takes the central insight from postmodern theory I acknowledged above and applies it in what I consider to be *regressive* ways (alas my taste for modernist projects persists!). The thesis of the article is simple: Opposing racism from the standpoint of race (e.g., the Black Power movement and contemporary movements organized around racial consciousness) necessarily reifies the construct. In other words, those who oppose racism as members-of-an-other-raced-group necessarily share complicity in the process by which race is essentialized. While true to a certain extent -- race, after all, has proven to be a particularly intractable phenomenon in U.S. society -- McPhail's thesis ultimately serves as the classic "reversal," to borrow Teun van Dijk's term. That is, by accusing the direct victims of racism for perpetuating it with their efforts to oppose it, the article ultimately works to divert attention away from the actions and inactions of those who benefit directly and indirectly from racism.

Much of my own work on meaning-making processes centers

society. For example, Turkle's (1995) *Life On The Screen: Identity In The Age Of The Internet* is an interesting ethnography of online communities where individuals can engage in identity experimentation and slip through a social texture of fixed stable identities. But Turkle frames these experiences based on contestable background assumptions: "The Internet...is now available to anyone who can buy or borrow an account on a commercial online service...making the connection is not difficult; it requires no particular technical sophistication" (p. 11). Access to computers and ease of use seem, according to Turkle, to be part of a routinized reality in late 20th Century American life. But if personal computers are easily accessible and simple to use then why does Wilson, in *When Work Disappears*, include a prescription for the structurally disadvantaged that includes the "imperative that the public schools provide each student with a computer work-station in the elementary, secondary, and high schools and develop linkage to the information society superhighways, including access to the Internet" (p. 213). This prescription is backed by the assumption of the necessity of computer related skills in a information technology dependent occupational structure. The structurally disadvantaged already have access to computers in many of the low-paying, scientifically managed jobs they work at in the service sector. Leidner's *Fast Food, Fast Talk* describes workers in Chicago who take long mass transit trips to work in a McDonald's franchise where the cash registers are really local area networked computers connected to an in-store

processor that includes a script of quotes that cashiers should use on customers to promote impulse buying, engages in surveillance techniques where inventory totals are electronically tabulated to deter theft of the food, and involve computer assisted modelling of employing schedules thereby insuring optimum utilization of workers paid time while simultaneously guaranteeing that weekly hours remain below the threshold of a fulltime employee in order to avoid paying federally mandated benefits legally due a fulltime worker.

The above works were selected to display how background assumptions can lead sociologists to starkly different depictions of the computerization of society. The assumption that individuals have ease of access and use of computers led Turkle towards a celebratory approach to online communities. Turkle misses however the financial expenses of contemporary computing, technical complexities, and social control techniques wielded by many commercial online services. Wilson makes the popular call to bring more computer technology into the educational environment in order to prepare students for occupations in a postindustrial economy. I presume though that Wilson would not encourage institutional ruthlessness where elite administrators utilize information systems to control, threaten, and or replace workers. In contrast to Wilson, Lemert, in *Social Things*, assumes that computerization leads to loss of jobs. "Jobs disappear in societies where the economies are now based on high-technology applications and where manufacturing is done more often

by computer-driven machines than by men and women" (pp. 143-144). I have argued that background assumptions structure the way computerization is interpreted and these interpretations have potentially significant social effects. Theorists have an important role in critically inspecting these assumptions and developing their own interpretations of the contemporary meaning of computerization.



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As we conclude our term as co-editors of Perspectives, we want to thank all who have contributed to and supported our efforts to create a newsletter which would make visible some of the current debates among theorists in the discipline. It has been our position that providing a forum for theoretical debates and awareness of some of the critical issues in Sociology today constitutes the essential "news" of the Theory Section. The positive responses we have received have been most gratifying as have been the requests for copies to be used in theory classes. Our best to all. Chryis and Steve

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