1 What is media theory?

Before we begin to answer the question 'What is media theory?’, we must ask two more basic questions: what are media and what is theory?

What are media?

We could think of a list: television, film, radio, newspapers and the internet, to name but a few. But a list tells us little about what commonly defines all these media. Perhaps the solution is to define media as technologies that communicate messages to audiences in different parts of a region, country or even the world. These media are the most obvious and familiar to us, but they are more accurately described as mass media. Mass media mean that 'no interaction among those co-present can take place between sender and receivers' (Luhmann 2000: 2). The term 'mass', in this sense, refers to the massive reception of media such as television, film, and so on.

However, media do not have to be mass to be media. This fact draws our attention to an historical sense of a medium (the singular form) as an intervening substance or agency (Williams 1983a). Before the age of mass media, the term 'medium' referred to something or someone situated between an object (the message being sent) and a subject (the receiver of the message). As Burton (1621) remarks, 'To the Sight three things are required, the Object, the Organ, and the Medium' (quoted in Williams 1983a: 203). For example, I am looking at a computer screen as I type these words. The object is the screen and the organ is my eye(s). So what is the medium between my eyes and the screen? Answer: light. Without light, I would not be able to see what I was typing – and you would not be able to read this book. The computer is a medium of its own, of course, but it would be nothing without the medium of light. This historical sense also applies to a human medium like a clairvoyant. A human medium is possessed by a supernatural spirit that sends messages through him or her to another party. Not everyone believes in this type of medium – but many of us still read our stars. Moreover, the human medium continues to capture the imagination of contemporary popular culture, not least in films such as The Others (2001) and Don't Look Now (1973). Next time someone asks you what media studies is all about, give them a two-word answer: 'the paranormal'.

Of course, media in their historical sense are quite different from today's media. Nonetheless, this historical sense provides an important dimension to
WHAT IS MEDIATHEORY?

what mass media are. The supernatural, spiritual essence of media technologies lives on with every new invention. It is interesting to gauge the amazed and astonished reactions to early telegraph communications, for instance. In 1844, the American inventor, Samuel Morse, transmitted a telegraph message from Washington, DC, to Baltimore, Maryland, that was decoded into the words: What hath God wrought? Such was the astonishment with which it was received that the man at the other end, Alfred Vail, sent the same message back to Morse. In today's parlance, this would translate as: What has God created? The implication is that only a divine presence could have possibly enabled such a remarkable feat of communication. The radio and television were greeted with similar wonderment. With this historical sense in mind, we can confidently claim that media are not objects (newspapers, television sets, telegraph messages, and so on) but means of communication. Objects exist in our immediate environment - media mediate messages to these objects. So what are the means of communication that constitute media? This brings us to a second sense of media discussed by Raymond Williams (1983a): the technical sense. We can distinguish between word-of-mouth, print, audio, visual, analogue, digital, and so on, all of which are media in the technical sense. In this sense, the radio set which we listen to is an object; the means by which it communicates messages to us (digital or analogue) is a medium.

In addition to historical and technical senses, Williams describes a third etymological sense of the term 'media': the capitalist sense. This sense developed during the nineteenth century when media became profitable enterprises – means of making money as well as means of communication. The driving force behind the capitalist sense was commercial advertising. Early forms of mass media – such as broadsheet newspapers – relied on sales alone, which brought relatively modest financial returns, but resultant revenues from the expansion of advertising content transformed the craft of media production into a lucrative business sector.

As well as Williams's three senses, media are also importantly defined in their social and cultural senses. A common phrase used today is 'the media'. For instance, we sometimes hear celebrities say that 'the media tells lies' or 'the media hunts in a pack like a feral beast' (Tony Blair), or we might say ourselves that 'the media influences people'. Even media theorists like Niklas Luhmann use the phrase – for example, I quote: 'Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media' (Luhmann 2000: 1 – my italics). As we have already discussed, however, media is a plural form that literally means 'mediums' so it seems strange to bracket media under a single entity (i.e. the media). A phrase like ‘the media tells lies’ literally means ‘the mediums tells lies’, which is grammatical nonsense. Nonetheless, the phrase 'the media' resonates so loudly in a social and cultural sense that it cannot be – nor should it be – merely dismissed as incorrect English usage. The social and cultural senses of the term, therefore,
WHAT IS MEDIA THEORY?

refer to how media are perceived by us. In Western democracies such as Britain and the United States, for example, media are perceived both positively (as democratic sources of truth) and negatively (as powerful manipulators of truth). By contrast, in countries where media are wholly (e.g. China) or partly (e.g. Thailand) controlled by governments, the social and cultural senses of media may be underscored by their wider political sense – as tools of propaganda and social control.

So we have identified at least six senses of what media are (historical, technical, capitalist, social, cultural, political), notwithstanding several other senses – for example, psychological – that we have no room to consider here but will discuss later (Chapter 2 considers psychological ‘media effects’). ‘Media’ clearly has no straightforward definition. The next question we must address is: what is theory?

What is theory?

Theory, like a virus, spreads fear and trepidation among the student population. It is almost as frightening as philosophy, which spreads fear and trepidation among the postgraduate population (not to mention one or two academics). But theory is really nothing more than a way of thinking that is more systematic and sophisticated than ‘thinking’ in an everyday sense.

An example might suffice. When we learn to drive a car – a rite of passage that most of us will undertake at some stage in our lives – we must think all the time about how to steer, when to brake, where to indicate left or right, and so on. However, we do not stop to think about why we are learning to drive a car, or why a car is what we are driving, or how we are operating within a particular set of rules and conventions that constitute the ‘Highway Code’. After all, if we did stop to think about all these things, we would probably crash! Some of us might need to pass a ‘theory test’ – but this is really a practical test designed to transform us into practitioners (i.e. drivers). And then, a few months after we have passed our driving test and purchased our first car, we will start to think far less about the ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions, not to mention the ‘where’ and ‘when’ ones. Experienced drivers often talk about not needing to think about driving because it has become such a routine, familiar, everyday activity.

But to do theory requires us to break away from routine, familiar, everyday ways of thinking – or not thinking. To extend the current example, we need to get out of our cars and start to think with more depth and breadth. Intelligent questions are the foundations for intelligent theory, so the theorist in all of us might ask: why has the motor car become such a vital means of transportation in modern times? How does a private – yet mass – method of transport reflect our social and cultural values? What are the consequences of
mass car production and consumption? What alternative forms of transport might compete with the car? Why is car transportation more popular, generally, than public transport? What would happen if each driver practised their own interpretation of the Highway Code? These questions and others start to dig into a theory of cars. The task of this book, of course, is to excavate theories of media.

What is the opposite of theory? Answer: practice. Yes, to some extent this is true, but then again, theory and practice should be treated like the contemporary husband-wife relationship – happily married but always liable to divorce. Abstract theory, in this respect, is like the lone ranger, in search of but unable to find fulfilment. Theory without practice is lonely abstraction, as was sadly demonstrated by some theorists in the 1980s who expressed ‘resolute (and excessive) anti-empiricism’ (Corner 1998: 150) – and who have been forgotten about ever since. Indeed, the key to unlocking the best theories lies in the practical evidence that is brought forward to support them. In short, a good theory is like a good defence in a court of law. There are no fixed rules about the type or scope of evidence that might be required, but evidence provides a bridge between theory and practice. Theory that has no foundation in practice is likely to appear disconnected or contrived. On the other hand, practice disconnected from theory is aimless and uninteresting to media scholars like us. Theoretical evidence may derive from empirical research such as surveys or interviewing, or perhaps from analysis of texts such as a popular song, film or novel, or perhaps from historical documents and accounts, including biographies and autobiographies. The type of evidence used will have a crucial bearing on how a particular theory is constructed, evaluated and – in some cases – tested out. On the whole, a theory backed by wide-ranging evidence from diverse sources will withstand the test of time longer than a theory built on shaky evidence from limited sources.

What is media theory?

We now have some sense of what media are and what theory is. So what is media theory? If we condense the discussion above, media theory can be defined as a systematic way of thinking about means of communication. These might be means of communication used historically, such as light and smoke, or mass means associated with today’s electronic media technologies. Of course, this book is mostly about contemporary media theory – not theories of media history – although we will discuss theories of modernity (see Chapter 3) which, in part, offer ways of thinking historically about the development of modern civilizations. An important point about doing media theory is to break free from our everyday experiences, and to think about
them at a critical distance, through the different perspectives that we will encounter.

**How to use this book**

Before we begin to tackle this media theory book, a note on how best to use it. The eight main chapters discuss distinctive themes or strands in media theory. Ideally, the chapters should be read in order (i.e. Chapters 2-9) and – even more ideally – treated as distinct topics of discussion in the context of a media theory undergraduate-level course or module. In the spirit of Michel de Certeau (as discussed in Chapter 9), however, readers are free to use this book as they see fit, regardless of authorial intentions. If you do decide to move freely over this text – which you may be doing already, oblivious to what I write now – I have a few authorial recommendations. Chapter 2 would be the best place to start for newcomers to media theory. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 should be read in order and compared with one another. These three chapters form the cornerstone of the structure-agency debate that runs through the whole of media theory. Chapters 6 and 8 are essential but can be read out of sequence with the rest of the book if required, although Chapter 8 should not be read before Chapter 3, nor Chapter 6 before Chapter 4, nor Chapter 9 before Chapter 5. Chapter 7 should not be read before Chapters 3 and 4. Chapters 7 and 9 do not follow each other in the book, but should be compared with one another where possible. Chapters 7 and 8 share similar concerns but from different theoretical perspectives. Chapter 10 is a short summary of what has gone before.

A ‘Glossary’ is included for reference purposes, but the definitions of key terms are necessarily brief and should not be relied upon without first consulting the relevant discussion within the main chapters of the book. Words defined in the Glossary are shown in bold on their first occurrence. Further reading lists at the end of each chapter are intended as a starting point – but only that – in the search for wider sources on media theory. The best advice is to read and research widely. It is also very important, if you are new to media theory, that you seek out and read first-hand theory – that is, the work by authors discussed throughout this book. For example, a theorist we have encountered already in this introductory chapter is called Raymond Williams, and several of Williams’s theoretical works are discussed later – for example, a book called *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (Williams 2003). Locate Williams’s works in the ‘Bibliography’ section to the rear of this book, and then search them out in your university libraries. You may even wish to buy a book or two. Inter-library loans are an option if all else fails. Reading raw, first-hand theory can be frustrating because the terminology and writing style of some of the best-known theorists are notoriously complex. Nonetheless,
reading theory close-up and discussing it with others is the key to becoming a theorist oneself – and theorists tend to get first-class honours (in theory at least). So read this book in companion with the works of media theory it discusses. There is more to media theory than can be accommodated here. This book is merely a media theory taster – a means to several ends rather than an end itself.