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Silvio Waisbord (ed.)

Media sociology: A reappraisal

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014. 298 pp. ISBN 9780745670553

Reviewed by: Matthias Revers

This timely book keys in the gradual reengagement of sociology with questions of media. Many of its chapters, however, are far from satisfied with this slow transition, given how profoundly mediated communication is changing around us and for how long these changes have already been going on. The book constitutes another push for media sociology to make the leap from a field for itself that is most tangible in adjacent disciplines to a field in itself within sociology. It is also a reminder of the foundational contributions of sociology to media studies scholarship.

The book is divided in four sections: (1) media, institutions and politics; (2) media industries and audiences; (3) media representations; and (4) digital technologies, self and society. One red thread running through the book is the identification of inward and outward consequences of ignoring media sociology. Inwards, sociology fails to understand important changes of contemporary societies if it continues to ignore mass-mediation processes, Silvio Waisbord's introduction argues. Outwards, especially with regard to political communication scholarship, this ignorance means that questions of power and ideology, social inequality and mass mobilization are underrepresented.

Rodney Benson's chapter argues for a 'structural media sociology,' which emphasizes the power of 'the social' in mediated social life and stresses institutional complexity instead of simplistic understandings of a unitary 'media logic'. The premise of Michael Schudson's chapter is that the area where media sociology is probably strongest today – journalism studies – tends to forget changes in contemporary democracies. Important shifts, which he subsumes as trans-legislative democracies, affect journalistic practice and need to be accounted for. Howard Tumber underscores the lasting importance of the 'golden age' of sociology of news of the 1970s and 1980s – the existence of which Benson questions, at least in the shape of a 'critical institutional analysis of media' (p. 39).

Richard Butch calls for the reinvigoration of audience studies in sociological research on collective action, family and community. Timothy Havens suggests a shift of focus in media industry sociology (beyond political economy and production of culture approaches) towards analyses of social constructions of value and meaning by different fields of discourse and on various levels of media industries. In contrast, Toby Miller argues for the continued importance of the political economy perspective because of the ubiquitous permeation of media representations by commercial logics.

For Shani Orgad, on the other hand, the critical focus is on how media representations perform. That is, how media representations construct social reality by making proposals, which are 'activated, negotiated, enacted, and/or rejected by particular people, in particular places and at particular times' (p. 136). Laura Grindstaff and Andrea Press discuss sociology's influence on feminist media studies, which was formative at the end of the 20th century but, apart from their own work, fell short of expectations in the digital era. Ronald Jacobs' chapter sketches changes in mediated racial discourse in the United States since the 1980s. He argues that future media sociology not only needs to account for newer media and the blurring of boundaries between news and entertainment but also the racial stratification of the public sphere beyond African Americans.

The design of digital technologies reflect what Graeme Kirkpatrick terms 'ludification', which denotes the capitalist incorporation of aesthetic playfulness today. We see this in the fact

that social media engagements may not be crudely instrumentalized but used for commercial purposes in the last instance. Rich Ling explains the sociological significance of mobile communication, specifically how individual addressability through these technologies affect social interaction and social cohesion. The final chapter by Jeff Pooley stands out in its originality: It empirically examines the influence of sociological and psychological analytical frameworks on communication scholarship dealing with social networks and selfhood/identity. While sociological explanations are more complex, psychological explanations provide more causal clarity but are overly narrow, according to Pooley. His findings also support the general sentiment of the book, which is that sociology misses the train in contemporary media scholarship.

Before moving to substantive points of criticisms, two formal comments: (1) the book contains far too many typographical errors, even for a reader who generally thinks of himself as not pedantic in this regard; (2) the book provides neither biographical blurbs of contributing authors nor their affiliation, which is an unnecessary annoyance, even in the Internet age. Blind spots are inevitable for a comprehensive collection. Yet, the fact that the book has nothing to say about mediatization seems problematic, which may well be a buzz term but one that currently manifests itself in a number of empirical and theoretical scholarly undertakings. The volume is best where media sociology's actual and possible future contributions are laid out. Some parts, however, read too much like literature reviews and would have benefitted from pushing contributors harder to set their own accents and provide programmatic and/or conceptual impulses for media sociology.