

Sociological studies of the media. Contributions towards a socially-situated  
understanding of media and communication processes

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## Abstract

This thesis contains ten chapters that together put forward a case for a renewed sociological approach to the study of media and communication. I argue that the increasing complexity of contemporary media and communication processes demands not only that sociology remains at the centre of research in this field but also that a particular sociological approach is needed that aims to uncover the way individuals take and make meaning from the social situations in which they find themselves.

In seven of the chapters the research described is concerned with the work of journalists. The remaining three are concerned with the study of media audiences. Each chapter is self-contained but the thesis as a whole demonstrates an overarching interest in the nature of socially-situated human action, how this can be conceived theoretically and studied empirically, and how research conducted from within this perspective can help to build a fully-rounded understanding of media production and media use. The introduction outlines this approach and describes the contribution that each chapter makes to the case I wish to make.

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## **Introduction**

The chapters collected in this thesis reflect my interest in a sociologically-grounded approach to the study of media and communication. My particular concern has been in the detail of social organization and human interaction. In this introduction I argue that an emphasis on such detail is worthwhile because it can help the field to progress towards a deeper and more fine-grained analysis of contemporary media processes.

The thesis is divided into two parts. In the first part the chapters address the topic of media work and journalists and journalism in particular. In the second the focus is on food and the media. Across this division six chapters (Chapters 1 to 5 and Chapter 10) describe a sociological approach that is focussed on micro-level social interaction and discuss its implications and potential advantages. Chapters 6 to 9 develop some of these ideas to advance this approach and report on empirical research I have conducted on media and communication processes which has taken inspiration from it.

In this introduction I begin by explaining what my thesis is and what it offers to the field of media and communication research. I go on to outline how the main themes in my research are reflected in each chapter in the collection. I then present a summary of my argument and its relevance to more recent work in the two areas that I have been concerned with before concluding with an outline of my plans for further research. The final section contains a note on the roles I took in the writing of the jointly-authored chapters and in the research on which they are based.

## **Overview of the Thesis**

In part this thesis and the research presented in it is an assertion of the importance of sociology to the study of the media. Sociology has had a profound influence on the field of media and communication research throughout the field's history. As Silvio Waisbord has suggested, although media studies has been influenced by several other disciplines (e.g. psychology, political science, economics, linguistics, literary studies) a 'sociological sensibility' persists. (Waisbord 2014: 15).

In broad terms sociology's contributions to media and communication research have reflected its core disciplinary impulses: a conception of society as comprising a number of inter-related social institutions; a commitment to the notion that the task of the sociologist is to collect and

interpret facts about these; and a broadly reformist orientation towards social or cultural problems arising from the inter-relations between and within social institutions. The rapidity with which media institutions are being altered as they adapt to the changing ways people receive and make use of media, and the transformations that are taking place as media penetrate further into the organization of social life make sociology as relevant to the field today as it has ever been. In the present era where the social world is increasingly filtered by and experienced through media and almost no event – personal, local, national or global – appears to us unmediated, sociology’s core impulses continue to be important for the study of media and communication.

In his discussion of sociology’s sometimes uneven presence in media and communication research, Waisbord, echoing a plea by Benson (Benson 2004)<sup>1</sup>, lists some of the concerns that, without sociology, media and communication research would be in danger of neglecting. “Without ‘bringing sociology back in’”, he writes, “questions about capitalism, history, power, inequality, control, institutions, autonomy, and human agency may not be foregrounded.” (Waisbord 2014: 17).

It is possible to identify significant and influential sociological work in all these areas. For example, Manuel Castells and James Curran both see the media as providing the primary landscape on which power relationships operate in contemporary society; both authors have examined the role of capitalism in the historical development of modern media forms, institutions, and systems (Castells 2009; Curran 2002; Curran and Seaton 2010). In taking up and challenging Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory, Rodney Benson has developed an institutional approach to the study of news and journalism (Benson 2013), making, alongside others (e.g. Hjarvard 2013), a case for a ‘New Institutional’ approach to media studies, the latter exemplified in the work of Cook and Sparrow which, in Benson’s view, occupies similar theoretical territory to the field approach (Benson 2006; Cook 2005; Sparrow 1998). Curran and Seaton have explored how new media forms are challenging the frameworks through which media institutions have conventionally been regulated (Curran and Seaton 2010). And in their accounts of the origins and development of contemporary society John Thompson and Nick Couldry have both attempted to address all the items on Waisbord’s list of concerns by placing the media and their evolving nature at the centre of their analyses (Thompson 1995;

Couldry 2012). There is no doubt that sociological work remains at the core of media and communication research.

Overall, the work I have collected in this thesis reflects a sociological sensibility and in a general sense is an endorsement of the case for the continued relevance of sociology for media and communication research. In his discussion Waisbord goes on to argue that a sociological focus must involve investigation at different levels of analysis in order to address micro- as well as macro-level social processes (Waisbord 2014: 21). It is to the micro level that most of my work has been directed and it is for this that my thesis makes a particular case. In my most recent publications I have tried to outline the important features and demonstrate the value of a certain type of sociology that, although it has become less prominent in recent years, seems to me to be especially well-suited to the study of a number of aspects of contemporary media. In its style and intent the sociological approach that I argue for derives from symbolic interactionism.

The thesis demonstrates the advantages of using interactionist ideas to study how people who work in media organizations do media work, and what people do with, and how they live with, media. Each chapter presents the argument in detail in relation to specific cases and examples. I suggest that analysis and understanding of these topics would be difficult without this sort of foundation but in different ways the chapters attempt to show what I think media sociology should be most concerned with, what will be most productive, and what will be most helpful to the analysis of media work and use. The claim for an interactionist sociology of the media is increasingly justified in my view because as new and old media interact with one another and they become entwined with social and personal life there is a growing need to establish productive ways of studying, on one hand, people who are involved in the media's creation and, on the other, people who live with and use media. In this way, human interactions with, within and between newly-emerging and older media forms can be better understood. The broader relevance of this point can be appreciated further by considering the specific research foci that I have chosen.

The contemporary and emerging practices of journalism have implications for the quality of news and the media's democratic role. In the past 150 years or so, democracy has been thought to depend upon the quality of its journalism. The practices and forms of journalism that are evolving must be analysed and understood in that context. For a variety of reasons, but chiefly

because of rising commercial, technological and political pressures, the difficulties encountered by the news media in the performance of their democratic role are increasing and becoming more complex. Several scholars have argued recently that journalism is undergoing a ‘structural transformation’ and that normative standards of journalistic practice are shifting as the news media’s commitment to their traditional social obligations alters and new forms of journalism emerge (Christians *et al* 2009; Broersma and Peters 2013). An understanding of evolving journalistic practices as journalists navigate this uncertain terrain is therefore essential.

At the same time the way people live with and make use of media and the media’s role in the routines of domestic life should be of central concern to media and communication research because they provide the context for decisions and behaviours that can affect all aspects of life, not least those to do with human health and wellbeing. Recent work on ‘media practices’ attempts to re-conceptualize media use in terms of the divergent ways different media types and platforms and the symbolic resources they afford are adopted and used for different purposes at different times (Couldry 2012). There is also research that attempts to theorize the processes of ‘mediatization’ (Hjarvard 2013; Hepp 2013). This work draws attention to the need to examine empirically the ways in which people construct and inhabit social contexts that are themselves increasingly ‘mediatized’. While my own research on audiences presented here pre-dates this work, there is a clear line of continuity between the two – a point to which I will return later in this introduction.

In several chapters in this thesis I make reference to or explicitly discuss the work of such sociologists as Everett Hughes, Eliot Freidson and Howard S. Becker. In other chapters these authors’ work is an important, if often *unacknowledged* source of inspiration for the sociological approach I have taken. Even though Hughes, Freidson and Becker tended not to use it to refer to their own work, the term ‘interactionist’ none the less seems to capture the essence of this approach.

The *tacit* rather than *fully acknowledged* influence of interactionism in my work places me in a well-established tradition in British sociology which draws upon interactionist ways of thinking about and studying human behaviour (Atkinson and Housley 2003). At the same time it places me in a somewhat marginal category within British media and communication studies. This is not because interactionist ideas have not been influential – they have – but they are less visible in contemporary media scholarship than they once were. At several points in the work

presented in this thesis I propose that media studies would benefit from a closer and more explicit engagement with these ideas.

Put simply, my research is concerned with the socially-situated nature of social action. That is to say, I am interested in the organization of the social world in different contexts: *at work* (in the occupational sphere) and, in particular, in the processes of news production; and *at home* (in the domestic sphere) and the ways media consumption shapes and is shaped there, the resources it offers, and the resources that are taken up, in the course of domestic life. Most recently I have been interested in journalists and their place in what I call in Chapter 3 the ‘news world’, and how and to what extent their social organization is changing as the news industry undergoes radical transformation.

My aim has been, among other things, to contribute to and promote a kind of sociology that is concerned with patterns of human social action and what these mean to the people who take part in them. It is a type of sociology that responds to an urge to make sense of the social world by interpreting, understanding and explaining what the world means to those who inhabit it and the manner in which they dispose themselves in it and in respect of one another. By offering a conceptual framework that can be used to examine and interpret social action in context, this kind of sociology provides useful ways of analysing and thinking about society and social processes.

### **Media Studies and Interactionism**

Interactionism has at different times been a significant presence in media studies both theoretically and methodologically. Its interest in concepts such as social action, identity, and socialization and its use of qualitative methods of data collection connect it directly to the concerns and approaches of a wide range of media and communication research. In recent times, however, the interactionist approach has become less visible, its importance often forgotten and its continued relevance overlooked as the field of media and communication research has expanded and other approaches and styles of work from the social sciences and humanities have become popular.<sup>2</sup>

Why does this matter? If its influence is diffuse, does it matter if media researchers are either ignorant of or have forgotten the origins of some of the concepts that were once central to the field they occupy? I think it matters because these concepts have continued relevance to contemporary media processes.

Interactionist thought was clearly evident in media and communication research in what Cottle calls the 'first wave' of newsroom ethnographies, including the studies by Altheide (1976), Tuchman (1978) and Fishman (1980) (Cottle 2000).<sup>3</sup> It was largely because of this work that these and other ethnographies (e.g. Epstein 1973; Golding and Elliott 1979; Gans 1979; Schlesinger 1978) adopted the notion that journalism and news production should be understood as a form of work and, by extension, that the newsroom could be conceived as a place of manufacture.

As Wahl-Jorgensen notes, the metaphor of the factory was a powerful one and helped to support a conception of journalism as work and that journalists were to be understood as members of an occupation with its own distinct characteristics and constraints (Wahl-Jorgensen 2009). Conceived of in this way, journalism could be accounted for in terms of journalists' behaviour as employees, circumscribed by the social organization of their employment and the broader institutional and commercial concerns and objectives that guided their employers. It is therefore widely acknowledged that the newsroom sociology of the 1970s and 1980s provided important insights into the nature of news production and the social factors that shape it and made an important contribution to one of the 'golden' eras of media sociology (Jacobs 2009: 150; Waisbord 2014: 18). However, the interactionist turn was subject to criticism for the narrowness of its vision, a view taken by Cottle and Wahl-Jorgensen among others (Cottle 2007; Wahl-Jorgensen 2009).

Indeed the apparently overriding concern in interactionist work with micro-level social processes has been regarded as problematic by much of mainstream sociology. This is one of the reasons for the gradual abandonment within media studies of some of the key ideas that have guided research in the tradition. Whereas concepts such as *the definition of the situation*, *occupational identity*, *occupational commitment*, *boundary definition*, *situational adjustment* were once common in accounts of the newsroom, studies that draw on them now are rare. The point I make in several chapters in this thesis (in particular Chapters 1 to 3) is that a revival of the interactionist approach is now needed once again. It might be argued that the approach should

never have been abandoned in the first place, its eventual rejection a mistake, for as Paul Rock has argued, critics of interactionism have tended to either misrepresent the scope of its interpretation – in relation to wider, or macro-, social structures and processes – or to misunderstand its aims and its practice (Rock 1978) yet it is my contention that the aims and practice of interactionism are especially apt for a study of contemporary media.

One of the more common ways interactionism has been misrepresented relates to structural level social forces such as the phenomenon of power. Because of their narrow focus, interactionists are said to have a weak theory of power that weakens their analytical purchase on the way societies are organized and structured. This view has been strongly contested by Dennis and Martin (2005). These authors argue that interactionist studies 'far from neglecting the phenomena of power in social life, have in fact focused [...] precisely on the ways in which authoritative and consequential power relations are enacted and sustained by real people in ways which contribute to the 'structuring' of societies.' (Dennis and Martin 2005: 207).

Indeed the charge about power is perhaps even harder to sustain in the realm of media studies. The well-known theorization of the practices of news production in the 'law and order crisis' of late 1970s Britain by Stuart Hall and his colleagues drew on the interactionist concept of labelling. Becker's notion of a 'hierarchy of credibility' connected the social processes in which deviant acts and their likely perpetrators are defined and labelled as 'criminal' to the power exercised by the police, the courts and institutional political actors. Journalists' routine newsgathering practices led them to give prominence to the definitions provided by these actors in proportion to their position in the hierarchy (Hall et al 1978). You would have to look very closely indeed to find reference to a 'power structure' in Becker's writing, but it is simply incorrect to say that neither he – nor other interactionists – have shown an interest in or have no theory of power.

At the same time the charge of narrowness is also based on a misunderstanding. In questioning the scope of their theorising, social theorists such as Giddens and Mouzelis have implied that it is problematic that interactionists 'ignore' the reality that is of concern to macro-sociologists – for Giddens 'a reality that is somehow more substantial' (Giddens 1984: xxvi). Mouzelis writes of the 'neglect' by interactionists of macro-structural social forms and processes and the 'impasses' of micro-social theorizing (Mouzelis 1995: 15; 19). Yet one of the ways interactionism diverges from other, more orthodox, sociologies is that, with its roots in

pragmatist philosophy, it rejects the idea that there are knowable realms beyond the practices of everyday life. Society is seen as an “ongoing accomplishment and not as a hypostatized aggregate of structures, institutions or universal processes which can be unambiguously defined, or even measured, from some ‘objective’ standpoint” (Dennis and Martin 2005: 208). For interactionists the ‘structures’ of macro-sociological theorising are unknowable objects of sociological investigation and are therefore not in themselves researchable phenomena. The key point is not that interactionism is, as Giddens puts it, ‘strong on action, but weak on structure’ (Giddens 1993: 4), but that intrinsic to its unorthodox nature is the view that the question of social structure lies outside the realm of practical social enquiry. Interactionism is more suited to, and regards as paramount, the analysis of what is observable in social life.

As Rock points out, this being its defining characteristic, interactionists have tended to see their perspective and the style of sociology that is involved as complementary rather than challenging to other sociological styles (Rock 1978). This is the essence of my proposal in Chapter 3, which is that deeper understanding of news production might be derived from blending the interactionist social worlds approach with the institutional-level field analysis of Pierre Bourdieu. A key characteristic of the interactionist approach whatever the context of practice is not to assert itself as *rivalling* other forms of sociology but more modestly to claim a place *within* sociology – in my case, the sociology of the media – to do what other forms of sociology cannot or will not do.

The ‘second wave’ of newsroom ethnographies (Cottle 2000) have offered a considerable amount to our understanding of news production in different media contexts (e.g. Forde 2003; Matthews 2010) and the changing nature of production practices in the digital era (e.g. Anderson 2012; Boczkowski 2005; 2010; Ryfe 2012; Usher 2012; 2014. See also the collections by Paterson and Domingo 2008, and Domingo and Paterson 2011), but, to repeat, interactionist ideas in the study of news work are now a rarity. As well as the rejection of interactionist thinking on the grounds of its narrow vision, this is no doubt also partly because questions of work and employment have been replaced by new interests. Some of the main concerns in more recent newsroom research are to do with technology and social change – Hemmingway’s work, for example, which is underpinned by a rather different sort of sociology (Hemmingway 2008) – and are somewhat more media- (or medium-) centric than before, less

interested in the social organization of news work and more interested in the implications for news practices and news output of an industry undergoing transformation.

Despite the retreat from interactionist thinking and the micro-level focus on the occupation that this entails, sociology of a broader type has remained at the core of much of this work. It is noticeable, however, that in place of sociological analysis at any level – micro, macro or otherwise – some of the research arising from the expanding field of journalism studies on the practice of journalism and the inner workings of news organizations, offers little more than empiricism – *reportage*<sup>4</sup> or, at best, detailed description, almost free of sociological explanation, interpretation or theoretical perspective (e.g. García Avilés, J. A. and Carvajal, M. 2008. Chapters 1 and 4 of this thesis contain a more detailed discussion and critique).

Much of this reportage is valuable in shedding light on contemporary news production processes and practices and it occupies an essential ‘moment’ in the creation of social theory (Runciman 1983), but by remaining in that moment and failing, as it often does, to adopt a sociological perspective in order to adequately explain and interpret what is being observed and reported upon, it remains, in my view, less effective than it could be in helping to build an understanding of what is going on and, as Howard Becker might say, ‘how things get done’ inside the social world of contemporary news production (see Becker 1970). Reportage, however detailed, can only provide a starting-point for deeper sociological understanding (Runciman 1983).

The chapters in this thesis can be read therefore as a reflection of my interest in interactionist-influenced sociology and a call for a revival and renewal of interactionist thinking in media sociology. In its concern with the study of meaningful human social action interactionism provides both a set of concepts and a methodological approach that are, I argue, indispensable to much media and communication research. In some chapters I report on research that has either employed such an approach or has been influenced by it and in others I offer illustrations of its analytical advantages and some reasons for renewed attention to it.

As I have already mentioned I have found that such a perspective offers a helpful way of addressing questions in two areas – media production and media influence. It is illustrated by research about journalism and journalists and research on the media and their role in decision-making about food and eating. In the study of journalists this entails the uncovering of the

social conditions in which journalistic knowledge is created. In the study of media consumption it entails the uncovering of the practices of daily household life. In both topic areas it is an approach that involves studying people at close quarters in the situations in which their media and communication-related activities take place.

So my case is not just for a revival of interactionist thinking for the sake of it or because it is a type of approach that simply appeals to me, but to assert its potential as an approach that will equip media sociologists with the analytical and methodological tools that are needed now and will be needed in the future to understand the ways working in the media and the ways the media are used are changing. Although the thesis illustrates this thinking specifically in relation to the media work of journalists and to the social organization of the domestic sphere it is also suggestive of the implications of these changes for other kinds of media work and other forms of social organization.

### Chapter Summaries

The thesis is divided into two parts to correspond with the two areas of research interest I have just outlined. In the first part the chapters discuss and report on research about media work, journalists and journalism. The chapters in the second part are concerned with the topic of food and the media.

#### *Part One*

Chapters 1 to 5 set out a developing case for a revived sociology of media work. The impetus for this case arises from a sense that contemporary accounts of journalistic practice are unable to adequately explain how journalism is evolving. Each chapter suggests that a sociological approach that reacquaints itself with *journalists* (in contrast to *journalism*) and re-attaches itself to the notion of journalism as a variety of work offer the promise of providing a more rounded sociological account of journalistic practice. Understanding journalists as being engaged in the *accomplishment* of their occupation will help to better understand what journalists do and how and why they do it.

Using the examples of journalists' mistakes and the ways journalists regulate and control each other's work Chapters 1 and 2 show how the micro-sociological focus of an interactionist

approach can bring important insights into the practice of journalists. Chapter 2 concludes that the prevalence of deviance in journalism and its handling may be considered a defining characteristic of the occupation. Chapter 3 builds a case for a more theoretically sophisticated approach by offering, as I have already mentioned, a synthesis of two forms of sociological theorising – field theory and the social worlds approach – suggesting that such a synthesis would create a framework for a more fruitful sociological study of journalism. Chapters 4 and 5 develop and reiterate the case for the socially-situated analysis of journalistic practice and its contemporary relevance.

Chapters 6 and 7 illustrate the benefits of the orientation I am advocating for the study of journalistic practice with reference to empirical research on journalists conducted in two contrasting social and cultural contexts. Chapter 6 (co-authored with Hugo Bigi) examines the professional practices of Swiss video journalists. Chapter 7 (co-authored with Bashir Memon) is an attempt to illustrate the analytical benefits of the combined field/social world framework introduced in Chapter 3. The chapter reports on some original research into the role of press clubs in Pakistan and shows that the social organization of journalists is especially significant when they suffer physical intimidation and the threat of violence.

### *Part Two*

Chapter 8 presents and discusses some results from two empirical research projects that adopted similar approaches to understanding the processes of decision making about food use in the household. It describes some of the ways in which different components of domestic consumption – in this case food and the media – are organized, intersect, and coexist in daily life. It discusses the way in which broadcasting, of the public world, has become embedded domestically by being used to help structure and sustain household routines of the private world and how patterns of activity outside the home shape the timing and significance of meals inside it.

Chapter 9 is partly an exploration of the themes of *consumption, everyday life, the domestic, and the family* which had been circulating in the field of audience studies during the early 1990s and partly an attempt to outline a theoretical framework which can make sense of the wider role that television plays as it penetrates ever more deeply into people's lives. Following the

logic developed in Chapter 8 I argue that television contributes to decision-making about food and propose that television's content and its messages and meanings are best thought of as resources for the formation of public knowledge.

Chapter 10 presents a detailed review of research on the topic of food and the media in order to evaluate its contribution to the wider field of food research. The chapter shows that the main preoccupations of Western media scholars lie in the interrelationships between, on one hand, human society and culture, and, on the other, the institutions of the media and the social structural factors that are thought to underpin them. The chapter takes a socially-situated approach and suggests a potentially fruitful perspective on the topic that will not only help to provide the basis for a more complete understanding of the media's role in their representation of food and the creation of food-related meanings, but will at the same time add to what is known about their influence on the social practices concerned with food and eating.

### Conclusion

To reiterate, my earlier assertions and the arguments I make in the chapters in this thesis do not amount to a claim that media and communication research has simply ignored sociology in recent years. In neither of the topic areas with which my research has been concerned could this be said to be the case. As I show in Chapters 1 to 7, sociology has a presence in the necessarily multi-disciplinary field of journalism studies, for example. Recent work on the digital challenge to journalism as an occupation and to the nature of journalistic work (Deuze 2007; Harrison 2006), the field level studies influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. Benson 2013), broader studies of the news industry itself (e.g. Fenton 2010), and the study of journalism in general (Zelizer 2004; Schudson 2011), all either overtly acknowledge the importance of sociology to the field or are imbued at some level with a sociological imagination. My point here is not that media and communication researchers have ignored sociology but that in order to improve and further advance understanding in certain areas a particular sociological approach which *has* been ignored in recent years has continuing relevance.

Journalism studies is dominated by a concern with *journalism* – a category sometimes given its own agency, its essentially contingent character being frequently ignored – and characteristic of much of the work being undertaken is the detailed reporting of the ways journalism is evolving

in changing times (e.g. Singer *et al* 2011; Lowrey and Gade 2011). An interactionist approach that enables renewed attention to *journalists* and their contingency and a more complete account of the social world of news will, I think, help the field move beyond mere *reportage* towards *explanation* and thus further towards improved understanding of contemporary journalistic practice.

As the chapters which follow try to show, interactionism is helpful in this pursuit because of the conceptual apparatus it offers. To take one example, the need for an explanation of journalistic practice is evident in, and was reinforced by, the findings of the Leveson Inquiry (Leveson 2012) which have made it obvious that profound changes in the news industry have been taking place at the level of practice. Despite the institutional orientation of Leveson's recommendations, if the concerns over the culture of the press are to be addressed, clearly it is at this level that change must occur. This presents a challenge to media research that an interactionist approach could help to meet. The interactionist concept of *situational adjustment* offers an illustration. This concept provides a way of explaining social behaviour and human interactions in changing circumstances (Becker 1964). To take one instance: by several accounts (e.g. Marsh 2012) Andrew Gilligan's infamous early morning BBC radio report on the government dossier on Iraq in 2003 was in part the result of his failure to adjust to that organization's news production culture (see Chapters 1 and 2). From Marsh's description, having moved recently from the realm of print journalism, Gilligan's *occupational socialization* was, for a number of reasons, incomplete at the time of his contribution that morning. In an industry where there is increasing job insecurity and mobility between employers, episodes like this are likely to be increasingly widespread.

Interactionist thinking can take this further. Gilligan's behaviour and other examples of journalistic deviance that surface from time to time may, on closer inspection, be more satisfactorily explained not as exceptions to the norm or the aberrations of a minority, but as evidence that journalists constitute a *delinquent community* that acts collectively to protect its members from criticism when errors and malpractice occur (Freidson 1975). A more nuanced appreciation of journalists' behaviour in these terms will assist in the continuing debate about contemporary news culture.

My urging for a socially-situated understanding of media as they are experienced in everyday social life in Chapters 8 to 10 was influenced by the approach taken by other audience research

that was attempting to make sense of the ways different information and communication technologies are used in the domestic arena and how they become 'embedded' in them (Morley and Silverstone 1990). My aim in extending this sort of sociological approach in relation to food and the media was to direct attention away from overly-simplistic notions of media effects that tended to dominate – and continue to have an influence on – public health policy debates about the media and public knowledge towards a much more fine-grained appreciation of the complexities of the media's embedding in daily domestic life.

Sociological thinking with a less specific interest than this has emerged recently that develops the notion of 'embeddedness' in several ways. A line of enquiry can be traced from the ideas that inspired me in Roger Silverstone's and others' work (such as that of Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998) to Silverstone's later adoption of the notion of 'mediation' (Silverstone 1999). This, in turn, is linked to the attempt to theorize contemporary 'digital media practices' by Nick Couldry who advocates a 'socially grounded' approach to the analysis of everyday practice in relation to digital media (Couldry 2012), by Stig Hjarvard whose work is oriented towards the level of social institutions (Hjarvard 2013), and in the study of the 'mediation of everything'<sup>5</sup> in, for example, the recent work of the German sociologist Andreas Hepp. All this work is based on the recognition that contemporary social life entails a continuous engagement with media meanings. Silverstone argued that one reason for studying the media is to 'understand this process of mediation, to understand how meanings emerge, where and with what consequences' (Silverstone 1999: 18).

Hepp (2013) has argued for an approach that brings together 'institutionalist' and 'social-constructivist' traditions of research to examine this phenomenon – these traditions sharing the term 'mediatization' – in order to account for the ways daily life is experienced within and through media. Whereas Hjarvard advocates an approach focussed on the inter-relations between media and social institutions – e.g. politics, religion – and the ways media shape and condition social interaction within them (Hjarvard 2013), Hepp calls for the further development of the social constructivist tradition in this work. He suggests a merger of interactionist theory (re-modelling the notion of social worlds as 'mediatized worlds' and resonating with some of my own work on journalism – see Chapter 3) with the figurational sociology of Norbert Elias to suggest 'communicative figurations' – 'constellations of

individuals' interacting with one another within periods in time characterized by the forms of media in use.

Couldry's, Hjarvard's and Hepp's discussions barely hint at the kind of empirical work that might be guided by their theorizing. This is one of the many difficulties that this body of work presents (see Deacon and Stanyer 2014), but it is clear that, just as with the study of journalists, empirical research must involve the close examination of the complex human interactions of 'audiences' (now all but inseparable and indistinguishable from human interactions in general) situated in ordinary settings that can be conducted from within an interactionist perspective. For me, the aim of a sociology of the media inspired by such a perspective should be to provide the *explanation* and, ultimately, *understanding* of these spheres of collective and collaborative human action as and wherever they are occurring and evolving. My thesis is therefore a claim for an approach to media and communication research that is rooted in a type of sociology whose origins lie several decades in the past, but is amply-suited for the study of the media of the present.

### **Ongoing and Future Research**

Ongoing and future research encompasses three distinct areas of activity. It includes further work on local journalists' evolving use of social media. This is a longitudinal project centred on Leicester print journalists that examines the use of Twitter as a tool for broadcasting news, building followers, drawing readers to the newspaper and promoting the journalist's 'personal brand' (see Appendix 1 for details of a conference paper on the topic).

Ongoing work on Weber's 'plan for the press' continues with the aim of further exploring the utility of Weber's framework for contemporary studies of journalism with particular reference to the evolving status of journalists. I am particularly interested in the implications of search personalization for the role of journalists, the various innovations made by Google that are implicated in journalists' career patterns, and the nature of digital news and the distribution of public knowledge (Appendix 1 contains details of a relevant conference paper).

Finally, a new departure to be developed with colleagues at the University of Grenoble involves the use of professional social network data in an international comparative study of the career patterns of journalists. Analysis of data derived from the LinkedIn profiles of active freelance

and employed journalists focuses on journalists' self-definition as professionals, the characteristics of network users, and investigates variations in the way journalists' careers are built over time.

### **A note on authorship**

Four of the chapters in this thesis were written jointly (details appear on the Contents page – p. iv). When considering jointly-authored chapters for inclusion in this thesis, I employed two criteria for selection: first, that I was the lead author and second, that I had sole or substantial responsibility for the theoretical development of the research being reported. The balance of the authors' contributions in each case is as follows (page numbers are as published):

Chapter 4: I took the lead on the chapter as a whole as well as the writing of the first and third sections (pp3-7 and pp11-12).

Chapter 6: I wrote the chapter, developed the theoretical framework and conducted the data analysis on which it draws. The second author collected the data under my joint supervision.

Chapter 7: I wrote the chapter. The second author collected the quantitative and qualitative data and conducted the quantitative analysis under my sole supervision.

Chapter 8: I took the lead on the chapter as a whole as well as the writing of the first and final sections (pp235-242; pp252-253). The second author undertook the analysis of the data, developed their interpretation, and took the lead on the writing of the central section (pp242-252). The third and fourth authors undertook a large part of the data collection and data handling.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Waisbord (2014) and Benson (2004) are among the more recent contributors to the movement to foreground a sociological approach to media and communication research. The case for a sociology of the media has been made many times during the history of media and communication research, e.g. McQuail (1969).

<sup>2</sup> An exception is the interactionism of Erving Goffman which has for many years had a presence in media studies (Ytreberg 2002). Goffman's influence seems to be growing for his work looms large in, for example, recent research that attempts to understand and interpret social media use (Knorr Cetina 2009; Murthy 2013). Sociology's interest in the media is, in work like this, bringing it into closer contact with media studies at this level.

<sup>3</sup> Some of these authors were recent graduates of doctoral programmes led by interactionist sociologists. Tuchman, for example, completed her PhD in 1969 in the programme established by Everett Hughes at Brandeis University.

<sup>4</sup> McLennan (2002) adopts Runciman's four analytical 'moments' in the formation of social theory: *reportage*, *description*, *explanation* and *evaluation* (Runciman 1983), to compare sociology and cultural studies, categorizing the former as having a greater explanatory orientation, the latter being more firmly located in the descriptive and evaluative moments. Much of the work on journalists within the field of journalism studies can be said to belong to the moment of reportage. While detailed reportage is important, research is also needed to move towards the explanatory moment.

<sup>5</sup> The term was the title of Sonia Livingstone's 2008 ICA Presidential Address (Livingstone 2009).

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The published articles have been removed from this electronic Thesis  
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Please follow the links on the contents page where available.

## Appendix

### Other Relevant Publications and Papers

#### Books

Gunter, B. and Dickinson, R. (eds) (2013) *News media in the Arab world*. London: Bloomsbury, 200pp.

Dickinson, R, Harindranath, R. and Linne, O. (eds) (1998) *Approaches to audiences* London: Edward Arnold, 318pp (translated into Chinese and re-published in China with a revised and updated introduction in 2006).

#### Edited special Issue of a refereed journal

Dickinson, R., Matthews, J. and Saltzis, K. (eds) (2013) New(s) media technologies and new(s) work: changing journalistic practices across Europe. *International Communication Gazette* 75(1).

#### Book chapters

Dickinson, R. (2013) Food and the media: production, representation and consumption. In Murcott, A., Belasco, W. and Jackson, P. (eds) *The Handbook of Food Research*. London: Bloomsbury, pp439-454.

Gunter, B. and Dickinson, R. (2013) The Changing Nature of News in the Arab World. In B Gunter and R Dickinson (eds) (2013) *News media in the Arab world*. London: Bloomsbury. pp 1-20

Nussibeh, Z. and Dickinson, R. (2013) The Development of the Palestinian News Media. In B Gunter and R Dickinson (eds) *News media in the Arab world*. London: Bloomsbury. pp 65-82.

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Dickinson, R., Harindranath, R., and Linne, O. (1998) Approaching audience studies. In: Dickinson, R, Harindranath, R, and Linne, O (eds) *Approaches to audiences* London: Edward Arnold, pp1-15. (80/10/10)

Dickinson, R. and Leader, S. (1998) Ask the family. In: Griffiths, S.and Wallace, J. (eds) *Consuming passions: food in the age of anxiety* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 122-129 (80/20)

Dickinson, R. (1994) The influence of the mass media. In: Harrison, J. and Edwards, J. (eds) *Developing health education in the curriculum* London: David Fulton

### **Peer-reviewed articles**

Dickinson, R. (2013) Weber's sociology of the press and journalism: continuities in contemporary sociologies of journalists. *Max Weber Studies* 13 (2) 197-215

Saltzis, K. and Dickinson, R. (2008) Inside the changing newsroom: journalists' responses to media convergence. *Aslib Proceedings* 60 (3) 216-228.

Dickinson, R. (2000) Food and eating on television: impacts and influences. *Nutrition and Food Science*. 30 (1) 24 - 30.

Leader, S. and Dickinson, R. (1998) 'Televisie en voeding: de rol van televisie in de voedingskeuzes van 11- tot 18-jarigen', *Mediagids Audiovisueel*, Diegem: Kluwer: 8pp. (20/80)

Dickinson, R. and Leader, S. (1997) The role of television *British Food Journal* 99 (8/9) 346-51. (80/20)

Dickinson, R. and Leader, S. (1996) The role of television in the food choices of 11-18 year olds *Nutrition and Food Science* 6 (5) 14-19.(80/20)

### **Other publications**

Dickinson, R. (2015) Review of Rodney Benson (2013) *Shaping Immigration News. A French-American Comparison*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press; 280pp *American Sociological Review* 120 (4).

Dickinson, R (2005) Food on British television: multiple messages, multiple meanings Discussion Papers in Mass Communications, MC05/2, 34pp

Dickinson, R (1996) *Media Professionals*. Unit 37 of the MA Mass Communications (by Distance Learning). Centre for Mass Communication Research, University of Leicester, 38pp.

### **Conference papers**

*The relevance of Max Weber's 'plan for the press' for contemporary studies of news and journalism*. Paper presented at the conference 'The Unlovable Press: Conversations with Michael Schudson', 16-17 June 2014, Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, The Netherlands.

*Weber's sociology of the press and journalism: continuities in contemporary sociologies of journalists and the media.* Paper presented to the British Sociological Association Max Weber Study Group 'Thinking the present with Max Weber' Seminar, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester, 3 May 2013.

*The use of social media in the work of local newspaper journalists.* Paper presented to the Future of Journalism Conference, Cardiff University, 8/9 September 2011

*Putting a sociology of the media into the study of food.* Paper presented to the Thinking with Food Conference, University of Leicester, 28 September 2011

*The video journalist: freedom and constraint in a multi-skilled role.* Paper presented to the conference "Merging Media, Converging Newsrooms", MAZ - the Swiss School of Journalism, 21-22 March 2009 (with H. Bigi).

*Agency, autonomy and technologies of news production. The case of the Swiss video journalist'* Paper presented to the Fourth International Conference on Communication and Reality, Barcelona, 25/26 May, 2008. Paper published in conference proceedings.

*Theories of consumption and theories of the media.* Paper presented at The Media: A Resource for Sustainable Consumption, a conference organised by the Oxford Centre for Environment, Ethics and Society, Mansfield College, Oxford, 8-9 January 2001.

*Young people, food and television.* Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Advertising Association Food Advertising Unit 'With the Eyes of a Child'. Church House Conference Centre, London, 21 November 2000.

*Television and food choice.* Paper presented to the MAFF Food Acceptability and Choice Programme Review, Royal Stuart Hotel, Derby, 15 June 1999.

*Consuming contradictions: television, food and the household.* Paper presented to the 49th Annual conference of the International Communication Association (Health Communication Division), San Francisco, California, USA, 27-31 May 1999.

*Television, food and the household: television content and the social context of food choice.* Paper presented to the Eats for Kids conference, Leatherhead Food Research Association, Leatherhead, Surrey, 21 October 1998.

*Food on television.* Paper presented to the Parents, peers and adverts MAFF project steering group, South Bank University, 12 December, 1997.

*Disordered images, disorderly choices?* Paper presented to the ESRC Eating Places Workshop, Department of Geography, University College, London, 29 July 1997.

*Food and television: what's on the menu?* Paper presented to the MAFF Food Research Dissemination Meeting, Belgrave Square, London, 8 April 1997.

*Television, food choice and young people.* Paper presented to the MAFF Food Acceptability and Choice Research Programme Workshop, Nottingham, 9-10 May 1996 (with S Leader).

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