GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The second edition of this reader was published in 1999: before the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the ‘war on terror’ that followed them. It was also published before a man of mixed race, with family in Kenya and Hussein for a middle name, had been elected President of the United States of America, after running a media campaign designed to reach out to grassroots supporters that even his opponents described as highly media savvy.

Obama’s election, an event of obvious global significance, was undeniably also a global media event. It was also a new media event. The election coverage/campaign bloomed like algae, reaching out across that series of connected platforms – some new, some old, some remediating, some networked, some relatively discrete – that currently constitute the new media ecology. It included moments of public spectacle designed for television, although some of these – notably Obama’s victory speech in Chicago – referred in their mode of address back to a form of oratory popular in an earlier age. Alongside this, the Obama campaign in particular successfully utilised social networks of all kinds to address different social demographics – from Facebook teenagers to Linked-In professionals. It understood that networks could operate virally and with some autonomy – many supporters took it upon themselves to propagate the Obama message in unofficial ways. These included innovative forms of culture jamming, for instance the mucked-up and personalised injunctions to vote that circulated around e-mail lists. But Obama’s campaign was also typical of the contemporary public media landscape in that, alongside the bloom and buzz of social media, was a highly orchestrated and controlled campaign that set out to take no chances in getting its message across – and that included constructing a particular kind of message, one short on complexity and high on image.

The election was formally an American affair but information about it, in the form of campaign news, satire, comment and statistics, was more immediately accessible to those beyond the States than in any previous election. Digital access to US news feeds and US stations, global TV and in some underdeveloped countries improved basic access to media through satellite and mobile technology ensured this was so. In commentary surrounding his win
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Obama himself was repeatedly taken both to embody a history of segregation and its overcoming, and to inaugurate a new era in which race and ethnicity might be a less significant marker of identity, or at least a different one. While the first of these relates very particularly to American history, the second is a comment on globalisation and the prospects for a more cosmopolitan form of culture – it comes interestingly enough both from America (as a superpower) and from Black America (historically a dominated group).

These are the new grounds within which media studies operates. This is the environment, these are the media forms and technologies and practices that are ripe for investigation. What then about media studies itself – should it mould its approaches to new environments, cleave to earlier models, reject or adapt them? Let us turn back for a moment to the US election campaign and ask a ‘media technology’ question about the relation between media technology and society that it provokes. The question is whether the Obama camp were able to use new social networking tools so effectively because their fundamental approach, the content of their political philosophy, suited the bias of this media? To accept this argument would be tantamount to suggesting that such technology is inherently progressive (the contrast might be with a technology such as nuclear power which Langdon Winner famously claimed was inherently totalitarian in its tendencies). Many theorists of the social construction of media technologies would suggest that this gives technology too much power, arguing instead that innovation occurs at the intersection between socially produced needs and desires and technological possibilities and trajectories. Others would suggest the specific attributes of a technology have no connection with culture but simply ‘carry it’. The point being made here is that crucial elements conditioning the outcome of any investigation of the interaction between media, technology and culture are the general theoretical models and approaches taken by the theorists concerned.

Media studies is the site of many debates and dispute about theory, theoretical models, critical approaches and methodologies. Its history can be traced through some of these debates and disputes. There are two caveats here. The first is that this is not only a linear history – many approaches are revived in response to new conditions. It is perhaps in this sense that media studies is always in process rather than being a finished discipline. The second is that media studies is something more than a neutral site, a place that may be retooled completely in response to each new media wave: this is why so many of the contributions made early on remain useful and important today.

Beginning to identify what makes media studies distinctive we might turn to the work of Stuart Hall and others at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies, which constituted a crucial break for media studies in Britain in the 1970s, providing a clear approach to the study of media power which divided the UK approach from that of mass communications theory and the psychology of individual effects. One key characteristic of this approach was that even as it suggested ways in which the media system exerted forms of power, it also
suggested ways in which this (symbolic) power is limited and can be contested by groups or individuals in certain situations.

Developing these ideas, Hall drew directly on Gramsci and the concept of hegemony (the uneven battle of ideas that tends to mean the ideas of the powerful come to be accepted as right) to develop an understanding of how different moments (articulations) of the media system operate. His vision is of a hegemonic media system. This signals other allegiances. In so far as it mounts a critique of social power and domination and the ways that it operated in mass culture, Hall's approach can be included within a body of writing and thinking that is critical not only of the role and function of the media in mass society but of modern capitalist society more generally. The Frankfurt School's reading of culture as mass deception, its attack on technocratic rationality, is part of this tradition, for instance, though the two approaches, Birmingham and Frankfurt, are often understood to be antithetical to one another. Finally, Hall and others, in developing parallel approaches, also drew on the American mass communications tradition even as they interrogated its failures, and they were clearly influenced by both 1970s film theory and a particular tradition of literary work in the UK (for instance that of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams).

Hall's contribution then, marks not an absolute beginning or a final word, but it does signal a general approach— one that is tested: the intervening decades have contained many critiques of the Hall model, which was attacked, among other things, for its structural absolutism (it remained a model that insisted on the integrated nature of the social world rather than its fragmentation) and for its stress on the (relative) autonomy of the articulations it described. In particular, the 'free reading' it seemed to some to promote, was said to disregard structural constraints and inequalities, especially the realities of the global political economy of the media with its Western bias. Our sense, however, is that Hall and the general approach of the work his contribution emblematises, remains important in an age of new media—and new media studies.

At some level theory is always made in the world. Hall himself, for instance, was writing in response to particular social conditions (one of the articles reproduced here is written in response to race, racism and policing in the UK in the years after Enoch Powell made the 1968 Rivers of Blood speech— also in Birmingham). It is also the case, and in a similarly qualified way, that we are justified in suggesting that the world makes theory. In this decade the break in the study of the media, the demand for forms of rethinking and forms of reconfiguration, comes not primarily from inside theory, but from the two connected developments already mentioned in the discussion of the US election: the rise of pervasive information networks on the one hand and globalisation as process involving the accelerated flows of material and immaterial goods, people and capital around the world on the other.

These developments demand a reappraisal of the object of study—the question of what constitutes the media is a real one in an age of biotech,
embedded controllers, GPS, for instance. It also provokes a reconsideration of how to study this newly constituted object of study. Once again, there are critical-theoretical as well as real-world choices: it is possible to explore the developing semantic ('intelligent') web, for instance, in terms that are purely market driven, or to measure technological developments through categories such as ‘efficiency gains’. Work coming out of the critical media studies tradition, however, would want to examine the categories being used. This allows some inconvenient questions to be asked: ‘efficiency’ – ‘for whom? for which groups? where? ‘gains’ – ‘at whose expense?’ Media studies’ methodologies, designed to connect symbolic forms, technical processes and materials, forms of communication and the developing economy of the culture industries to questions of social power and to governance are highly relevant here.

This emphasis on continuity isn’t to negate the need for new probes, to use the old McLuhan term. There is less media studies work on sense perception and affect than there needs to be. There is a need to reconfigure the relationship between medium theory and media studies, perhaps to redress the relative neglect of material culture in favour of representation in future work. Challenges for the study of contemporary global media ecologies include: how to find new distinctions between forms of programming that were previously discrete, so they may be meaningfully investigated; how to find ways to grapple with structures that are not amenable to traditional forms of inquiry; how to understand the forms of control exercised by a low-level protocol; how to understand the forms of labour involved in social networking; how to conduct ethnographies when media use is increasingly mobile and fragmented; how to locate and understand new and ephemeral forms of public space; how to consider questions of accountability. A key question, and one we have spent much time on in this book, is how to conceptualise issues of citizenship, the public sphere and the media in relation to global media organisations, flows and peoples.

It also requires redefining forms of thinking in traditional arenas. Film, for instance, was traditionally studied somewhat separately from other media forms. That distinction is increasingly difficult to sustain as the cinematic apparatus is replaced with digital equipment. Some argue this might represent the termination of the project of ‘cinema’ (or rather its transformation into a historical project), but this of course raises the question of how to explore emerging forms of spectatorship within newly combined or forged platforms (on low-status terrestrial TV, via large-screen entertainment venues or via web services such as YouTube, for instance). In sum, the evolving landscape of the media requires the development of distinctive theoretical positions, the reappraisal and refashioning of older ones, returns to neglected threads from earlier traditions which may now seem more important and new blends and melds of earlier approaches previously thought incompatible.

Writing a revised edition of a media studies Reader designed for new and established media scholars, the question of continuity or innovation is stark.
It comes down to this: should we ignore the old theory and old theorists and bring on the 'all new' in sympathy with our subject? As is already clear there is a great deal that is new in this Reader. There are articles on new media forms and formats, updated critiques, new case studies. You will also find much that will give you a sense of media's history, a sense of how various critical questions and empirical issues have been approached over many decades, in different historical conditions and from different perspectives. This is essential, we feel, in order to avoid a blindness to context and history. It also signals a degree of unease with the absolute prioritisation of the new. This is partly because even within the category of 'new media' itself, there is a history of theory, a social history of use and a political economy that has boomed and bust spectacularly; at over fifty the internet is hardly young — it is, for instance older than America's new president. It is also because, in the media as a whole, moments of innovation are counterbalanced by the weight of remediation — of original content (via endless repeats) or form (genre, format), of audience responses (through their repurposing and recirculation, potentially or in reality, on various digital or older media technologies and platforms), even perhaps of media technologies — 'cinema' is imported onto DVD, for instance. Finally there is an ideological objection. 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.

Stressing continuity as well as transformation in this book we organise a series of readings around overlapping subject areas that seem important to us. 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. The Reader includes 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, much of it, however, gets on with the investigation at hand. Around two-thirds of these are new, the rest are retained from earlier editions. These readings are organised into thematic sections, each displaying internally the kind of meta-balance outlined above. The first half of the book provides frameworks for studying the media, the second offers various kinds of case studies. The division is useful but has in fact been difficult to maintain. The expansion of the remit of media studies and the diversification in the forms and approaches being adopted to investigate the media mean that a traditional division between theory and its
application is untenable. Perhaps it always was. The collection in the end is a wager about what matters, what still matters and what will come to matter about information and the media in the twenty-first century.