



Resource Review

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Name of reviewed item:	Media Studies: A Reader
Editors:	Sue Thornham, Caroline Bassett & Paul Marris
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Review:

This book is intended as a general text for undergraduate Media Studies courses and would also be a useful text for those studying the media at post-graduate level who may not have a first degree in the subject.

This is the third edition of the book. The second edition was published in 1999 and the book begins by acknowledging that there have been considerable developments in the media and those aspects of the media which fall within areas covered by Media Studies since then. The second edition was published before 9/11 and before the advent of social networking sites such as Facebook, You Tube and Twitter which have become an integral element of global media and now form a part of mainstream media. It is because of these developments and their integration into operational methods of mainstream media that this new edition is required. This on-going adoption of diverse new technologies into the creation and dissemination of media texts, transmission of information and opinion and the sharing of instant reactions to events means that any academic study of the media is obsolete without an examination of the effects of these technologies. As it states in the introduction: 'The media's own focus on innovation, its voracious demand for the new, for more to consume, exemplified in 24-hour news, flash fame via reality shows and constant hardware/software and platform innovation, needs to be explored, put into context and questioned. It does not need to be adopted as a credo for media studies itself. On the contrary, media studies needs to explore many aspects of the contemporary media ecology and its users that are hidden or neglected because of the unrelenting focus on the moment of the new - and on those population groups who best exemplify it.'

A book such as this should be revised more regularly than every ten years if it is to reflect these developments and provide a current analysis of contemporary media.

This statement would appear to set the book up as an academic and historical analysis rather than an examination of the ever changing nature of current media, something which may be impossible using the technology of published textbooks. If so, can any textbook accurately examine contemporary media?

The General Introduction to the book cites Barack Obama's election campaign as a successful integration of old and new media including digital access to 24/7 news satellite and mobile technology which spread his message world-wide. It claims that Obama used these technologies because they fitted his political philosophy. What it does not do is to compare this use of technology with others who had successfully exploited earlier technologies in their political campaigns and careers, particularly John F Kennedy's manipulation of late 1950s and early 1960s film and TV technology.

The book is divided into two parts, the first, entitled 'Studying the Media', is a comprehensive coverage of the subject. The second part comprises a range of case studies. This is described as 'a balance of classic articles, important interventions written during the past ten years or so which have shaped a particular area, and new work – some of this explicitly addresses questions of innovation.' Most of these are new and some have been retained from the second edition. The editors do not claim this to be a definitive selection of pieces; 'We are not neutral. While we have included a wide range of different flavours and approaches and covered a lot of ground, we do not claim to be comprehensive which would be impossible, and nor do we claim to be entirely 'objective' which would also be impossible and, arguably undesirable.' Whilst this statement is admirable in its honesty, it does seem to present an attempt at justification for the rather narrow selection of works included.

Part One is divided into five sections: 'Foundations', 'The Media and Public Spheres', 'Representation', 'Audiences' and 'Media and Everyday Life'. The section on 'Representations' is further divided into three sub-sections: 'Textual Structures', 'The Politics of Representation' and 'Feminist Readings'. Each section has an introduction followed by a number of chapters written by eminent academics in each particular field and a list of further reading. The 'Foundations' section provides a concise introduction to 'classic' media theory with articles written by 'the usual suspects' in that area such as Adorno, McLuhan, Baudrillard and Bourdieu. This provides short examples of their work which can form the basis of further study or would probably provide all that many students would need unless they were concentrating on the theoretical aspects of media study at degree or postgraduate level. Other sections provide a good combination of established writers such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall and newer writers such as Andrew Gorman-Murray and Valerie Walkerdine. However, many of the articles were written in the 1990s or earlier with the minority written this century. Consequently, many of them may not truly reflect the contemporary media industries and may not resonate with undergraduate readers. Perhaps the book needs to more clearly establish its position as either an analysis of current media or a historical study. This section contains some useful links between media theory and practice but these are confined to older 'classic' media and as such, again, do not reflect current practice or engage the younger reader. This is a serious shortcoming of the book as it requires the student (often younger) reader to try to engage with media texts with which they are not familiar and that are not relevant to current study or to employment in the media or media-related industries. The concerns associated with studying older classic media texts are that they were created in a different period, for a different audience and produced under different conditions of finance, resources and technical developments. Whilst many of these concerns may be dismissed as practical details and not relevant to academic study, analysis of media texts should not be undertaken without some consideration of these.

Part Two of the book comprises case studies. The format is the same as Part One with several sections structured in the same way. These sections are: 'Reality Television', 'News and Documentary', 'Advertising and Promotional Culture' and 'New Technologies, New Media?' This would appear to be a rather selective and arbitrary range of areas for analysis. There is no inclusion of any type of drama production or light entertainment and its links to other forms of media (tabloid and 'celebrity' journalism and interactive media) or the relationships between digital, broadcast and print media.

Like Part One, this includes a combination of 'classic' articles by such writers as Greg Philo and Bill Nichols and more current ones such as Annette Hill and Jonathan Sterne. Again, each section is structured in a consecutive manner beginning with older writing and leading to more current pieces. For example, the section on Reality Television begins with an article written in 1994 and follows with articles written in 2005, 2007, 2005 and 2004. While these are not completely chronological, they do present a clear indication of the development of the subject. Although the text claims on the back cover to 'look to the future, exploring new media formations and their significance', this section comprises articles written several years ago.

Film and cinema are not analysed as a separate element of the media but mainly in terms of their position within general cultural theory. In fact almost all reference to film or films are in Part One. There is no analysis of the position of cinema within contemporary Media Studies, of its relationship with other areas of media, or of the changing ways in which films are experienced; on digital HD TV, DVD and downloads, with shorter intervals between cinema release and these methods, and in the increase in cinema attendance. To include a detailed examination of film and film studies in a book of the nature would be impossible, perhaps there should be more reference to film theory in Part One and references to the relationships between film and other media in part Two. This could include TV spin-offs from films, film re-makes of TV programmes and the adoption of cinema production methods in TV.

Part Two is more current and relevant than Part One but takes up less of the book, 320 pages compared to 550.

The book, as its title suggests, is a general reader within what is understood by the term 'reader' in academic study. It provides a useful background to media studies with short examples of the works of a broad range of writers which offer a concise introduction and directions to the main body of their work and more detailed study. It would be a valuable core text for media students but must be accepted as a contextual background to more current study.