
Gender Stereotyping and the *Jersey Shore*: A Content Analysis

KOME – An International Journal of Pure
Communication Inquiry
Volume 4 Issue 1, p. 1-19.
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and Permission:
kome@komejournal.com
Published by the Hungarian Communication
Studies Association
DOI: 10.17646/KOME.2016.11

Jacqueline S. Anderson¹ and Sharmila Pixy Ferris²

¹ William Paterson University, USA

² William Paterson University, USA

Abstract: Reality television is a highly popular genre, with a growing body of scholarly research. Unlike scripted programming, which offers fictional storylines, reality television relies heavily on cast member's reactions to carefully crafted situations. This study examined the relationship between *reality television* and *gender role stereotyping* in a seminal reality television show, MTV's *Jersey Shore*. Content analysis was used to conduct an in-depth examination of the first season of *Jersey Shore*, investigating three gendered issues: physical appearance, social roles and behavioral traits.

Findings demonstrated the carefully manufactured relationship between gender role stereotyping and reality television programming in *Jersey Shore*, and illustrate the development of the female reality show character as related to sexualized behavior and social/emotional gender stereotypes. The depiction of female reality show characters seems to have increased its level of sensationalism, while continuing to be clichéd and conventional, while depiction of male characters is beginning to push the boundaries of being typecast in regards to their physical appearance and role in performing domestic tasks. Additionally, physical alterations on screen were many, warranting further investigation of this behavior.

Keywords: gender stereotyping, gender roles, MTV's *Jersey Shore*, reality television, women and television programming, content analysis

Gender Stereotyping and the *Jersey Shore*: A Content Analysis

Television has become a fixture in the 21st century home. It provides us with breaking news from around the world, educates us, and most of all entertains us. Today the television has become a ubiquitous household appliance and a primary source of entertainment (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). While television as a medium has been comprehensively studied for decades, studies of genre TV are relatively new. A growing body of academic scholarship has

Address for Correspondence: Sharmila Pixy Ferris, email: FerrisS[at]wpunj.edu

Article received on the 21th September, 2015. Article accepted on the 19th May, 2016.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

begun to address reality TV, but the topic bears further study, given the popularity of the genre. This study focuses on the genre of reality television, focusing on gender stereotyping.

Literature Review

The concept of reality television as a medium is rather broad, so we will begin by delineating our understanding of the genre. In this study we follow Cato & Carpentier's (2010) definition of reality television as a medium that captures many different types of programming. Reality television is a hybrid genre, encompassing many other programming formats including game show, documentary, sports, health and fitness, cooking, home improvement and nature. Reality television is programming in which participants are real people (not actors) who interact with each other in an unscripted manner in order to provide a performance highly influenced by manipulations by the production team (Watson & Hill, 2003).

The reality television genre spans many decades and has become increasingly popular. With the growth of the genre has come a greater public demand for this type of entertainment. As Poniewozik (2010, p. 92) notes, "In 1992, reality TV was a novelty. In 2000, it was a fad. In 2010, it's a way of life." Reality television's presence on both broadcast and cable networks has steadily increased over the years (Lauzen, Dozier & Cleveland, 2006). Since the 2002-2003 season, reality television has "consistently captured the largest percentage of the audience watching the top 10 broadcast programs" (Nielsen, 2011). Possible explanations for the genres' popularity include inexpensive production costs and popularity with audiences.

The current popularity of reality TV can be seen in the creation of a new Academy Award category to honor the medium. The genre has gone from a few shows to occupying a majority of programming hours on both broadcast and cable TV networks, in part because of the audience perception that reality television is more "real" than traditional scripted programming (Lauzen, Dozier & Cleveland, 2006). While undoubtedly popular, it should be noted that the genre is not without its share of criticisms. "Countless critics have lambasted the reality genre for its simplistic storylines and often outrageous treatment of situations and participants" (Lauzen, Dozier & Cleveland, 2006, p. 445). The popularity of this genre, for good or bad, justifies further study of the medium.

Growing scholarly attention to reality TV is evidenced in some recent scholarship, with book's (such as Webner's 2014 *Reality Gendervision: Sexuality and Gender on Transatlantic Reality Television*) and journal issues (such as the 2009 special issue on "Reality/TV" in the *Canadian Journal of Communication* and the 2013 special issue on "Gender and Reality TV" in *Television and New Media*) devoted to different aspects of reality TV. While such scholarly attention to the genre is encouraging, it is interesting to note that the increase in the popularity of reality TV among viewers has been concomitant with an overall decrease in gender-related television research. Considerable research was conducted in the late 1980's through the 1990's on issues of gender in TV, but patterns of research indicate that studies on gender and television diminished at the start of the new millennium, showing a need for increased current research on gender issues in television.

Academic research is important as studying cultural behaviors and norms can be helpful in examining the progression of beliefs and opinions in a culture. Television programming can impact current societal issues, trends and attitudes, as Gerbner's cultivation theory observes (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1986). Television "cultivates" and the repetitive pattern of television's mass-produced messages and images forms the mainstream of a common symbolic environment. Further analysis of reality TV in general, and gender issues in particular, could prove beneficial for advancement in the social sciences in general, and the discipline of Communication in particular. Some recent research has found that reality TV

shows often encourage the idea of women as sex objects, as well as playing up traditional feminine virtues (Cato & Carpentier, 2010).

Previous research on gender in television bears out the importance of study. Historically, research on television programming has shown that male and female television “characters” are frequently typecast into specific gender driven roles. For example, Glascock (2001) examined demographics of gender roles from prime time shows, children’s programming, and the comparison of female and male characters within various sociological and economic classes, and concluded that while there have been improvements in the representation of females on television, women are still grossly underrepresented. In a similar vein, much early research examined gender in regards to the amount of screen time and number of lead characters for males versus females on television. Several studies utilized content analysis and found that that women have been grossly underrepresented as characters on television, through factors such as screen time and the amount of lead roles for females [Downs, 1981; Davis, 1990; Glascock, 2003; Lauzen & Dozier, 1999; Lauzen & Dozier, 2002; Lauzen, Dozier & Hicks, 2001; Lauzen, Dozier & Cleveland, 2006; McNeil, 1975; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999].

Limited representation of women on TV is well established in the research and appears to be a continuing trend. Signorielli & Bacue (1999) feel that it is “not surprising that gender images and representation during prime time have been remarkably stable during the past 30 years” (p. 540). As well, various qualitative studies have established the prevalence of gender stereotyping on television [Cox, 2012; Downs, 1981; Elasmr, Hasegawa & Brain, 1999; Greenberg & Collette, 1997; Lauzen & Dozier, 2002; Lauzen & Dozier, 2004; Lauzen & Dozier, 2008; McNeil, 1975; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Sung, 2013].

The reality TV genre seems particularly susceptible to the influence of societal issues, trends and attitudes. The highly contrived nature of reality programs suggests that there is influence from people behind-the-scenes who help to guide plots and dialogue (Lauzen, Dozier & Cleveland, 2006). Several studies by Martha Lauzen and colleagues (Lauzen & Dozier, 1999; 2002; 2004; 2008 and Lauzen, Dozier & Cleveland, 2006) examine women in behind-the-scenes roles and the effects their employment has on gender stereotypes. Lauzen and Dozier (1999) and Glascock (2001) found that males outnumber females in behind-the-scenes jobs. Lauzen, Dozier and Horan (2008) and Lauzen, Dozier and Hicks (2001) concluded that programming which employs at least one woman writer or storyteller will be more likely than all male teams to portray female characters as having dynamic relationships in all aspects of their lives, rather than just around the home. Davis (1990) hypothesized that because men are more prevalent than women in behind-the-scenes jobs, they write and produce shows from their inherently masculine perspective. Since male executives so heavily dominate the media industry, it seems that men may intrinsically project gender bias on female characters. This body of research demonstrates that becoming a mainstream entertainment medium has not significantly impacted gender stereotyping on reality TV.

Reality TV, Gender and Audience Perception

Despite the emerging scholarship about the prevalence of gender stereotyping in the representation of females on television, further research is needed on gender role stereotyping on television, particularly in regards to audience perception and impact. The research that does exist highlights the importance of gender in terms of audience perception and impact. For example, Leone, Peek and Bissell (2006) found that reality television programming portrays many unfavorable human characteristics, yet people continue to watch the programming for entertainment purposes. Atwood, Zahn and Webber (1986) concluded that

not everyone perceives gender stereotypes in the same way; rather they tend to construct their own meanings. This suggests that viewers do form their own individual opinions about character portrayal rather than just accepting a generalized depiction.

Greenberg and Colette's (1997) textual analysis of three decades of TV, through an analysis of *TV Guide Fall Preview Issues* from 1966-1992 offers comparative analysis across several decades, with one conclusion that "stereotyping of characters has been a familiar means for coping with risk" for programmers (p. 5). This research indicates that the world of television is socially constructed, relying on a decades old formulaic approach to programming.

While public opinions are generally scrutinized within the context of sociology, psychological factors should also be considered. Reiss & Wiltz (2004)'s research proposes that people watch other people engaging in "real life" situations to feel both relatable and important. In contrast, Boylorn (2008) uses an oppositional gaze in an autoethnographic study on race and gender in reality television to conclude that while she can identify with some aspects of black female characters on reality programming, none offer an authentic representation of her as a female or an African American woman. More studies of reality television from an autoethnographic perspective could help to challenge the media's current limitations of the genre.

Analysis of specific character portrayals, including speaking time, marital status, occupation, age and appearance also provide insight into gender stereotyping on TV. Lauzen and Dozier (2004) conclude that male characters on television sitcoms are "significantly more likely to have occupational power, engage in goal directed behaviors, and enact leadership roles than female characters" (p. 496). Lauzen, Dozier and Hicks (2001) found that many female characters are defined by their marital status, while men were defined by their occupational status. Glascock's (2003) study found that females were dressed more provocatively, and held jobs with less occupational status than men. Glascock (2003) also concluded that women were overall portrayed as younger than their male counterparts on television shows. Evaluation of the reality programming genre shows that female "characters" overall receive less recognition and respect than men (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999).

These broad historical findings on gender are supported by three recent qualitative studies on gender in reality TV. Sung's (2013) textual analysis of *The Apprentice* examines gender bias toward female contestants in leadership positions on the show. While the female contestants are shown as leaders, Sung's analysis argues that a masculine discourse style of leadership is still preferred. The bias is also reinforced by Davis' (2008) research where participants identified female contestants of *Survivor* as masculine if they were unattractive, older or muscular. Overall it appears that men have more flexibility in gender identification than women (Davis, 2008). Tyree (2011) found consistent stereotypical representations of females and African Americans in reality programming, which has a major role in shaping present-day pop culture. Cox's (2012) textual analysis of *Police Women of Broward County* showed language, clothing and subject matter that objectifies the female police officers depicted on the show. Cox's (2012) study demonstrates that females are objectified even in inherently masculine professions.

The findings from the aforementioned studies should come as no surprise, as they do not contradict societal attitudes towards gender. While there has been some change in the portrayal of women on TV, overall the industry has been reluctant to make any great strides in gender role stereotyping. This is significant, given that TV can cultivate viewers' perceptions of the world (Gerbner, 1986).

Research Question

Based on the above literature and the authors' interests, this paper proposes the following research question:

R1: What is the relationship between reality television and gender role stereotyping?

Here, reality television is defined as programming in which participants are real people (not actors) who interact with each other in an unscripted manner in order to provide an entertainment or performance, which is highly influenced by manipulations by the production team throughout the course of the show (Watson & Hill, 2003).

Gender is defined as a cultural term in which an individual responds to behaviors, attitudes and beliefs of a particular sex-related to the societal norms of that sex role (Watson & Hill, 2003). The appropriate behaviors for male, female and transgendered individuals are relative to the particular culture that is being examined. Lauzen, Dozier and Cleveland (2006) further describe the term by stating, "Gender stereotypes reflect the consistent use of narrowly defined set of traits" (p. 445-446).

Based on the literature review, it was expected that there would be widespread gender stereotyping in *Jersey Shore*, with expectations that cast members' behaviors, clothing, and verbal interactions would exemplify stereotyping of males and females in society.

Methodology

Research Design

A content analysis was chosen for this study because it offers a qualitative opportunity to "describe and analyze the content of written, spoken or pictorial communication..." (Reinard, 2007, p. 302). A content analysis is an excellent method for examining gender stereotyping because it can offer a comprehensive summary of "broad themes, reoccurring phrases, semantics or concepts" (Reinard, 2007, p. 302). This can be seen in the utilization of this method in many previous studies of gender and TV [Davis, 1990; Downs, 1981; Glascock, 2001; Glascock, 2003; Lauzen & Dozier, 1999; Lauzen & Dozier, 2002; Lauzen, Dozier, & Hicks, 2001; Lauzen, Dozier & Cleveland, 2006; McNeil, 1975; and Signorielli & Bacue, 1999]. As well, the research question posed in this study invites content analysis as a research method.

Advantages to a content analysis are that it can help to find patterns or trends within a large body of content, it is highly versatile, and it can help to encourage description as well as explanation of the topic in question. Disadvantages are that it is unable to draw cause-and-effect conclusions, data gathering can be tedious, and research cannot be generalized across other content categories.

Sample

The first season of MTV's *Jersey Shore* was selected as the sample for analysis. *Jersey Shore* is a seminal reality TV show made up of eight cast members (four males and four females) who come together for the summer to live and work in Seaside Heights, NJ (MTV, 2013a). "It took just nine episodes to earn MTV record-breaking ratings (4.8 million viewers watched the Jan. 21 finale) and to insinuate itself into popular culture so completely that President Obama referred to the cast during May's White House Correspondents' Dinner" (Stack, 2010,

p. 40). The show spanned six seasons, airing from December 3, 2009 through December 20, 2012. Season one of the show is set in a coastal vacation town in southern New Jersey. Subsequent seasons are set in Miami FL, Italy and then back in Seaside Heights, New Jersey. Season one was selected for several reasons. First, examining the debut season of the show establishes reality “characters” which remain throughout the duration of the series. Second, looking at the first season gives an opportunity to explore gender related issues in relatively authentic setting, since the show was filmed before any of the participants rose to fame or the show had a chance to be marketed to the American public. Exploration of the first season shows the participants’ actions, language and overall communication in a (comparatively) genuine way. Appendix B provides a guide to the episodes of season one.

Coding and Analysis

Thematic coding was used to identify gendered behavioral roles and social patterns within the TV series. Three content categories were established: physical appearance, gendered social roles, and behavioral traits. Physical appearance was measured by examining the show for references to, and demonstrations of, beauty/ugliness, sexualized/non-sexualized clothing and performance of domestic tasks. Gendered social roles were measured by examining the show for the social roles of leader/follower, victim/hero, and an “other” sub-category. Behavioral traits were measured by examining the show for behaviors of dependence/independence, anger, sorrow (crying), happiness, and “other.” The “other” category provided an opportunity for themes that may have been neglected in the construction of the data coding categories. Table 1 provides definitions of the coding categories.

Table 1. Definitions of Coding Categories

Category	Definition
Physical Appearance	
Looks (Beautiful/handsome)	Told by another person that an individual looks attractive/declares attractiveness about oneself
Ugliness	Told by another person that an individual looks unattractive /declares unattractiveness about oneself
Sexualized clothing	Wearing clothing that exposes a lot of skin, breasts and legs, and is tight fitting and or sheer
Non-sexualized clothing	Clothing that covers up the skin and is baggy and not form-fitting
Gendered social roles	
Leader	Someone who takes charge in a situation
Follower	Someone who goes along with another person’s idea in a decision making situation
Victim	Someone who has been emotionally or physically attacked by another individual
Hero	Someone who stands up for themselves or another individual to do what they believe is “right” for the given situation
Behavioral Traits	
Dependence	Physically or emotionally reliant on someone else
Independence	Not relying on someone else physically or emotionally

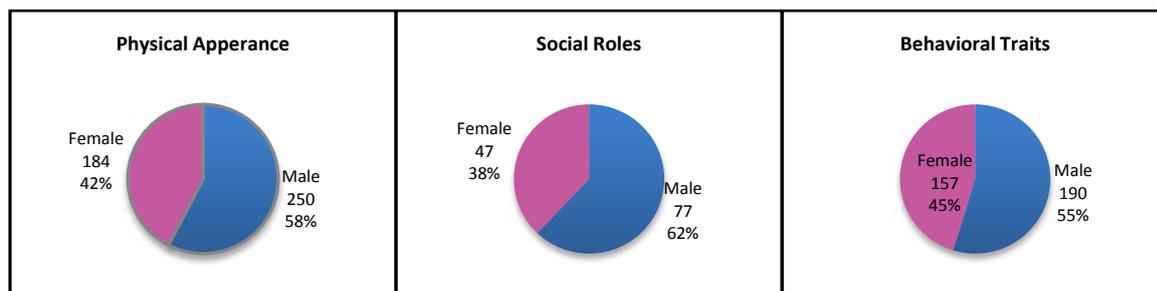
Anger	Loss of temper
Sorrow (crying)	Visible physical upset, often resulting in tears
Happiness	Elation, including laughter and smiling
Other (Fight)	Physical altercation between individuals

Gender stereotyping was coded by cast member and episode (see Appendices B and C for details). Episodes were viewed and notated for the key scenes regarding gender, building on the literature review. The episodes were initially viewed, then notated scenes were reexamined and categorized. Reoccurring gender themes were analyzed thematically.

Results and Discussion

A content analysis of the first season of the *Jersey Shore* found both expected and unexpected results. For example, it was found as expected that female characters were portrayed as more emotionally and socially helpless as compared to male characters, but were presented in a less sexualized manner than the males. Summary results follow. For detailed analysis of physical appearance, social roles and behavioral traits by episode (see Appendix A_).

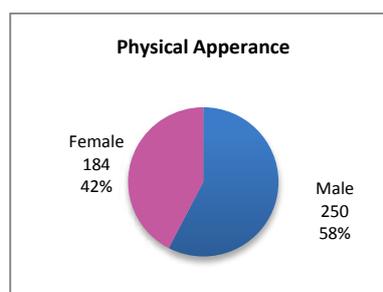
Figure 1: Cumulative Results



Physical appearance

Physical appearance was measured by examining the show for references to beauty/ugliness, sexualized/non-sexualized clothing and performance of domestic tasks. Overall, physical appearance was found to be more focused on the males (58%), with only 42% of references to physical appearance being made to female characters

Figure 2: Physical Appearance



Slightly more references within the show were made to male appearance (“Beautiful/Handsome”), with 57% references to male looks and 43% to female. For example, throughout the episodes, the female Sammi Sweetheart consistently comes up for discussion among the cast as being beautiful, and part of episode four’s plot line involves an emphasis on physical appearance, when Sammi Sweetheart takes an extraordinarily long time to get ready to go out to lunch/meet Ronnie’s parents for the first time.

Far more references to ugliness involved females (69%) than males (31%). “Ugly” as a subject was not a prevailing theme within the series. Physical traits were discussed, but the term “Ugly” was generally only used in conjunction with some sort of verbal or physical fight.

Males wore more “Non-Sexualized Clothing” (71% male). A good example of “Wearing Non-Sexual Clothing” occurs in episode two, where Vinny has pinkeye and wears loungewear until he feels better. Both sexes wore “Sexualized Clothing” evenly, at 50% for males and females. The entire cast, including both genders, wears very sexualized clothing when going out, lounging around the house, or going to work. The male cast members often appear shirtless throughout the series, and the women frequently wear bathing suits, low cut tops and very small shorts. While the females own and wear many revealing outfits, the women tended to display their sexual clothing when going out drinking, while the males tend to reveal more skin around the house. In episode nine, the cast lays out at the beach, which produces the illustrative sexual clothing scenario for both genders.

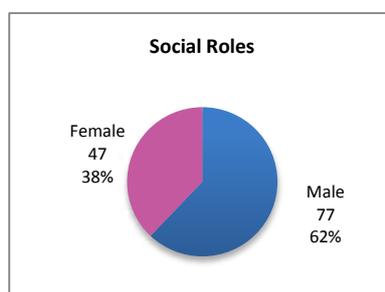
Overall, it was found that female characters were presented in a less sexualized manner than males. These overall results were interesting in light of prior research (Davis, 1990; Glascock, 2001), which positions female characters as presented in a more sexualized manner by the media, and with a greater focus on physical appearance.

These findings are noteworthy as they suggest that the gap in gender stereotyping in reality TV, at least as pertaining to physical appearance, may have narrowed. As discussed in the Literature Review, over the decades much importance has been placed on the physical appearance and clothing of women. The first season of *Jersey Shore* suggests that the emphasis on physical appearance may now extend equally to males’ (sexualized) clothing choices. The influence of setting is also of interest, as when the male characters were in more casual settings they tended to wear *more* sexualized clothing than the women, and vice versa. Perhaps societal convention plays a role here, as males are expected to play less sexualized roles in public (Kraft, 1987).

Is clothing within and without the home really important in terms of gender stereotyping? We feel it is, because, as Bresler (2006) notes, “Dress reflects many things about ourselves and our culture. It tells us about standards, deportment, pride, and character (p. 21).

Gendered Social Roles

“Gendered Social Roles” were measured by examining *Jersey Shore* for the social roles of leader/follower, victim/hero, performance of domestic tasks, and an “other” sub-category. Overall gendered social roles were found overall to be controlled by the male characters, with 62% male gendered social roles and 38% female, as can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 3: Social Roles

The role of “Leader” was largely demonstrated by males (68%). Although far less in scope, some important leadership moments were demonstrated by females. For example, in episode three Angelina took charge of her life and packed up and left the show after her relationship with her boyfriend began to deteriorate. Episode nine showed Snooki displaying leadership when she stood her ground while being bothered by a group of rowdy admirers.

Interestingly, “Follower” behaviors were also demonstrated mostly by males, at 77%. One example is when DJ Pauly D willingly agrees to The Situation’s plan to bring a woman back to the house for sex.

Victim/Hero behaviors illustrated societal norms, with “Victim” roles being female dominated at 68%, and “hero” behaviors male dominated at 60%. An example can be seen in episode seven when Snooki exhibits both “Victim” and “Hero” traits. The Situation calls Snooki fat, in front of the entire cast, during dinner. Snooki becomes visibly upset and leaves the table, but later stands up for herself and says that she used to have an eating disorder and is sensitive to comments about her appearance. In episode eight, The Situation is a “Victim” of J-Woww, who slapped him in a fit of drunken anger (further discussed under the “Other: Fight” sub-category). Vinny is the “Hero” during this confrontation, stepping in to try and prevent any additional violence. As can be seen, these examples reflect societal gendered norms.

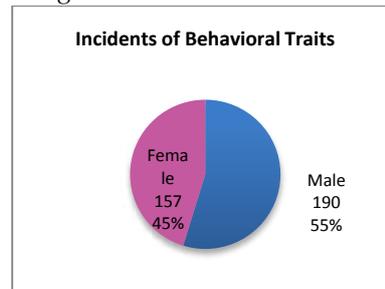
Another social role in the show that *seemingly* goes against societal stereotypes was “Performing Domestic Task,” where 75% of domestic tasks were performed by males. Most of the male-performed domestic tasks were in the kitchen, and starred The Situation cooking for the other housemates. Episode five offers a good illustration of this. The Situation takes it upon himself to cook a “family” dinner for the house, with minimal help from the rest of the cast. During the on-camera interviews, The Situation even acknowledges the gender divide.

The *Jersey Shore* was set in a beach house, so there was ample opportunity for all characters to perform domestic tasks. Yet results in this category were surprising because one male character was the *only* member of the house to consistently participate in a domestic behavior; specifically, the preparation of food. In the average American household, cooking is seen as a female task, but cooking is glamorized on TV. The professional culinary world is inherently male dominated, making women the minority in this field (Hsuan, 2014). The Situation’s choice to cook for the house enforces gender role stereotypes in performance of domestic tasks, as he picked what society would deem as the most masculine of behaviors. This suggests that males continue to be confident and self-assured in their masculinity, as well in their social roles.

Behavioral Traits

The category “Behavioral Traits” was measured by examining the show for behaviors of dependence/independence, anger, sorrow (crying), happiness, and “other.” Interestingly, this category showed the least division between sexes, splitting male (55%) and female behaviors (45%) as can be seen in Figure 3. The findings are of interest as they largely, but not completely, reflect societal gender stereotyping.

Figure 4: Behavioral Traits



“Independent” behaviors were demonstrated slightly more by females (58%) than males (52%). Overall, this category did not produce any noteworthy data. “Dependent” behaviors demonstrated a 66% female lead, with 34% for males. For example, Snooki shows a great deal of “Dependent” behavior in episode five as a result of the aftermath of the physical altercation between her and the group of drunk men at the bar in episode four (further discussed under the “Fight” sub-category). No other substantive examples were noted.

Females (56%) showed a little more anger than males (44%). For instance, female anger behaviors in episode seven include: J-Woww getting upset at The Situation for not escorting her back to the hotel suite when she was intoxicated, Sammi getting mad at Ronnie for talking to another woman, and Snooki’s reaction to The Situation hurling insulting her during dinner.

Sorrow/crying was almost entirely female (93%) as to crying on the show. The first reported “Crying” incident is recorded in episode three when J-Woww sheds tears while disclosing her infidelity to her boyfriend. Snooki exhibits heavy crying in episode five as a result of the aftermath of the altercation at the bar in episode four (further discussed under the “Fight” sub-category). In episode six Sammi Sweetheart cries several times due to a night of emotional relationship drama with Ronnie.

“Happy” behaviors were largely male at 69%. Many “Happy” behaviors can be seen in episode two, as Ronnie and Sammi Sweetheart pursue a romantic relationship with one another. Other “Happy” behavior is exhibited in episode eight as DJ Pauly D and The Situation successfully plot lighthearted pranks aimed at Vinny and Snooki. J-Woww exhibited the least amount of “Happy” behaviors.

Other: Fights

One additional behavior worth noting (that was not an original coding category but emerged from analysis) is fighting, which was found to be a prevalent behavior on the show. Here fighting is defined as physical altercation between individuals. Quite a lot of fighting occurred, involving both the male and female cast mates, in six of the nine season’s episodes. Overall males got into more physical altercations (65%) than females. For example, in

episode two, The Situation punches a man who he feels is disrespecting him, and DJ Pauly D joins the fight in support of his friend. In episodes four and five, almost all of the housemates were involved in a brawl at a local bar.

Females' physical altercation, though fewer in number than the males, are also of interest as they exhibit a duality of gendered behaviors. In episode seven J-Woww slaps The Situation across the face. This follows an incident where she (J-Woww) becomes too intoxicated at the club to get herself back to the hotel suite in Atlantic City, so she asks The Situation to leave the club with her and escort her to the room. He refuses J-Woww's request multiple times, so she hits him on head and gets kicked out of the club. J-Woww makes it back alone, and then plots to "punch him in the face" when he gets back. This premeditated assault shows the duality of J-Woww's gender roles; she exhibits "Dependent" behavior in asking The Situation to escort her home and then becomes violent for "getting" her kicked out of the club. This altercation shows that while J-Woww may exhibit traditional female "helpless" social and emotional behavior, she is perfectly capable of standing up for herself when necessary. When The Situation returns to the suite, J-Woww does, in fact, punch him in the face. The Situation exhibits the traditional male gender role stereotype by walking away from her rather than engaging in further physical contact with a female.

While domestic violence of any kind is not encouraged in our society, abuse of females by males is not condoned. The CDC (www.cdc.gov) states that 2.6% of men report being beaten, compared with 11.2% of women. This data shows that females continue to be more socially and emotionally weaker than men (Priddy, 2014). The display of aggressive behavior by the female character J-Woww on the *Jersey Shore* demonstrates that female reality show characters are more likely than before to stand up for themselves, even in a physical fight. The male character, The Situation's reaction to J-Woww's attack shows that male reality show characters continue in their socially reinforced behavioral roles.

Summary of findings

This content analysis of season one of the *Jersey Shore* surprisingly demonstrated a domination of all coding categories by males. It was expected that females would be more focused on such areas as "Physical Appearance". It was also interesting that all of the females exhibited such strong physical violence, as evident in the "Fight" sub-category. We consider the meaning of these findings in the following section.

The research conducted in this study illustrates the development of the female reality show character in a seminal reality TV show, as related to sexualized behavior and social/emotional gender stereotypes. The first season of *Jersey Shore* demonstrates that male reality television characters were beginning to push the boundaries of being typecast in regards to (1) physical appearance and (2) role in performing domestic tasks. The depiction of female characters in the show demonstrates an increased level of sensationalism, while yet continuing to be clichéd and conforming to societal gender stereotypes.

An unexpected finding in this first season of the *Jersey Shore* was the amount of screen time dedicated to physical fighting. Since both the male and females of the *Jersey Shore* engage in fights on numerous occasions, this behavior is not easily defined as a gender role stereotype, but the physical act of fighting does associate itself with established societal rules.

Conclusion

Reality television is an area of media that merits increased academic study due to the way it has infiltrated pop culture and civilization. The greatest limitation of this study is the subjective content analysis methodology. Future research should include inter-rater reliability.

In examining reality television as a medium, it is important to consider the power of creative control in the editing room. The production of reality shows operates by shooting exhaustive footage of the cast, which is then edited together-under the watchful eye of a producer-to tell a compelling story. What we see as the finished product of reality TV is not always an accurate depiction of what really happened in a given situation. Footage is frequently compressed for time, editing out scenes that are long or prove irrelevant. Often there is some small morsel of this scrapped footage left on the cutting room floor that is important to the overall accuracy of the story. Taking creative editing into consideration, the behaviors that were discussed in this research study all did occur, but it is highly likely that the footage was edited together to depict each character in the most sensationalized way possible. This raises an important limitation of this study: it does not take into account the larger issues of what makes reality television “real.” This larger question is of real interest given the importance of reality TV today, and provides fruitful ground for further research.

A related limitation of this study, but a limitation inherent in the nature of the study, is the fact that reality TV is unscripted, but carefully directed, and characters on reality TV are, essentially, not “real.” Characters on reality television programming are essentially caricatures of their authentic selves, a satirical depiction of their inherent stereotypical traits. Demby (2014) summarizes the concept of stereotypes by saying, “once they become fixed and widely accepted, it becomes difficult not to use them as explanations for everything”. Stereotypes exist as a result of observations that appear to be true. Over time, stereotypes transform from observations of patterns into rules, and eventually into self-reflexive explanations for those rules. Stereotypes become self-reinforcing... eventually, they actually blind us to the complex mix of sociological, economic and historic circumstances that undergird those patterns. (Demby, 2014, no page). The increase in the depiction of stereotypical behaviors and characters in reality programming heightens the chance of solidifying these representations in both television and society.

In conclusion, the results of this study show that there is a carefully crafted relationship between reality television programming and gender role stereotyping. With the sustained success of the genre, it is clear to see that the reality medium will remain an important aspect of the television programming spectrum. Continued study of the medium within the academic community is clearly necessary, and this empirical study contributes in a small way.

References

- Atwood, R. A., Zahn, S. B., & Webber, G. (1986). Perceptions of the traits of women on television. *Journal Of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 30(1), 95-101. [CrossRef](#)
- Bresler, R. J. (2006). The sloppy majority. *USA Today Magazine*, 135(2736), 21.
- Boylorn, R. M. (2008). As seen on TV: An autoethnographic reflection on race and reality television. *Critical Studies In Media Communication*, 25(4), 413-433. [CrossRef](#)
- Canadian Journal of Communication (2009). Special issue on Reality/TV, 34(1).
- Cato, M., & Carpentier, F. R. D. (2010). Conceptualizations of female empowerment and enjoyment of sexualized characters in reality television. *Mass Communication & Society*, 13(3), 270-288. [CrossRef](#)

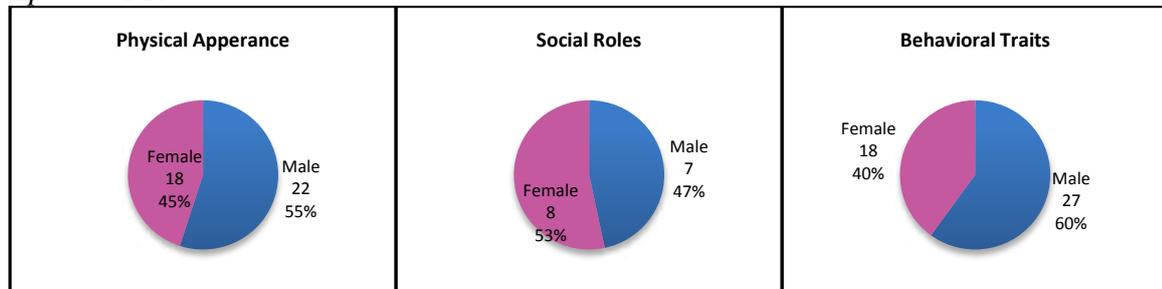
- Cox, N. (2012). Kicking ass...with lip gloss: Mediating gender on TLC's Police Women of Broward County. *Critical Studies In Media Communication*, 29(2), 149-163. [CrossRef](#)
- Davis, C. (2008, May). The gender factor of "Survivor": A Q method approach. Paper presented at the Fifty Eighth Annual International Communication Association Conference, Montreal, Quebec. Abstract retrieved from: <http://ezproxy.wpunj.edu:4357/ehost/detail?vid=3&sid=e104fe39-be28-40df-a43c-7716ab692469%40sessionmgr4003&hid=4114&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtG12ZQ%3d%3d#db=ufh&AN=36956678> [Accessed: 01 Apr. 2016.]
- Davis, D. M. (1990). Portrayals of women in prime-time network television: Some demographic characteristics. *Sex Roles*, 23(5-6), 325-332. [CrossRef](#)
- Downs, A. C. (1981). Sex-role stereotyping on prime-time television. *Journal Of Genetic Psychology*, 138(2), 253-258. [CrossRef](#)
- Demby, G. (2014, April 8). *How stereotypes explain everything and nothing at all*. Retrieved from http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2014/04/08/300279224/how-stereotypes-explain-everything-and-nothing-at-all?utm_medium=facebook&utm_source=npr&utm_campaign [Accessed: 01 Apr. 2016.]
- Elasmar, M., Hasegawa, K., & Brain, M. (1999). The portrayal of women in US prime time television. *Journal Of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 44(1), 20-34. [CrossRef](#)
- Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (1986). Perspectives on media effects. In J. Bryant & D. Zillman (Eds.) *Living with television: the dynamics of the cultivation process* (pp.17-40). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Glascok, J. (2001). Gender roles on prime-time network television: Demographics and behaviors. *Journal Of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 45(4), 656-669. [CrossRef](#)
- Glascok, J. (2003). Gender, race, and aggression in newer TV networks' primetime programming. *Communication Quarterly*, 51(1), 90-100. [CrossRef](#)
- Greenberg, B. S., & Collette, L. (1997). The changing faces on TV: A demographic analysis of network television's new seasons, 1966-1992. *Journal Of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 41(1), 1-13. [CrossRef](#)
- Hsuan, L. K. (2014, March 27). Sexism in the kitchen. *Global Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/851174.shtml#Uzmtadx9VBU>
- Kraft, I. (1987, June 17). The bare facts: No shirt, no shoes, no service may be the rule but it isn't the law. *The Morning Call*. Retrieved from http://articles.mcall.com/1987-06-17/features/2571780_1_waitress-cones-ice-cream [Accessed: 01 Apr. 2016.]
- Lauzen, M. M., & Dozier, D. M. (1999). Making a difference in prime time: Women on screen and behind the scenes in the 1995-96 television season. *Journal Of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 43(1), 1-19. [CrossRef](#)
- Lauzen, M. M., & Dozier, D. M. (2002). You look mahvelous: An examination of gender and appearance comments in the 1999-2000 prime-time season. *Sex Roles*, 46(11/12), 429-437. [CrossRef](#)
- Lauzen, M. M., & Dozier, D. M. (2004). Evening the score in prime time: The relationship between behind-the-scenes women and on-screen portrayals in the 2002-2003 season. *Journal Of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 48(3), 484-500. [CrossRef](#)
- Lauzen, M. M., & Dozier, D. M. (2008). Civilizing prime time: Gender and conflict resolution in the 2004-05 season. *Mass Communication & Society*, 11(3), 300-318. [CrossRef](#)
- Lauzen, M. M., Dozier, D. M., & Cleveland, E. (2006). Genre matters: An examination of women working behind the scenes and on-screen portrayals in reality and scripted prime-time programming. *Sex Roles*, 55(7-8), 445-455. [CrossRef](#)

- Lauzen, M. M., Dozier, D. M., & Hicks, M. V. (2001). Prime-time players and powerful prose: The role of women in the 1997-1998 television season. *Mass Communication & Society*, 4(1), 39-59. [CrossRef](#)
- Lauzen, M. M., Dozier, D. M., & Horan, N. (2008). Constructing gender stereotypes through social roles in prime-time television. *Journal Of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 52(2), 200-214. [CrossRef](#)
- Leone, R., Peek, W. C., & Bissell, K. L. (2006). Reality television and third-person perception. *Journal Of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 50(2), 253-269. [CrossRef](#)
- McNeil, J. C. (1975). Feminism, femininity, and the television series: A content analysis. *Journal Of Broadcasting*, 19(3), 259-271. [CrossRef](#)
- MTV. (2013a). Jersey shore > main [About]. Retrieved from http://www.mtv.com/shows/jersey_shore/season_6/series.jhtml [Accessed: 01 Apr. 2016.]
- MTV. (2013b). Jersey shore > main [Watch Video]. Retrieved from http://www.mtv.com/shows/jersey_shore/season_6/series.jhtml [Accessed: 01 Apr. 2016.]
- MTV. (2013c). Jersey shore > main [Cast Bios]. Retrieved from http://www.mtv.com/shows/jersey_shore/season_1/cast.jhtml [Accessed: 01 Apr. 2016.]
- MTV. (2013d). Jersey shore > season 1 > episodes [Synopses]. Retrieved from http://www.mtv.com/shows/jersey_shore/season_1/episodes.jhtml
- Nielsen. (2011, September 21). 10 years of primetime the rise of reality and sports programming [Newswire]. Retrieved from <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/newswire/2011/10-years-of-primetime-the-rise-of-reality-and-sports-programming.html> [Accessed: 01 Apr. 2016.]
- Poniewozik, J. (2010). What's right with reality TV. *Time*, 175(7), 92-97.
- Priddy, E. (2014, March 6). Woman accused of hitting man with cinder block. *Southeast Missourian*. Retrieved from <http://www.semissourian.com/story/2057770.html> [Accessed: 01 Apr. 2016.]
- Reinard, J.C. (2007). *Introduction to communication research* (4th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Reiss, S., & Wiltz, J. (2004). Why people watch reality TV. *Media Psychology*, 6(4), 363-378. [CrossRef](#)
- Riddle, K., De Simone, J. J. (2013). A Snooki effect? An exploration of the surveillance subgenre of reality TV and viewers' beliefs about the "real" real world. *Psychology of Popular Media and Culture*, 2(4), pp. 237-250. [CrossRef](#)
- Salsano, S. A. (Producer). (2009). *Jersey shore* [Television series]. Seaside Heights, NJ: 495 Productions.
- Signorielli, N., & Bacue, A. (1999). Recognition and respect: A content analysis of prime-time television characters across three decades. *Sex Roles*, 40(7/8), 527-544. [CrossRef](#)
- Stack, T. (2010). Skank you very much!. *Entertainment Weekly*, (1113), 40-43.
- Sung, C. C. M. (2013). Language and gender in a US reality TV show: An analysis of leadership discourse in single-sex interactions. *Nordic Journal Of English Studies*, 12(2), 25-51.
- Television and New Media. (2013). Special issue on "Gender and Reality TV."
- Tyree, T. (2011). African American stereotypes in reality television. *Howard Journal Of Communications*, 22(4), 394-413. [CrossRef](#)
- Watson, J., & Hill, A. (2003). *Dictionary of media and communication studies* (6th ed.). London: Arnold.

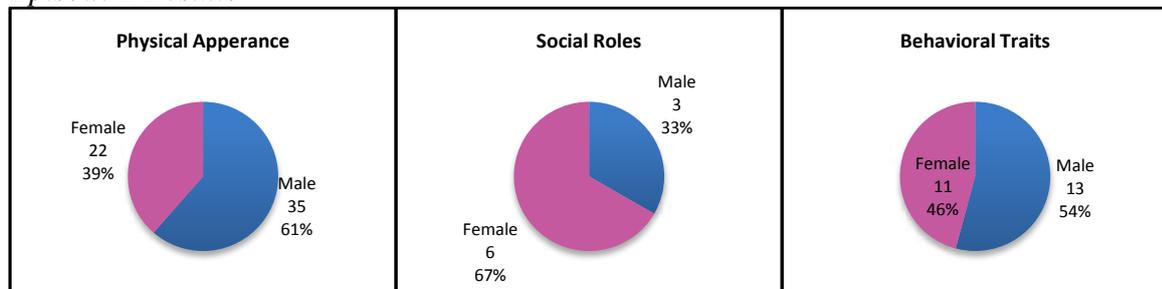
Webner, B. R. (2014). Reality Gendervision: Sexuality and gender on Transatlantic reality television. Durham: Duke University Press.

Appendix A: Coding by Episode

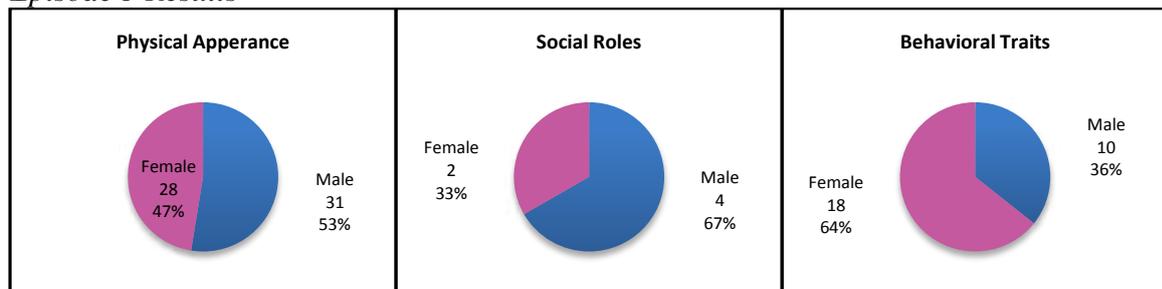
Episode 1 Results



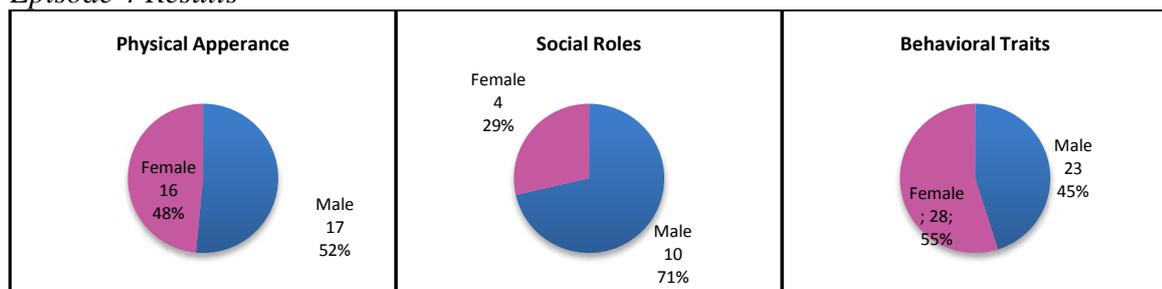
Episode 2 Results



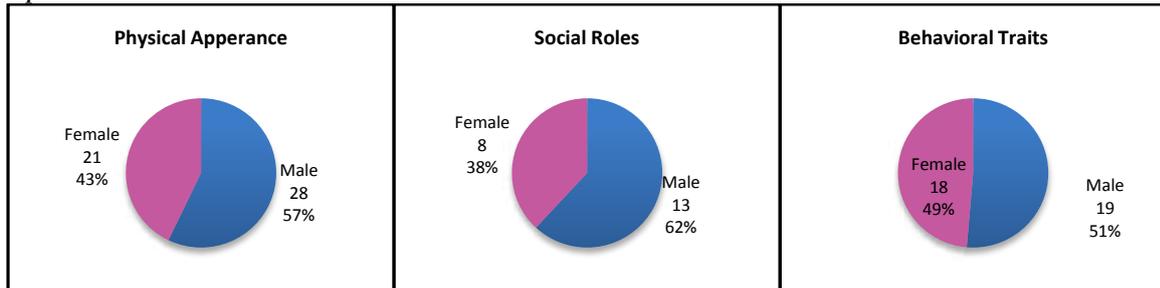
Episode 3 Results



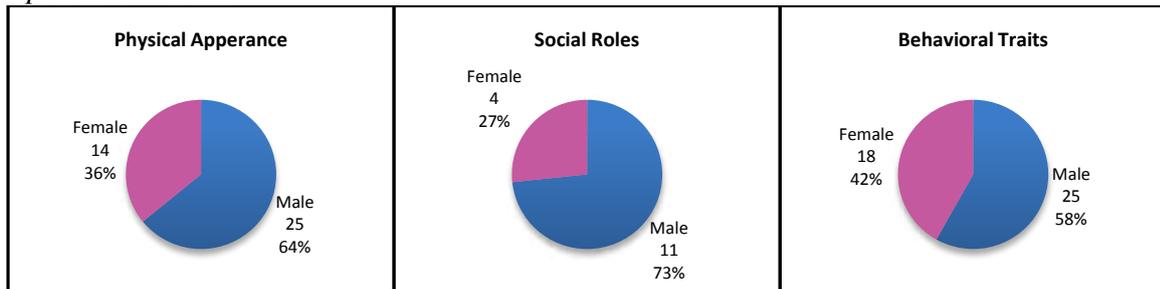
Episode 4 Results



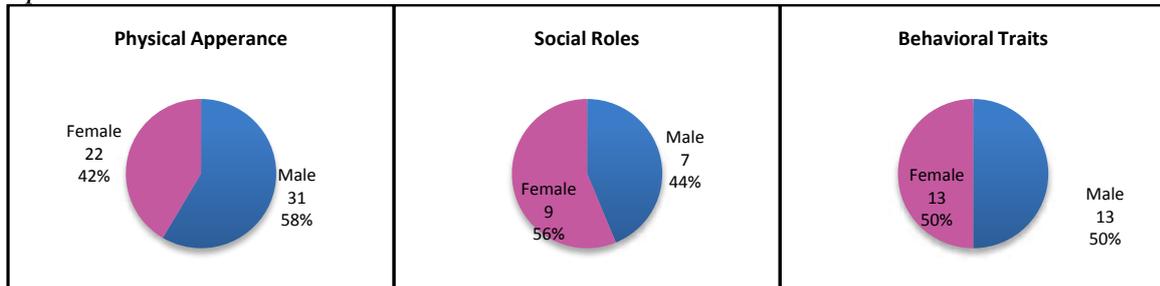
Episode 5 Results



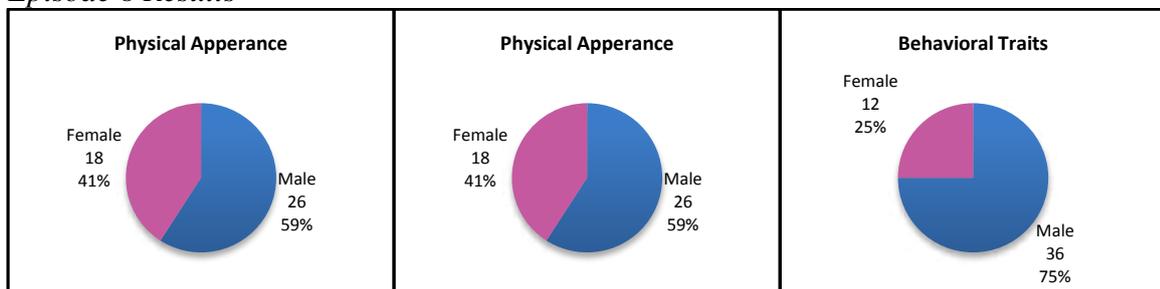
Episode 6 Results

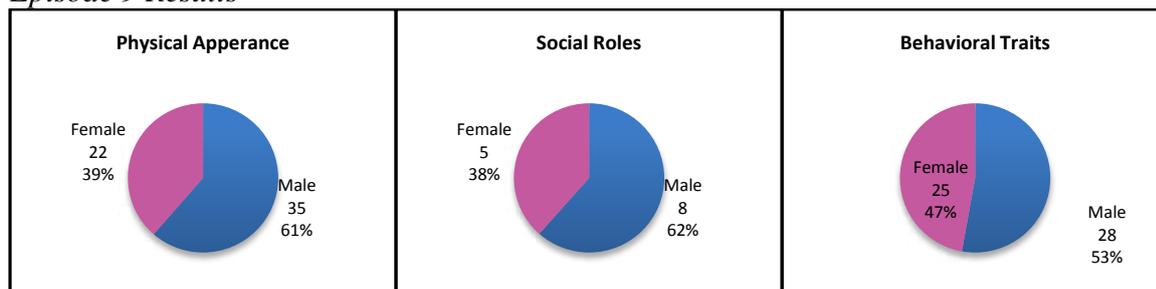


Episode 7 Results



Episode 8 Results



Episode 9 Results**Appendix B***Jersey Shore Season 1 Cast Guide*

Name, Age & Hometown	Nickname	Bio
Angelina, 22 Staten Island, NY	N/A	If Angelina has something on her mind, it'll be out of her mouth before you know it. She always has something to say and doesn't care what anyone else thinks. The question is, how long will her housemates put up with it? She has a new boyfriend and intends on staying faithful--but who knows what the summer will bring.
Jenni, 23 Franklin Square, NY	J-Woww	When Jenni walks into a bar, the guys yell "J-WOWW!" She may have a boyfriend, but down at the Jersey Shore all bets are off. Impulsive and spontaneous, Jenni is a party girl with zero self-control. Wherever she goes, drama is sure to follow. But under her tough exterior there is a softer side, which makes her the resident big sister.
Mike, 27 Staten Island, NY	The Situation	Mike may have a sensitive side, but he has plenty of game to go with it. He knows what he wants from his summer at the Jersey Shore and is not going to let anything stop him from getting it--even his roommates. The way he sees it, he has the situation under control.
Nicole, 21 Marlboro, NY	Snooki	Nicole is looking to meet the man of her dreams. When she goes to the gym, she goes in full makeup, hoping to make a splash with all the toned men. Her height has been as much of a strength as it has been an obstacle, and it will color her summer at the Shore in a big way.
Paul, 28 Johnston, RI	DJ Pauly D	Pauly D is Rhode Island's most well known DJ and keeps a tanning bed in his house. He orders gel by the case and does his hair twice a day--once in the morning and once before hitting the town. For Pauly D, cleanliness is close to godliness, so he is not sure how he's going to handle living with roommates.
Ronnie, 23 Bronx, NY	N/A	Ronnie might find himself in a brawl or two, but he is a lover who just wants to have a good time. He comes into the house with one rule: Don't fall in love at the Jersey Shore. But as the summer goes on, he finds rules are meant to be broken.
Sammi, 22	Sammi	Sammi has been a serial dater all her life, but she's now single

Hazlet, NJ	Sweetheart	and loves every minute of it. Her friends call her a sweetheart, but when it comes to guys she is a heartbreaker. Just ask Mike and Ronnie.
Vinny, 21 Staten Island, NY	N/A	Vinny is a self-confessed mama's boy and natural entertainer. He knows how to get a laugh from everyone he meets. Having just turned 21, Vinny has been waiting for this summer his whole life and is ready for a wild time with no boundaries.
(MTV, 2013c)		

Appendix C

Jersey Shore Season 1 Episode Guide

Episode	Title	Original Airdate	Synopsis
101	A New Family	12/03/2009	Summer at the Jersey Shore kicks off when eight soon-to-be roommates move into their summer share. Romance heats up between Sammy and Mike, but all might be lost when the guys invite three random girls to join them in the hot tub. Meanwhile, Snooki comes on way too strong, and finds herself the outcast. She can only hope that first impressions won't be lasting impressions.
102	The Tanned Triangle	12/03/2009	Still feeling like the outcast, Snooki tells the others that she's leaving the Shore. And the roommates' first night out at the club gets flirty, proving that the boyfriends back home might, in fact, have something to worry about. And what started with Mike and Sammy turns into a love triangle that threatens to divide the house.
103	Good Riddance	12/10/2009	The love triangle gets even more intense when Ronnie catches Sammy giving her number to another guy. And a housemate chooses to leave the Shore for good.
104	Fade To Black	12/18/2009	After a night at the clubs, Pauly D and Mike have to juggle multiple groups of girls. And mayhem breaks out when a fight erupts at a bar, and one of the housemates goes down.
105	Just Another Day At The Shore	01/01/2010	The roommates rally around Snooki, and the unexpected result of the brutal punch is that it actually brings the house closer. Sam meets Ronnie's parents.
106	Boardwalk Blowups	01/07/2010	When Mike invites girls back to the house, the situation gets out of control, and Snooki gets into her second fight of the summer. Meanwhile Ronnie gets into a brawl of his own, leaving Sammi questioning their relationship.
107	What Happens In AC	01/14/2010	The roommates head to Atlantic City where fun turn to fury when Mike manages to antagonize both Snooki and J-WOWW. And one roommate reveals that she used to have an eating disorder.

108	One Shot	01/14/2010	The summer's winding down, but the drama doesn't stop. Pauly's got a stalker and a fight lands another roommate in jail.
109	That's How The Shore Goes	01/21/2010	Ronnie is released from his night in the slammer and the guys comfort Snooki after she has a bad encounter with her ex-boyfriend. The housemates wrap things up at the Shore as summer draws to a close, but not before one final house hot tub hook up.
(MTV, 2013b) & (MTV, 2013d)			

Communication Studies, Normative Justice, and Amalgamating Traditions of Inquiry

KOME – An International Journal of Pure
Communication Inquiry
Volume 4 Issue 1, p. 20-35.
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and Permission:
kome@komejournal.com
Published by the Hungarian Communication
Studies Association
DOI: 10.17646/KOME.2016.12

Scott Timcke

Simon Fraser University, Canada

Abstract: Communication Studies scholars tend to be dialogical-dialectical and so are generally able to productively talk across multiple traditions of inquiry. As I argue in this paper, a study of justice requires this type of approach. After discussing classical notions of dialogical argumentation, the critique of rhetoric, and their modern counterparts, I identify several key elements of dialogical-dialectical reasoning. I then demonstrate how this kind of approach emphasize consideration, deliberation, assertion, the giving and taking of reason, concern with the nature of reasoning, and points to the ethical evaluation of political practices.

Keywords: Dialectics, Rhetoric, Reasoning, Pragmatics, Method

Introduction

Given the centrality of justice to social encounters, it is not surprising that various academic disciplines have sought to study it. To select but two approaches, one could suggest that political philosophy has traditionally had a narrow concern with ethics, by which I mean the reasoning of appropriate action, while political sociology has had a narrow concern for political practice, by which I mean the struggle for power that can be found in many areas of life. But an excessive concern for disciplinary boundaries can perpetuate the mistaken belief that political philosophy and political sociology are two alternative, sometimes antagonistic, ways of studying justice. This belief, however, obscures more lines of inquiry than it reveals. The primary cut should not be along disciplinary lines, but rather the willingness to examine the ethics of power. In this sense disciplinary fidelity inadvertently divides what should be kept together: the ethical evaluation of political practices.

Address for Correspondence: Scott Timcke, email: snt2[at]sfu.ca

Article received on the 1st October, 2015. *Article accepted* on the 19th May, 2016.

Conflict of Interest: The author declare no conflicts of interest.

Although it can by no means lay claim to exclusive authority, Communication Studies is well positioned to conduct such an evaluation. This is for two reasons. The first is that as Robert Craig points out, the field is “enormously rich in the range of ideas” (1999: 119) available to analyse complex phenomena. The second is the tendency of the discipline to be “dialogical-dialectical” (1999: 123). This means that it is able to productively incorporate and amalgamate various traditions of inquiry for the purposes of enhancing the understanding of a particular problem.

As proposed by Alasdair MacIntyre, a tradition of inquiry relates not to the transmission of specific content *per se*, but rather to the manner and modalities of how that content is accepted and considered legitimate. As MacIntyre writes,

A tradition is more than a coherent movement of thought. It is such a movement in the course of which those engaging in such movement become aware of it and its direction and in self-aware fashion attempt to engage in its debates and to carry its enquiries forward. (1988: 326)

One can add some of Jeffrey Stout’s remarks to develop the concept further:

It inculcates certain habits of reasoning, certain attitudes towards deference and authority in political discussion, and love for certain goods and virtues, as well as a disposition to respond to certain types of actions, events, or persons with admiration, pity or horror. Its ethical substance however, is more a matter of enduring attitudes, concerns, dispositions, and patterns of conduct. (2005: 3)

This means that it has a common set of concerns, pieties, and aspirations, with distinctive ways of approaching those concerns. It also means that the manner of approaching problems is ritually transmitted across generations. Hereafter, the tradition becomes a resource for scholars to draw upon as well as providing a framework by which to undertake creative inquiries. Thus, traditions have a particular role to play in determining the process by which knowledge is acquired and justified.

A feature of interest to Communication Studies scholars is how traditions are conceived of as being continuously refashioned through the process of transmission itself. As it relates to Craig’s dialogical-dialectical model, multiple transmissions in effect produce a dialogue, or more precisely, conditions for dialectics. Etymologically, dialectics derives from ‘*dialektike*,’ which is a modification of the verb ‘*dialegein*’ which refers to talk across. Understood in this manner, Communication Studies is able to productively talk across multiple traditions of inquiry. As demonstrated below, a study of justice requires this type of approach.¹

Justice: Of Nature, or Of Art?

By Aristotle’s categorization, philosophers are “those who discourse on nature.” They are distinguished from the tragedians “who discourse on the gods.” This distinction—the realm of nature, and the realm of the gods—was a central disciplinary demarcation in Aristotelian philosophy. Philosophers, according to Aristotle, were concerned with having wisdom of nature. By contrast classical Greek tragedians traditionally confined themselves to the realm

¹ This paper does not propose a communicative method to achieve substantive justice. I am not disputing that by cultivating the excellence of communication one can better cultivate and enrich relationships with others. Of course, sometimes more talk begets more injustice. Rather this is a method to study justice in meaning, and in practice.

of the gods, insomuch that they speculated about the Gods' prevarications and personalities, and how persons are subject to the whims of the gods, being little more than puppets and playthings who exist in a certain role, a certain place within the world. In doing so the tragedians gave a dramatic rendering to the forces beyond the person, and how these forces come to influence life, and give it meaning and color. In short, the tragedians were not excessively concerned with what things are able to be known, but rather with the effort to give poetic intelligibility to things that cannot be known.

To make this divide more explicit we can turn to Leo Strauss's description of what Homer meant by nature. It is worth quoting him at length:

On his way to Circe's house to rescue his poor comrades, Odysseus is met by the god Hermes who wishes to preserve him. He promises Odysseus an egregious herb which will make him safe against Circe's evil arts. Hermes "drew a herb from the earth and showed me its nature. Black at the root it was, like milk its blossom; and the gods call it moly. Hard is it to dig for mortal men, but the gods can do everything." Yet the god's ability to dig the herb with ease would be to no avail if they did not know the nature of the herb—its looks and power—in the first place. The gods are thus omnipotent because they are, not indeed omniscient, but the knowers of the natures of things—of natures which they have not made. (Straus and Cropsey 1963: 2)

From these lines, we see that knowing the purpose and characteristics is to know the nature of a thing. But additionally, we should not overlook that the herb grows; it becomes something without human intervention; it changes at a predetermined pace. By contrast, things like sculptures do not grow. They are made, and the speed at which they take a certain form depends on the amount of labour involved. Once made, sculpture does not change unless it is altered by human intervention. They are not of nature, but rather by art. Nature grows. Art is made.

At this point it is worth noting that through the Western Tradition there has been as strong and persistent critique of idolatry, and value distinctions between the organic and the inorganic. We partially see this distinction in Moses' destruction of the Golden Calf, and Paul's Epistle to the Romans. In both cases conditions for injustice occur when people replace the revelation of God for the worships of things they themselves have created. We can appreciate these items, but the proper order of things is distorted when persons worship the items that they make. Indeed, while Marx was willing to concede that human-made objects had an intrinsic quality that distinguished them from machine-made items, he nevertheless was cautious of fetishizing these human-made objects, or treating humans in the same fashion as these objects. Again, while people can make things, can even have concern and care for the things that they make, things that are made are not things that can grow.

In the bifurcation between art and nature, to know the inner working of things that grow is to become like the gods. To be a knower is to understand the reasons for nature; that is the character, the power and attributes of change. This is quite clear if we look at Parmenides' *Ways of Inquiry*. In the poem Parmenides is taken by a chariot of mares to "the far-fabled path of the divinity" where he is initiated and welcomed into the place of the gods, and comes to know what they know. Entering the "the halls of Night" Parmenides has a revelation when he meets the goddess Night. She says,

You must learn all things
both the unshaken heart of well-rounded reality
and the notions of mortals, in which there is no genuine trustfulness.
Nonetheless these things too will you learn, how what they resolved
had actually to be, all through all pervading (Parmenides in Cook 2013: 110)

Knowing the reasons for creating objects pales in comparison to knowing the nature of objects; this is because nature needs to be discovered, whereas because humans create art, we know the reasons for it from the outset.² In Aristotelian terms, this is an appreciation of final cause. This division comes to establish the basic parameters by which we encounter the world, by knowing the reasons for some things, while not knowing the reasons for others. There are however difficulties in sustaining this distinction. For example, the Hebrew Bible does not have a word equivalent to nature. This does not mean that they did not know the concept, but rather that their understanding fell under a different rubric. Their rough equivalents are “way,” what we might call convention, “custom,” what we might call law, and “regular behavior,” what we might call practice. Now clearly, various groups have customs, ways, or regular behaviors, and generally we tend to collect these concepts under the umbrella of culture. These are all key concepts in sociological analysis. As Strauss makes clear, “that human beings can speak is natural, but that this particular tribe uses this particular language is due to convention” (Strauss and Cropsey 1963: 3). Under this rubric, form is natural, while content is cultural, one universal, the other particular. Strauss continues, “The distinction implies that the natural is prior to the conventional” (Strauss and Cropsey 1963: 3). But this tends to reverse the consensus at least with a particular stand of communication theory and literacy criticism which holds, in an abbreviated fashion, that content and form are intimately connected to the extent that one conditions the other, and the sets of meaning that are possible.

With all this said, we are now in a position to add some additional dimensions to Aristotle’s divide: To be a philosopher is to be wise like the Gods by knowing the purposes and characteristics of things that exist in nature, insisting that these are the kinds of things that can be known: To be a tragedian is lament the fragility of things we make, all the while attesting to the belief that they are subject to unknowable forces and intents.

As much as the Western Philosophical tradition is indebted to the philosophical inheritance of Aristotelian thought, a cursory view through Bertrand Russell’s *A History of Western Philosophy* shows that this division has never had strict adherence.³ Even twentieth century analytic philosophy as much as it embraced naturalism thereby distanced itself from the study of items in particular. It instead sought what A. J. Ayer has called “the study of evidence,” by, as Bernard Williams writes, being “clear.”⁴

Richard Rorty, however, has defended the tragedian contribution by countering that the analytic agenda was too narrow. As an alternative Rorty advocated the recognition that poetics could be legitimate philosophical exercises because they reveal elements of human nature, belief, and motivation that occasionally pass the blind spot of more orthodox analytical inquiries. In *Achieving Our Country*, he argued that poetics “must be allowed to recontextualize much of what you previously thought you knew.” (1998: 133-134) The same sentiments are present throughout *Philosophy as Social Hope, and Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Rorty’s point is simply that poetics is a core attribute of contemporary society; it shapes language, facilitates exchange, and provides a means to attend to identity. These of course come to bear on the understanding of the human condition.

² In part, the blurring of this distinction underwrites the basis of Lukacs reification of the labour process in that persons forget the reasons for the objects that we have.

³ The same applies for revisionist reviews of the same tradition. Cf O’Connor (1964), Neiman (2002), Kenny (2010).

⁴ What Williams means is that “if claims are (...) to carry conviction in coming from a philosophical writer, they are themselves best set out with some degree of discursive rationality and argumentative order.” (Williams 2006: viii)

These points provide good grounds to argue that one of the primary uses of justice is to examine the human condition and inform a discussion over a communication approach to justice, it is useful insofar that it helps us appreciate the distinction between what is natural and what is conventional. Importantly, if we recall Lukacs' discussion of reification—that is persons tending to misconstrue what is made for what is natural—this exercise can go a long way to remedying this conceptual and experiential confusion. Here an investigation into the ethical evaluation of political practices would wisely attempt to appreciate the dialectics of self and action, mind and world.

Justice and Dialectic

Justice is a complex phenomenon. One reason for this complexity is that justice, as best as we can tell, and despite Parfit's most recent magnificent attempt in *On What Matters* (2011), has no point of convergence. As Bernard Williams famously puts it for morality, but which is as applicable for justice,

[in] a scientific inquiry there should be ideally be convergence on an answer, where the best explanation of the convergence involves the idea that the answer represents how things are; in the area of the ethical, at least at a high level of generality, there is no such coherent hope. (2006: 136)

This does not demonstrate incoherence or weakness, but an acknowledgment that morality, ethics, and justice are not matters of formula, progress, and pure discovery, but rather matters of reasoning, judgement, and best fit. This being the case, one would be mistaken in believing that in ethics there is a single way of stipulating once and for all what justice should be. While one might have good reasons to think what we do have is suitability good enough, it is very different to thinking that it is definitive.

This sentiment resonates with Craig's vision of Communication Studies, which is not to create "some chimerical unified theory of communication" (1999: 123). Instead, Craig proposes that "the goal should not be a state in which we have nothing to argue about, but one in which we better understand that we all have something very important to argue about" (1999: 124). This point holds for justice, where following Plato, there is a common understanding that "justice is better than injustice," but where the question of 'what is just' remains somewhat open, even if it occasionally finds temporary consensus.

Regarding the pursuit of questioning and dialogue, we can draw some methodological guidance from Richard Rorty's essay, "The Philosopher as Expert." For Rorty, philosophy is not so much about vision and science, but rather the "continuing historical dialogue" amongst situated persons seeking to ask "questionable questions."⁵ Keeping that conversation going is the purpose of philosophy, and it is an activity done in and of itself for its own sake.

⁵ To elaborate upon this point, philosophers. Rorty argues that they are involved in a cultural enterprise which is larger than any individual, school, or method. The famous line here is "Philosophers are philosophers not because they have common aims and interests (they don't), or common methods (they don't), or agree to discuss a common set of problems (they don't), or are endowed with common faculties (they aren't)." (2009: 421). A similar sentiment is expressed by Aristotle: "If one must philosophize, then one must philosophize; and if one must not philosophize, then one must philosophize; in any case, therefore, one must philosophize. For if one must, then, given that Philosophy exists, we are in every way obliged to philosophize. And if one must not, in this case too we are obliged to inquire how it is possible for there to be philosophy; and in inquiring we philosophize, for inquiry is the cause of Philosophy." If Rorty and Aristotle are correct, then it appears that we are all philosophers at some point or another.

Still, asking questions, by itself, is insufficient. It simply cannot provide the fuel of the discussion. “The questioning of presuppositions,” Rorty cautions, “will not be effective unless one can show that there exist genuine alternatives to these presuppositions.” (2009: 407.) Rorty also acknowledges that questions can be disruptive and uncomfortable, to the point of overthrowing an existing set of beliefs. For this reason it is thus incumbent on the questioner to demonstrate why the questions are “worth the trouble.” (2009: 408). Questions need to demonstrate *gravitas*. In plainer terms, if you want to attack existing theoretical constructions, you have a responsibility to explain what you would have done differently. An additional criterion Rorty offers is that new questions, and the new philosophies they lead to, must demonstrate that they can incorporate and preserve what is considered valuable in the old set of beliefs. He writes that the new set of beliefs should

still say everything that we want within the new perspective, and that it will be said better than before by virtue of the gain in critical self consciousness that this new perspective offers us. (2009: 408).

If we equate Rorty’s remarks about philosophy with remarks about justice, then instructions for a study of justice require that

- a) questioning existing beliefs justice should have the intent, barring honest mistakes or honest mischaracterisation, of leading to genuine viable alternative conceptions of justice;
- b) should retain the presuppositions and accounts generally considered vital and valuable; and
- c) demonstrate moral earnestness.

Present in these comments is a dialectical account of knowledge. The hallmarks of dialectics are that supersession must be justified, retain necessary elements, and lastly never foreclose the possibility of other supersessions. In pragmatic terms, this is what is meant by the rejection of final vocabularies; it assists in maintaining the ongoing discussion.

Dialectics is, however, more than simply qualified supersession. Rather, it encompasses a particular stance on the relationship between structured debates and knowledge. Aristotle, writing in *Topics*, argues that the dialectical examination “lies along the path to all principles of methods of inquiry” in that it invents, finds, and orders arguments. (*Topics* 101b3-4) This attends to the epistemic significance of the dialectical method: The method proposes an intimate relationship between truth, justification, and discovery; the method makes things intelligible; the unknown known.

As Nicholas Rescher (1977) writes, this stance is different from rhetorical persuasion and scientific demonstration. Whereas rhetoric seeks to convince someone that something is true, and demonstration seeks to show what is known to be the true, dialectic seeks to posit the provisional truth through reasonable comprehension. One garners as much when consulting Plato’s conception of the dialectic.⁶ In Book VI of *The Republic* he writes:

...reason itself lays hold of by the power of dialectic, treating its assumptions not as absolute beginnings but literally as hypotheses, underpinnings, footings, and springboards so to speak, to

⁶ Marta Spranzi pins Plato as the first philosopher to consciously use the word *dialektike*. In the *Republic*, Plato describes it as being composed of two distinct moments: the first consists in relying on hypotheses in order to ascend to “that which requires no assumption and is the starting point of all.”; the second consists in proceeding downwards to the conclusion by “moving on through ideas to ideas and ending with ideas.” (511b, quoted in Spranzi 2011: 11)

enable it to rise to that which requires no assumption and is the starting point of all, and after attaining to that again taking hold of the first dependencies from it, so to proceed downward to the conclusion, making no use whatever of any object of sense but only of pure ideas [forms] moving on through ideas [forms] to ideas [forms] and ending with ideas [forms]. (The Republic (511 b2-c1))

The passage demonstrates Plato's intent to break from everyday practical reasoning so that the provisional dialectical truth is no longer colored by authority and custom. This is a strong, admirable claim, but perhaps not one I would fully rally behind given what one can sociologically demonstrate about the intersection of language and power. However, a slightly weaker Platonic version is described by Marta Spranzi: "[D]ialectic [is] a practice that, by working through provisional premises, can attain a higher kind of knowledge, which can then be tested through some sort of Socratic criticism" (2011: 11). Conceived as such, dialectics is quite defensible.

Having studied *Topics*, Spranzi (2011) believes that Aristotle attempted to distinguish between two different types of dialectical inquiry. The first, which she calls aporetic, is characterized by an opened ended examination of different views and does not involve other thinkers. This might be considered a type of project of the self, in that the inquiry continues as long as the thinker is willing to pursue the question. As it applies to a study of justice, an aporetic dialectic could be considered as a person trying to establish how they might live the good life in the contingent circumstances they find themselves.

The second type that Spranzi (2011) identifies is what she calls disputational dialectics. This type of dialectic is a rule-bound and characterized by asymmetrical debate between two interlocutors, a questioner and an answerer. Rules imply a strict parameter, and a demarcation of roughly the right way to achieve an answer. Asymmetry does not imply that one party is more important than the other: while the answerer provides and gives responses to the questioner, driving dialectic forward, the questioner directs the dialectical exchange in that they determine whether the answer was adequate, satisfactory, and most importantly, whether it was intelligible. As it applies to a study of justice, disputational dialectics has three instructions. The first is that it gives priority to the right as opposed to the good. This derivation matches Rawls' approach to justice which also gives priority to the right. The second is that as dialectical inquiry brings persons into conversation, there needs to be a means by which they can resolve differences and disagreements. This anticipates Liberal contractualists who seek to establish mutually advantageous contacts that provide the means to settle conflict. Lastly, in spite of asymmetrical positions, both parties are vital to the inquiry, for without the specific position of either, and a commitment to fully participate in this role, this type of dialectical inquiry would not be possible. It would become aporetic.

Both aporetic and disputational types of dialectical inquiry have merit when it comes to a study of justice. However, a disputational type has an advantage, as least as far a study of substantive political justice is concerned. By definition basic political justice involves more than one person; there exists many people who seek to live, if not together, minimally around one another. Common rules for determining how to settle disputes are required to mediate both conduct and conceptions of what is politically feasible. This dovetails with Williams' point above, where justice is not the outcome of some pre-determined equation due to be discovered, but rather an exercise in construction.

A few other aspects of dialectics are worth considering. To begin, dialectics, like any good conversation, requires some minimal common set of assumptions between interlocutors. This provides enough for persons to debate one another, as opposed to simply speaking past one another. But this comes at the cost of presuming what might be taken for granted by one party. However, unlike a conversation, dialectical writing does not have the benefit of an

immediate back and forth to explicit what is presumed, or clarify what is puzzling. For this reason, dialectical writing engages in a degree of anticipatory writing.

Like all anticipatory exercises, this can go awry. But this should not be cause for excessive alarm. As MacIntyre points out, Humans are a “story-telling animal.” That is, we use symbols to tell others meaningful interpretations of actions (1984: 214-216). As the tragedians could tell us, there are diverse kinds of stories. Some are false but riveting. Some are true but boring. And while the qualities of a good story depend upon genre and circumstance, a good story teller will nevertheless attend to the audience at hand. They understand their role as rhetors.

On a related note dialectical reasoning does not aim to produce consensus. Unlike rhetoric, the aim is not to persuade others to adopt a particular position, or to motivate them to adopt your position. Rather it is an act of dissent and criticism with what is claimed to be known. It is not surprising then that it gives birth to Critical Theory, broadly construed. As an example, consider that Plato in *The Republic* characterises several different known accounts of moral codes as they relate to justice: contentment with life, presented by Cephalus; regulation of life by proverbs and rules, presented by Polemarchus; proscriptions of general notions which lack nuance or suppleness, presented by Thrasymachus; maximising the utility of pleasure, presented by Glaucon; and governance to advance the idea of the good, presented by Adeimantus.

But for each of these accounts, Plato finds reason to dissent: Against Cephalus because traditions can perpetuate injustices, and are often idiosyncratic to positions within a culture; against Polemarchus because he simply parrots the moral principles of the teachers Cephalus’ wealth affords as opposed to knowing the reasons that motivate those principles; against Thrasymachus because his sophistry seeks not the good, but vanity, and he trades in gross generalizations.

Glaucon and Adeimantus present different challenges for their positions are more refined. Glaucon’s drive to maximise the goods within life comes from understanding the badness therein. He therefore presents a forerunner to a kind of act-utilitarianism. The weakness however, is that it pays insufficient attention to obligation, and not all goods can be reduced to monist pleasure; other virtues exist. Adiemantus’ directly confronts that there are consequences associated with acts, and this includes the act of moral reasoning; judgement is not an isolated from the world in which it exists. His proposal is to abide by a set of rules whose consequence is well understood. This account is akin to rule-utilitarianism. It therefore suffers from the same criticism: As one cannot prescribe unknown goods and proscribe unknown evils, if implemented people could likely live according to codes that harm their well-being because the lack of knowledge is a double bladed axe, sharp on both sides.

Having rejected these positions, Plato, by application of pure dialectical reasoning, advocates a more robust conception of justice, this being virtuous motivations that bring congruence between psychological states and the actions meant to fulfill duties thereby promoting our welfare, and the welfare of those around us. In this conception justice is both reason and affect. You know it, you feel it, and you know that you feel it. To use rough equivalent terms, Plato saw justice as a state of human flourishing.

Arriving at this position is achieved through presenting warranted premises and conditions, hence the conclusion stands as a justified and tested claim. Furthermore the claim stands independent of whether others subscribe to it. Accordingly, rebuttals must examine the substantive elements of the argument and its claims, not assess the degree of adherence. Given the degree to which consensus turns on power and custom, ignoring this altogether is a virtue for dialectics.

Nevertheless, and this needs to be made explicit, because dialectics does is not primarily persuasive, nor is conducted for demonstrative purposes, the notion of proof is highly

qualified. One cannot claim that Plato ‘proved’ that justice is this or that. Rather, we say that he engaged in rational argument in favour of this or that. Ultimately, it is up others to decide if this position is to be adopted or not.⁷ This points, minimally, to the involvement of rhetoric therein, at least if we are to understand rhetoric as the contemporary American philosopher, Henry Johnstone (2007) does. For this reason it is important to see to how rhetoric factors into a conception of justice.

Sophistry Cannot Bring About Substantive Justice

Plato argued strongly that the dialectical method was far superior to rhetorical methods for the purposes of determining truth. And it is fairly well known that Plato was a notable critic of rhetoric; take for example his dismissal and evisceration of the sophists, particularly Gorgias. However, the hard Platonic stance misses the value and virtue of the dialectical rhetor, a position that Plato himself occupies. As Aristotle notes in *Rhetoric* it would be wonderful if persons could base their judgements on “the bare facts,” or the burden of reasons to use Rawls’ phrase, but this is simply not the case. “[O]ther things” he writes “affect the result considerably, owing to the defects of our hearers.”⁸ And one can add the defects and fallibility of the speaker.

So even minimally, dialectical reasoning requires some consideration and modification of our words to ensure that reasons can be exchanged. Minimally then, dialectical inquiry requires the use of rhetoric techniques. But, this does not mean that rhetoric is a morally neutral technique; for it is not. Rather it is an attempt to persuade and clarify, and this has clear implications for how one understands, appreciates, and encounters the other. In this sense, rhetoric is a way of treating things.

Despite some who might adopt the stance that dialectics does not seek to persuade, or aim at consensus, nevertheless, given that disputational dialectical reasoning requires two, or more, interlocutors, it is bound to rhetoric, even insofar that interlocutors propose and appeal to the other participants. Rhetoric is present in the way that they treat the subject, and treat each other. I want to push this argument in this section and show how dialectics and rhetoric, or at least refined versions of each, are co-constitutive.

There are grounds for such an argument, particularly in the works of Aristotle. But before presenting it in full, I want to anticipate some objections. This is because my argument is at odds with positions occupied by the likes of Carl Holmberg (1977). Holmberg contradistinguished between dialectics and rhetoric as having fidelity to different, and mutually exclusive, ontologies. Whereas a dialectical ontology prompts people to use their minds to transcend their partiality and to grapple with things beyond their immediate scope to

⁷ John Stuart Mill in *Utilitarianism* (1969, quoted in Rosen 2012: xiii) says that “There is a larger meaning of the word proof, in which this question is amenable to it as any other of the disputed questions of philosophy. The subject is within the cognisance of the rational faculty; and neither does that faculty deal with it solely in the way of intuition. Consideration may be presented capable of determining the intellect either to give or withhold its assent to the doctrine; and this is equivalent to proof.” Michael Rosen explains this as “just because can’t reach a mathematical ideal of proof, we shouldn’t throw up our hands and conclude that philosophy is no more than personal preference. We can give reasons for and against positions, reasons that carry weight even if they’re not conclusive.” (Rosen 2012: xiii)

⁸ As the composer and sound studies theorist Murray Schafer asserts, “As we have no ear lids. We are condemned to listen. But this does not mean our ears are always open.” Schafer proposes that the existential phenomenological attunement of self is not entirely voluntaristic but is partially conditioned by social factors. Schafer continues: “In every society it is possible to detect individuals or classes of people whose ears are open and those whose ears are closed. Open to change? Open to commands? Open to criticism? Open to new ideas? Open to messages from God? Or closed to them.” (2003: 14.)

discover truth, a rhetorical ontology emphasises partial bounds of the appetite, refrains from positing definitive truths, and due to partiality, provisional truths are indeterminate. So rhetoric is a “relativism counter to the dialectical absolutism.” (Holmberg 1977: 236). But Holmberg pushes the exclusionary contrast too much. As much as rhetoric can be used for relativism, so to can it be used for absolutism. The draconian edicts of the tyrannical despot bear testament to this. And where dialectical inquiry might be seen to be absolute, sustained inquiry may find multiple suitable courses of action for instance. It is not ontology that matters. It is rather the intention to use the different techniques in particular ways. One might say that motivation matters.

The first step required in examining which aspects of dialectics and rhetoric co-constitutive requires a deliberate distillation of which aspects of rhetoric, which kinds of practices, are compatible with dialectics. Doing so requires that we attend briefly to Plato’s critique of Gorgias, assessing which parts should be discarded. Having done so, I will turn to Aristotle’s rhetoric.

The Platonic critique of sophist rhetoric proceeds on three inter-related grounds: epistemological, methodological and moral.⁹ Epistemologically, in that sophists are not concerned with establishing truth, but rather with creating a conventional wisdom for the audience present. (cf Phaedrus 267a.) Methodologically, in that sophists subordinate real expertise to posturing over expertise, or punditry over professionalism to use a contemporary analog. This is because the sophists do not respect the true and false distinction. (cf Gorgias 456e; Phaedrus 261c, Gorgias 501c-502d) Morally, in that it seeks to exploit the gullibility, nativity, and vulnerabilities of audiences. In this sense, sophists are predatory opportunists who seek to manipulate the audience (cf Philebus 58a) Gorgias is indifferent to truth, virtue, and justice, and instead abuses the appetites of others for his own ends (cf Meno 95c and Gorgias 500b). To use Harry Frankfurt’s taxonomy, Gorgias is a bullshitter (cf Frankfurt 2005). The consequences of sophistry and bullshitting are the same; an unstable world where hedonism and ego hold over the many. There is diversion and distraction, popularism and pandering.

Despite Plato’s critique, there is some inkling that Gorgias may have been onto something. Take for example Bruce McComiskey’s (2002) project to rehabilitate Gorgias. McComiskey claims that Plato unfairly tarnishes Gorgias’ rhetoric. He, McComiskey that is, claims that Gorgias is not indifferent to truth, simply not concerned with the types of truth with are amenable to empirical inquiry. He claims that the knowledge that matters is the kind that organizes “economic, political, social, and cultural realities.” (McComisky 2002: 37-38). In this characterization, Gorgias advances a kind of practical reasoning that seeks to attend to actually encountered situations, what McComiskey calls the “demands of the situation,” (2002: 111) but confronts them through discourses. This kind of practical, argumentative reasoning, and has epistemic value. In this fashion, McComiskey lobbies for Gorgias anticipating post-modern, post-structural, and performative theories.

But it is McComiskey, not Plato, who is mischaracterizing the sophists, and Gorgias in particular. Gorgias, in fact, rejects entirely that truth can be representational. As he declares in *Encomium on Helen*, Gorgias thinks that language is a “powerful drug” (8). In a contemporary fashion we might say that ordinary language is simply maneuvers in language games based upon utility, not faithful description. As this applies to audiences, truth is simply the by-product a contingent judgement. If this is the case, then the rhetor who shapes the process of judgement formation has influence over what truth is produced. But there are

⁹ This is to say, how the Sophists understood rhetoric, its purposes, and which techniques were considered fair use.

problems for this belief. As a way to demonstrate consider this well-known example from recent American politics attributed to Karl Rove:

We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do. (quoted in Suskind, 2004).

This does not mean that the distinction between knowledge and opinion, appearance and reality disappears. Recall that Rove's political colleague Rumsfeld was keen to preserve assertions of knowledge, but that this knowledge was subordinated to the game being played. This means that they reserve the right to change the conditions of the game, and hence what counts as knowledge. Knowledge, under these conditions, is not context invariant, but always situational. For Gorgias then, knowledge is a politics of which opinion is designated as appropriate. Like rhetors, scientists merely "substitute one opinion for another," (Encomium on Helen, 13) and are presumptuous in believing that they do otherwise. Under these conditions war and politics is little more than Calvinball but with higher stakes.

Gorgias is, to use Rorty's term, an 'antifoundationalist' and the weight of each statement is contingent. Gorgias seeks intersubjective agreement, but hopes that his interventions therein will skew advantages his way. But, to counter with another pragmatist tenant, we can re-describe this action as the tyranny of consensus. In this sense, Gorgias abuses the virtues of competitiveness and conciliation. By mischaracterising things, Gorgias treats political encounters and other items of a serious nature like game he can win, as if these are the sorts of things that can be won. He therefore also has a skewed understanding of the practices, and reasons for which these practices exist, with which he involved. He claims particular sensitivity to the context, he does not do it because he treats all contexts as if they were the same thing.

McComiskey and others might like to claim that Gorgias' disagreement with foundationalists like Plato is not over the designation of things, but rather over the certainty in this designation. But this is mistaken. Gorgias does not adopt a position, where like Henry Johnstone (2007), truth is inescapably rhetorical. Rather he claims that truth cannot be represented in any way shape or form. Truth and rhetoric do not meet. For Gorgias, there can be no 'speaking truth to power', because the concept of truth itself is meaningless. But there is incoherence here. In the dialogue *Gorgias* Socrates goes on to demonstrate how Gorgias' claims are mutually exclusive. Harry Frankfurt captures this point well in his brilliant book *On Truth*:

Even those who profess to deny the validity or the objective reality of the true-false distinction continue to maintain without apparent embarrassment that this denial is a position that they do *truly* endorse. The statement that they reject the distinction between true and false is, they insist, an unqualifiedly *true* statement about their beliefs, *not* a false one. (2006: 8-9).

We can add that there is a distinction to be made between what is true, what passes as being true, and our efforts to find truth. Making this distinction raises questions about what are the motivations of those who disparage veracity or fail attempt to pass one thing off as being true even if they know that it is not from those who without malicious intent make an honest mistake in thinking one thing is true. Moreover this distinction can help us leverage the motivations of persons who applaud those claiming it this is a distinction without a difference. The simple answer, I think, is that these people fetishize power at the expense of

truth. With this in mind, Gorgias, presents an unproductive view of the world that fails to take these vital distinctions into account.

At this point, I think that on the balance of things, Plato was correct to vilify sophists like Gorgias for their self-purported belief of control; they over-estimated their abilities to alter the minds of other persons, and even for their desire to attempt to do so. And indeed we are correct to chastise Gorgias for these reasons. To return to the dialogue, Gorgias doubles down on his assertion that the craft of rhetoric will win over expertise, but if this is the case then, eloquence has not power because it has not actual content, it cannot be backed by any virtue. The presumed power of eloquence is no power at all.

Justice and the Dialectical Rhetor

Clearly there is a sharp contrast between Platonic dialectics and Gorgian rhetoric. However, this does not mean that we need to jettison rhetoric in its entirety. Rather we need to jettison the motivations of Gorgias and his contemporary ilk. For a more suitable and reasonable set of motivations, we can draw upon Aristotle's rhetoric.

To provide some background, Aristotle's rhetoric, although adopting an ontology of the person as indeterminate, is predicated upon the indeterminate nature of argumentation. As a very simple example of Aristotle's rhetoric, consider the enthymeme. Whereas a syllogism aims to show the connection between logical points, the enthymeme allows the interlocutor to bring something to the argument, and even to the dialectical inquiry in which they may be involved. By reversing this technique, one can plot what attitudes and positions a person bring to the argument.¹⁰ This does not mean that reality is indeterminate, but rather that what a person brings is indeterminate. The important point to emphasis is that rhetoric cannot preexist the conception of reality it creates. In this sense, it is simply an alternative mode of inquiry, the purpose of which is to assess how people comprehend reality, how the understand it, what is their accepted reasoning, their presuppositions, and their particular manner of weighting items. What at first pass seemed like an objective limitation for rhetoric, is in fact a means to objectively assess what passes as reality to persons.

On another front, what is required is a reorientation of rhetoric that concerns itself with matters of objectivity, validity, and clarity. In other words, what is required is the desire to restore the virtue in the attempt to search for truth. For this reason Aristotle says that "rhetoric is the counterpart of dialectic." He continues:

Both alike are concerned with such things as come, more or less, within the general ken of all men and belong to no definite science. Accordingly all men make use, more or less, of both; for to a certain extent all men attempt to discuss statements and to maintain them, to defend themselves and to attack others. (Rhetoric, Book 1, 1354a)

In this respect, Aristotle calls for a ceasefire on whether dialectics trumps rhetoric, or *vice versa*. Rather Aristotle thinks in terms of practical matters; eloquence and clarity can promote dialectical encounters and exchanges; and this facilitates the assessment of 'the burden of reasons', to use Rawls' terms. In other words, rhetoric can help in the adjudication process, particularly in that it can help 're-describe' position such that we can see what is faulty with them. For instance, one could re-describe Cicero's *De Officiis* as 'decorum and etiquette for slave owners.' Such a re-description highlights how Cicero's conception of duty is colored by

¹⁰ In some respects the enthymeme technique has similar mechanics to that of the audience commodity, insofar that audiences are manipulated to in part contribute the labour required to persuade and involve themselves in a particular ideological formation, and are under the impression that they do so voluntarily.

a particular socio-economic position and intimately set within larger historical forces. Therefore, what analytic value there is to be had from engaging with this text comes only once having taken these social motivations into account. To be clear, a rhetorical re-description does not make an argument illogical. Rather it provides us with another avenue to assess the logic of the argument. It provides another means to separate out what is true from what is taken to be true.

One must not believe that conducting an investigation of kind I have sketched is easy. Moreover some beliefs might be more amenable to being revealed by this investigation than others. And not all beliefs can be explicated by this method. As it applies to justice however, seeing what meaning making actions occur, and what is taken to be true, is the value of Aristotelian rhetoric, because bringing indeterminate persons together allows finding determinate answers; hence it is participatory and can overcome the limitations of unique contingent life courses; the indeterminate nature of persons does not limit us to an orbit of relativism; but instead offers us more solid grounding. As Aristotle points out, rhetoric is a universal art, it is thus amenable to application on any subject matter. (Rhetoric, Book 1, 1355b) While Aristotle is less open to suggesting that rhetoric can be used outside of any given culture, it is also willing to consent that certain methods are able to speak objectively about a determinate reality, such as the sciences of biology and physics. Thus according to his taxonomy, the dialectical rhetor is open to objectivity in other areas, and is willing to entertain them as they come to relevantly bear on the subject at hand. We can contrast this stance against the rhetorical rhetor like Gorgias, who is willing to commit themselves that science is simply rhetoric dressed up, and who calls into question the expertise and discussion of reality that these items bring up.

In short, Aristotle notes that while rhetoric is cultural, not every inquiry is rhetorical, only certain types. There are degrees of cultural influence. Inquiries like mathematics are acultural, whereas, anthropology is certainly cultural. This is consistent with the nature of Aristotle's contingency: Not all things are contingent in the same way. With this in hand, I think we are in a position to suggest that the dialectical rhetor is open to putting justice in the 'of law' section, but noting that it is influenced by 'of nature.' The dialectical rhetor is able to develop provisional truth through reasonable comprehension, and this need not rest upon an absolutist ontology, but is certainly amenable to kinds contingency. This rhetoric is kind that emphasis consideration, deliberation, assertion, the giving and taking of reason, concern with the nature of reasoning, and always pointing to the ethical evaluation of political practices. Nussbaum calls a rhetoric of this kind "true and honest."¹¹ She writes:

For if we are talking about real things, it does matter, and matter deeply, whether we say this or that, since human life, much though we may regret the fact, is not simply a matter of free play and unconstrained making. And if it matters, it is worth taking the pains to do years of undramatic, possibly tedious, rigorous work to get it right. (1985: 129)

Doing so is not based on reality "as it is," for no such things exists, but from the vantage of "the worlds as perceived and interpreted by human beings." Here, Nussbaum (1985: 132) argues, "we can find all the truth we need." Let us contradistinguish this position to those that think that beliefs are incidental, tools, things that can be taken off like hats. But persons are not *homo faber credo*. Rather as Nussbaum shows, beliefs are intimately connected to the contingent lived experience; they constitute persons.

¹¹ Nussbaum writes, "as Aristotle puts it, a dialectic that is distinct from mere eristic." (1985: 132)

Conclusion

As Rawls established, ethics is different from epistemology. And as indicated above, justice is not nominal, but an exercise of judging, weighing, and evaluating. That said, the discrimination between different forms of justice must be informed by meta-epistemological discussions. It should take into consideration that the things we know are different from when most of our current contemporary forms of justice were set. When there are changes to *what* we know and *how* we know¹², justice must be able to be reconfigured accordingly. Suitable evaluative accounts of justice must take account of different traditions and weight their contribution according to a set of sound epistemological standards.

As this applies to interlocutors, in disputational dialectics, the incorporation of rhetoric is to assess whether the points advanced are intelligible. If dialectic does not make sense, then it is insufficiently rhetorically refined, or it might be an unprofitable avenue to explore. In this sense, I propose that one of the most important virtues of the dialectical-rhetor is clarity. When combined with the rule bound nature of disputational dialectical exchanges, there is a rough outlines of the analytic position as described above by Ayer and Williams.

With all this said, doubts do exist as to whether epistemological inquiry is amenable to dialectical-rhetorical inquiry. The first move I think is to parse out a critical empiricism from naïve empiricism. By naïve empiricism I mean the common-sense way of understanding sensorial experience with the world as direct. In accounting for the development of this position, Nussbaum writes,

...both science and ethics, began, it appears, by being naively realistic. Alternative scientific views were put forward without any hesitation as candidates for the way things really were in the universe. Even ethical norms were taken to be given for all time by the gods, independently of culture or history. During the fifth century, a variety of factors caused thinkers to focus on the presence of an irreducible human element in the purported eternal truths, an element of interpretation or conceptualization that seemed to entail that our theories do not passively receive and record a prearticulated given. (1985: 130)

This gradual acknowledgement interpretation, meditation, and facilitation developed to the point where, “it seemed no longer possible to reassert the old story of the received and altogether uninterpreted given.” As Wilfred Sellers wrote, this is the pernicious *Myth of the Given*. For these reasons and others, naïve empiricism is an untenable position.¹³ Rather is necessary to integrate the results of epistemological inquiry into dialectics. Critical empiricism draws upon these traditions, acknowledging that there is no unmediated access to the world but that is also incorrect to maintain that the world is simply sense and perception.

In summation a communicative study of justice should aim to connect everyday politics with philosophy. In this respect we again see the congruence with Plato; philosophy is developed through a consideration of contemporary political practices. This position concurs with Rorty, who as I have presented it, the question of whether political philosophy (vision) and political sociology (science) can contribute to a study of justice. Moreover, he points out that philosophy is “not materially self-sufficient. It draws its nourishment, obviously, from research in other disciplines, and less obviously but even more vitally, from debates between

¹² I refer here for example to the problems raised by epistemic luck, Gettier problems, debates between internalism and externalism and so on.

¹³ Rejecting naïve empiricism has one major implication; and that is the rejection of the conventional correspondence theory of truth. This is because the theory always ready relies upon the aforementioned tinted descriptions. To replace the correspondence theory of truth, theorists often turn to a coherence theory. This move, however, is problematic because is vulnerable to the problems of intersubjective agreement, notwithstanding the recognition that some common beliefs can themselves be faulty.

ideologues.” (2009: 420). To use Rorty’s terms, science can give us a vision of the future.¹⁴ The lesson is that a study of justice should show and clarify genuine connections of political causes with moral norms to the end of offering evaluation and guidance. In this way one can conduct scholarship seeking to offer an ethical evaluation of political practices.

Finally, as an approach to a study of justice, Craig’s dialogical-dialectical model, with its Rortian qualifications, has warrant. It is perhaps fitting even, given that *The Republic* is the preeminent investigation of justice through dialectics. So while one might not agree with the particular account of justice that Plato advances, the dialectical method has value because it seeks epistemological justification of various different position to the end of offering an appraise and evaluation. It is the means to separate the proverbial wheat from the chaff and draws attention to things often bracketed out of conventional disciplinary based discussions of justice.

References

- Aristotle, (2001) *Topics*. (trans. by W. A. Pickard-Cambridge). South Bend: Infomotions; Blacksburg: Virginia Tech.
- Aristotle, (2007) *On Rhetoric*. (trans. by G. A. Kennedy). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cook, B., (2013) *Pursuing Eudaimonia: Re-appropriating the Greek Philosophical Foundations of the Christian Apophatic Tradition*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars.
- Craig, R. T., (1999) Communication Theory as a Field, *Communication Theory*, 9(2) pp 119-161 [CrossRef](#)
- Frankfurt, H., (2005) *On Bullshit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Frankfurt, H., (2006) *On Truth*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Holmberg, C., (1977) Dialectical Rhetoric and Rhetorical Rhetoric, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 10(4), 232-243.
- Johnstone, H. W., (2007) The Philosophical Basis of Rhetoric, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 40(1), 15-26. [CrossRef](#)
- Kenny, A., (2010) *A New History of Western Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacIntyre, A., (1984) *After Virtue: A study in moral theory*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- MacIntyre, A., (1988) *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- McComiskey, B., (2002) *Gorgias and the New Sophistic Rhetoric*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Mill, J. S., (1969) *Utilitarianism*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Neiman, S., (2002) *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. (1985) Sophistry about Conventions, *New Literary History* 17(1), 129-139.
- O’ Connor, D. J., (1964) *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe.
- Parfit, D., (2011) *On What Matters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Plato (1960) *The Republic*. (trans. by B. Jowett). New York: Random House.

¹⁴ I acknowledge that there might be a degree of understandable hesitancy with this proposal: There are legitimate concerns that epistemology, or science to use Rorty’s term, is riddled with masculine, racial, and colonial attitudes. However, it is worthwhile separating the ideal from the practice thereof. Additionally, it would be odd if Communication Scholars or subalterns were to cede science to the powers that be. Such an undertaking would be counter-productive to emancipatory efforts.

- Rescher, N. (1977) *Dialectics: a Controversy-Oriented Approach to the Theory of Knowledge*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Rorty, R., (1998) *Achieving Our Country: Leftist thought in twentieth-century America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Rorty, R., (2009) The Philosopher as Expert. In Richard Rorty: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rosen, M., (2012) *Dignity: Its History and Meaning*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Schafer, M., (2003) Open Ears, *Soundscape: The Journal of Acoustic Ecology* 4(2) 14-18.
- Spranzi, M., (2011) *The Art of Dialectic Between Dialogue and Rhetoric: The Aristotelian Tradition*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Stout, J., (2005) *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Strauss, L., and Cropsey, J., (1963) *History of Political Philosophy*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Suskind, R., (2004) Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush, *New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004
- Williams, B. (2006) *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Oxford: Routledge.

Algorithms, Interfaces, and the Circulation of Information: Interrogating the Epistemological Challenges of Facebook

KOME – An International Journal of Pure
Communication Inquiry
Volume 4 Issue 1, p. 36-49.
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and Permission:
kome@komejournal.com
Published by the Hungarian Communication
Studies Association
DOI: 10.17646/KOME.2016.13

Jannick Schou¹ and Johan Farkas²

¹ IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark

² IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract: As social and political life increasingly takes place on social network sites, new epistemological questions have emerged. How can information disseminated through new media be understood and disentangled? How can potential hidden agendas or sources be identified? And what mechanisms govern what and how information is presented to the user? By drawing on existing research on the algorithms and interfaces underlying social network sites, this paper provides a discussion of Facebook and the epistemological challenges, potentials, and questions raised by the platform. The paper specifically discusses the ways in which interfaces shape how information can be accessed and processed by different kinds of users as well as the role of algorithms in pre-selecting what appears as representable information. A key argument of the paper is that Facebook, as a complex socio-technical network of human and non-human actors, has profound epistemological implications for how information can be accessed, understood, and circulated. In this sense, the user's potential acquisition of information is shaped and conditioned by the technological structure of the platform. Building on these arguments, the paper suggests that new epistemological challenges deserve more scholarly attention, as they hold wide implications for both researchers and users.

Keywords: Epistemology, Facebook, Social Network Sites, Algorithms, Interfaces, Information

Introduction

Through a series of publications, Jessie Daniels has studied so-called *cloaked websites* (2009a, 2009b, 2014). These are websites in which the authorship and underlying agendas guiding the dissemination of particular contents are deliberately disguised in order to manipulate users. Examples of this type of online propaganda include websites such as

Address for Correspondence: Jannick Schou, email: janh[at]itu.dk

Article received on the 27th January, 2016. Article accepted on the 26th May, 2016.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

www.martinlutherking.org (Daniels, 2009a, 2009b) and www.teenbreaks.com (Daniels, 2014). The first of these websites appears to be an educational site about Martin Luther King but is actually run by members of the Ku Klux Klan in order to promote white supremacy. The latter appears to be an educational site about abortion but is actually run by a religious anti-abortion organisation attempting to manipulate users' views on the topic. What both of these sites share, however, is the strategic use of media in order to disguise information under false pretences. They are both ways of sharing and circulating a particular ideological agenda under the guise of either objectivity or political neutrality.

One of the most interesting arguments prompted by Daniels' research has to do with what she terms as emergent "epistemological challenges" linked to the circulation of content through media. Daniels (2014: 143, our emphasis) argues (we quote at length):

The fact that people believe the misstatements, half-truths, and lies on cloaked sites highlights the unique *epistemological challenge* of activist websites in the digital era. Before the Internet, we relied on a system of gatekeepers such as editors, publishers, broadcasters, and librarians, all of whom mediated information for knowledge seekers. The rise of the popular Internet has not eliminated these gatekeepers, but it has opened a new venue for a kind of publishing that is not mediated by any sort of vetting process. Mostly, this opens new opportunities for a wider range of ideas to be shared by a broader array of groups and individuals; and, at the same time, it raises some disturbing questions about how we acquire and verify knowledge.

According to Daniels' (2014) argument in the quote above, it has become increasingly difficult to evaluate how and to what extent information can be regarded as valid or truthful within new mediated environments. New media, Daniels suggests, provides new means to manipulate, filter, and broadcast both truthful and purposely false information. These emergent epistemological challenges are directly tied to reconfigurations in who acts as gatekeepers and how information may be distributed through digital platforms.

In our view, Daniels' (2014) arguments point towards an object of study that is yet to receive a systematic scholarly attention, namely *the epistemological challenges introduced by new media at large*. Although Daniels (2009a, 2009b) did not frame her analysis in this way, what essentially seems to be at stake in her argument is a question concerning the interplay between *technological platforms*, understood as complex assemblages of codes, algorithms, design, user behaviour and content, and *epistemology*. It is, in other words, a question of how information processes – such as the circulation, validation and selection of information – are shaped, modulated, and mediated through the complex socio-technical networks forming in-between human and non-human actors.

If we take Daniels' arguments seriously, this leads to the introduction of a new and exciting series of questions tied directly to notions of knowledge, information, and media. What is implied by Daniels' reasoning is that fundamental philosophical questions of *what* we can know and *how* we can know it – explored from Descartes to Kant and beyond – may take on new and particular forms in the digital era. Yet, at the present moment, it would seem that the full contours of this very wide terrain of inquiry are yet to be properly explicated. How *does* new media reconfigure and change our ways of evaluating and assessing information? And, equally important, how and to what extent does the adaptation of different media provide us – both as researchers and users – with new epistemological doubts and challenges?

Questions concerning the ways in which codes, protocols, and algorithms shape and condition our behaviour, potential modes of interaction, and (in the end) subjectivity have increasingly come into view as important topics of research (Berry, 2011; van Dijck, 2013, 2014; Bucher, 2012a, 2012b, 2016a, 2016b; Skeggs & Yuill, 2015, 2016; Pasquale, 2015; Langlois et al., 2009). Rather than resorting to naïve technological determinism, this body of research – of which the above list is only vaguely indicative – has provided highly productive and often very complex insights into the ways in which new media platforms should not be approached as merely neutral tools, but rather as active agents in their own right. As *material* environments enveloping our everyday life, media play a highly important part in conditioning our acquisition and evaluation of information. This sentiment is echoed by Milan (2015: 8) in her study of mediated protest: "Evoking the 'material' of (...) social media in the analysis of contemporary collective action has epistemological, ontological, and methodological consequences. It impacts the way in which we can learn about and make sense of contemporary protest".

In this paper, we wish to take the above body of research as our point of departure. Drawing on this research, we will reflect upon and discuss what may broadly be understood as the epistemological dimensions and challenges of information processes on social network sites, specifically in the case of Facebook. We will investigate the conditions for evaluating information, the human and non-human actors selecting, filtering, and circulating information, and the implications of these processes for the evaluation and assessment of information. Rather than a large-scale philosophical argument, we will discuss these questions from a medium-oriented point of view. We wish – to distil our approach to its core – to discuss information construction and circulation from the viewpoint of interfaces, algorithms, and user-platform interactions. By drawing attention to how the underlying code, materiality, algorithms, and interface shape how information is processed, presented, and filtered, we will try to elucidate the connection between epistemology and media technologies. The goal of this paper, then, is to contribute to this emerging field of research by expanding and explicating the range of epistemological questions prompted by new media technologies such as Facebook.

Some key clarifications should be made from the outset of this paper. First of all, we are not using the term *epistemology* in a strong Kantian sense to imply the internal (cognitive) mechanisms entailed in the processing and understanding of information and sense-experiences. Instead, we attempt to interrogate the ways in which information processes are shaped within complex assemblages of human and non-human actors. Specifically, in the case of this paper, in the context of Facebook as a simultaneously communicative, cultural, and material infrastructure through which information flows are circulated amongst and between human and non-human actors alike. In this sense, our use of the word epistemology does not imply a basically cognitive or psychological frame of reference. Instead, our focus is on the ways in which information can and is processed through *both* the codes, algorithms, and technological infrastructure provided by Facebook, *and* the potential engagement and production of information provided by users. This also means that what is attempted here is not a Kittlerian argument concerning the ways in which media has altered and shaped subjectivity across history (Kittler, 1999). In a much more modest way, our intention is to reflect upon the ways in which platforms like Facebook act as active agents in the co-creating and shaping of how information can and is presented, distributed, and made available.

Second, in pursuing this particular perspective, we are not (first and foremost) interested in the various ways in which circulated information may be more or less "true", referring to

more or less true states. Instead, following an actor-network inspired approach (Latour, 2005), we are much more interested in the dynamic processes entailed in the continuous socio-material configuration and re-negotiation of information. This does not mean that questions of “truthfulness”, “representation”, and “interpretation” are not valid or important, but simply that they are beyond the initial scope of this paper.

And third, we should also state from the very beginning that a number of the specific claims and arguments made throughout this paper do not necessarily describe “new” features suddenly brought about by the rise of Facebook as an ubiquitous social media. We are, indeed, very sceptical of such claims of radical newness. Yet what is important – and this is the main presumption of this paper – is the notion that Facebook does *modulate* or re-configure already-known themes and questions. As Jessie Daniels highlighted in the quotes above, new media *can* alter the constellation of gatekeepers, algorithms, interfaces and so on, offering new possibilities and conditions for the circulation and evaluation of information. It is precisely this particular modulation that we attempt to explicate in this essay. This, in turn, is the intention of this paper: not to provide a final answer, but to clarify and explicate the ways in which epistemology and the processing of information is modulated with the implementation of new media.

What is Beneath a Page?

We want to open this paper with an anecdotal example taken from the Danish general elections in 2015 where Danish citizens had to elect their next prime minister as well as the individual Members of Parliament. During this campaign, a screenshot from a post within a secret Facebook group belonging to The Conservative Youth Party was leaked within the Danish mass media. The post, containing a link to a public Facebook page called ‘Remember to Vote’, read:

CONFIDENTIAL!! We have created this page and Facebook event, where we will try to mobilize young voters during the election campaign by first posting neutral content in the first phase of the election and then posting content related to key issues of The Conservative Party in the last phase ... We really hope that you will support the page and like and share our posts. You are also welcome to invite you friends, also from other parties, so we can reach the wider public, but we underline that it is confidential who is behind the page. (Facebook post, 27 May 2015)

What this post revealed was a sophisticated political tactic: by utilizing a Facebook page in a certain predefined, yet confidential, manner, the Conservative Youth Party would try to manipulate young voters in their direction. They would, as outlined in the secret post, deliberately frame and manipulate the information presented to their audience in a certain pre-conceived way.

This leaked post is interesting for a number of reasons: not just because it showcased how so-called secret groups on Facebook may be utilized in order to organize and carry out hidden operations, but also because it pointed towards a general epistemological problem: how can users know the source and intention behind information distributed and circulated through public Facebook pages? How can we know the underlying procedures governing public information spread through Facebook?

In this case, it became clear from the leaked information that underneath the public page there was to be a clear-cut strategy for how information should be presented. This information, rather than given in its entirety for the user to evaluate, would be pre-selected and curated in such a way that it would point the users in a specific political or ideological direction. Such withholding of political intention in order to manipulate users is, of course, nothing new, and the question of un-identifiable intentions is not a new one either, as this may also be the case with newspapers, television, books, and other media. However, what is potentially new is the extent to which Facebook – as a material and technological infrastructure – accommodates this form of mal-intentioned distribution of partial information. It is, to put it somewhat crudely, simply very easy for admins to curate, moderate, and selectively present information to users. What is equally important to note is how these technological functions – the ability to curate and create public pages – are no longer tied to particular gatekeepers or uniform centres of power. Instead, they are distributed to a potentially wide range of actors who may use online infrastructures, such as Facebook, to disseminate false or manipulated information.

We will explore the technological dimensions of this argument further below, but for now we wish to simply point towards some broader observations that can be generalized from this anecdotal piece of evidence: namely that what is given, through social media such as Facebook, as public information may be governed by and organized through a whole range of preceding mechanisms. The user cannot be sure that the information is presented in its totality nor if the source of the information is accurate. As we shall return to in the last part of this paper, part of these mechanisms are directly tied to the interface and material constitution of Facebook as a platform. Yet, what these observations also pointed towards was a broader questioning of the conditions and potentials for epistemological doubts related to Facebook and other social network sites. For research, we argue, these observations should be considered carefully. While technological platforms such as Facebook and Twitter offer great opportunities for collecting and analyzing very large corpus of data – in the form of tweets, posts, updates, likes and so on – it remains pertinent that the potential underlying mechanisms governing the production of such information are not forgotten. While indeed difficult to study, we should not be blind to the observation that collective activity may not merely be expressions of spontaneously formed networked publics. There is always the very real option that a number of mechanisms have preceded the publication of information. Underneath the surface, a number of complex epistemological strategies may be at work. If we fail to recognize that Facebook, like all other media (old and new), is not simply an outlet for the dissemination of fully explicated and “neutral” information, but rather the outcome of more or less conscious selection strategies performed by individuals or collectives, then research loses its critical edge. Rather than starting from the presumption that information simply *is*, we should interrogate how it has come to be *what it is*.

The case discussed above is an example of intentional withholding and manipulation of information provided by a small group of first and foremost human actors. Yet, as we will argue in this following, these forms of pre-selectivity and concealment of particular information can in fact be seen on a number of different levels in the case of Facebook. In particular, we argue, when looking at the underlying algorithms governing what is represented and representable to the user. It is these issues we turn to in the following section.

Algorithms and the Selection of Information

In a recent series of studies, Beverley Skeggs and Simon Yuill (2015, 2016) have begun unlocking the underlying set of structural mechanisms governing Facebook's algorithms. To put it somewhat oversimplified, an algorithm can be understood as "a finite list of well-defined instructions for calculating a function, a step-by-step directive for processing or automatic reasoning that orders the machine to produce a certain output from given input" (van Dijck, 2011:30). Through the use of custom-designed software, Skeggs and Yuill have been able to trace how these algorithms work, including how they collect data, manage news, and attempt to redirect attention towards particular forms of content. Skeggs and Yuill (2016: 388) have done so with an emphasis on "areas of activity where a user's own actions came into contact with the actions of the algorithms that Facebook uses to gather information". Their findings and methodology are both multiple and advanced, and they provide important insights into a series of technological conditions that are often hidden as "business secrets".

A series of findings from Skeggs and Yuill's studies, particularly related to epistemological doubts in the digital age, is how Facebook – in an attempt to maximize their profit and monetization through advertising and collection of data – influence "how your network is shaped over time" and "how you interact – with whom, when, how" (2016: 391). Skeggs and Yuill (*ibid.*) show how this is done in what may be termed a reflexive loop in which the platform is "constantly tracking you via Facebook and all other sites (using the APIs)". In short, Facebook's algorithms, named EdgeRank and GraphRank (van Dijck, 2013: 49), curate the content available to the user by filtering out and pre-selecting what and how the user should and ought to see, making "[s]ocial networking sites ... essentially designed and programmable spaces that encourage the user to carry out specific actions" (Bucher, 2012b: 480). This relates to both content from the user's "friends" as well as commercial content via advertising and pages.

In this sense, algorithms do not only constitute the very technological core of Facebook, its machine language, but also "control the 'visibility' of friends, news, items, or ideas" (van Dijck, 2013: 49). Thus, "social media platforms do not merely transmit content, but filter it on the basis of claiming to augment it, thereby making the content more relevant to its potential consumers" (O'Callaghan et al., 2015: 460).

At the same time, these algorithms are essentially tied up to the user's actions, communication, and behaviour: the algorithms track, collect, and analyse the user, ensuring a continuous feedback loop between user and platform. As long as the user is present, the algorithm's job is never quite finished. Yet, as Skeggs and Yuill (2015, 2016) also show, Facebook's algorithms are not always perfect, and although they will try to match individual behaviour with their pre-defined categories, some individuals may be more difficult to collect and trace than others. Certain forms of subjectivity will be uncategorizable from the perspective of the algorithm. Though multiple algorithms may target different parts of the user's behaviour, the question of algorithms and subjectivity is an important one. If we take Skeggs and Yuill's findings seriously – which suggests that only particular forms of behaviour (i.e. those already expected by the algorithm) will yield the "proper" and "traceable" results – then this also means that embedded within the machine language are pre-existing notions of how subjects should and ought to act. In this sense, the particular algorithm does not only hold an embedded form of normativity – designating a particular outlook on how the subject should act – but also actively re-enforces this pre-conceived notion by operating more or less according to intentions.

These different considerations connect – in a very real way – to the question of epistemology. The main question prompted by the discussion above is how the individual user can know how presented information *has become* representable at all. It is, in other words, a question concerning the underlying, algorithmic mechanisms governing what is deemed information (and presented to the user) and what is not. This captures, in many ways, what Gillespie (2014: 168) has called the specific *knowledge logic* guiding algorithmic assessment of information, which is “built on specific presumptions about what knowledge is and how one should identify its most relevant components.”

In this way, rather than simply mediating, the filtering provided by algorithms – based on how the particular user’s network has been shaped over time – has implications for what becomes information. Instead of a simple question of information being *inputted* by one user, only to be *transmitted* or *outputted* to all the user’s friends, the algorithms are entangled in the modulation and presentation of this information. It is in this precise sense, as *mediators* rather than *intermediaries* (Latour, 2005:39), “whose specificity has to be taken into account every time” as their “input is never a good predictor of their output”, that algorithms have epistemic implications.

By placing algorithms at the centre of an epistemological questioning, we argue, the focus is shifted from information as knowledge or truth to the *underlying processes* constituting what appears as information to the user. To put it slightly differently, it is turned from a question of validating already constituted information to a question of *how* information is pre-selected: what procedures go into constituting what appears as information to the user? And on what particular normative ideals does this pre-selectivity rest? The answer to this question is indeed complex and only partially addressed by the research discussed above. Our aim here is simply to explicate the nature of this question, and, perhaps more importantly, showcase that this is imminently a question concerning always-already entangled relations between human and non-human collectives.

Further expanding this argument, a number of additional considerations should be kept in mind. In the case of Facebook, what is presented as information to the user – after the careful (pre-) selection provided by the algorithms as discussed above – may indeed still be subject to a number of the problems outlined in the first and second section. That is to say, the curative role performed by the algorithms should not necessarily be seen as a filter of more or less trustful information: disinformation or intentionally manipulated information can easily be passed through algorithms. And similarly, in a reverse direction, the pre-selection performed by the algorithm should not be equated with the intentional manipulation performed by individuals, though it does carry similar traits. Specifically in the sense that what is presented to the user as a totality has already been subject to a selection; one whose criteria are not directly negotiable or changeable.

Adding to this last argument, we should keep in mind that the user cannot directly change the algorithms underlying Facebook. There is no switchboard or modular set of controls. If the user wishes to engage *actively* with the algorithms, she has to engage in careful appropriations and potential purposeful misuses in order to trick, take advantage of, and turn the structural conditions into productive forces, e.g. by ‘liking’ content that she does not really like, abstaining from certain actions, or by using fake names, images, and so forth. This, however, appears as a completely different scenario: one that is not given in a transparent interplay between user and platform, but rather through a creative exchange that

hinges on wilful misuse on the user's part. As Milan (2015: 4) argues: "Users have "mobilized" with some success to counteract this power asymmetry [inherent in Facebook's design], for example, requesting multilanguage services and opposing draconian content moderation policies and design choices; they have occasionally engaged in strategic litigation. But these initiatives do not really have the ability to corrode the regime and the economic model that operate in the back".

So if we accept that Facebook's algorithms play a central part in brokering and engineering what appears as information, then we must also accept, it seems, that this curation of information is never simply the direct output of input provided by other users. Instead, put somewhat simplified, algorithms actively shape the potential information that the user can come to know based on a particular image or normative idea about *what* counts as information to *whom*.

The Challenge of Algorithms

One of the particular problems or challenges regarding algorithms and the technological structure of Facebook is that the technological (and, by extension, algorithmic) dimensions of the platform tend to be or become invisible. As van Dijck (2013: 29) states by referencing Berry (2011: 4): "As software increasingly structures the world, 'it also withdraws, and it becomes harder and harder for us to focus on as it is embedded, hidden, off-shored and merely forgotten about."

We cannot see the software or the algorithms as carriers of particular intentions or ideals. Instead, we tend to simply forget their presence all together. Not only does the algorithms act behind the user's back (so to speak) – which, in the end, is precisely what they are designed to do – but there is also a tendency to forget their existence altogether. This forgetting, withdrawal, or becoming-invisible of technology is not a new argument, as scholars within philosophy, sociology, and information science have discussed the tendency for objects to disappear from our active circumspection for a long time (Heidegger, 1962; Bowker and Star, 1999; Latour, 1996).

However, what is potentially new, in the case of algorithms and platforms like Facebook, is the fact that even if one would want to access and comprehend the algorithms, they would still be largely inaccessible. In the context of Facebook, they remain so-called business secrets, even if research has found ways to reverse engineer or tingle with these systems (Bucher, 2012b; Skeggs and Yuill, 2015). Thus, if a user would want to make them even slightly visible, this would require – as is evident from the complexities of Skeggs and Yuill's studies (2016) – custom-build software or advanced technical proficiency.

In this sense, algorithms are *invisible by design*, and not just due to inattentiveness on the user's part. As Bucher (2012b: 1176) argues: "One of the problems with analysing algorithms is their often black-boxed nature. While some components of the algorithm are known (...), others remain obscure. We are not seeing completely under the bonnet of the Facebook infrastructure". Thus, Facebook's algorithms and simple tools (like hammers) are not necessarily the same thing. While the hammer may become an object of active circumspection (even if this is not the case for its everyday way of being), algorithms are rather to be regarded as infrastructural elements working within what is accessible to the user

as a tool: they constitute the very core of the equipment, rather than its immediately apparent features.

While there is certainly a material dimension to this unreadability – a form of invisibility by design – there is also (what we might very loosely term) as a cultural or meaning-bearing component to this withdrawal. One way of framing this is by drawing on what Ernesto Laclau (1990) – following an appropriation of Husserl – names *sedimentation*. Designating a process of routinization or forgetting, sedimented discourses are arrangements that have taken on the appearance of being natural or ahistorical. Sedimented discourses appear self-sufficient, objective, and are unquestioned. Yet, the point here, according to Laclau (1990), is that such discourses are never merely neutral, but *always* given through contingent decisions that distinguish between what is included and what is excluded: or, in the case of algorithms, what is represented to the user and what is not, what counts as information and what does not, and how that which is represented (that which is counted) is represented. Sedimentation, then, makes structures appear immobile, unchangeable, and normal, while they are in fact always the product of historical processes with no innate end-purpose or rationale.

This argument can be taken in two directions: first of all, it may be seen as a tendency to forget or neutralize the function of algorithms in our everyday dealings with structures such as Facebook. This argument leans towards a culturalist perspective: what is at stake, in other words, is the perception and articulation of algorithms on the user's part. A second approach, however, may also be to view sedimentation as a material process designating the black boxing of algorithms into neutral and inscrutable voids. In this case, the imperative would be to actively open up and *reactivate* these sedimented black boxes as material entities in order to grasp the ways in which they shape our potential knowledge about the world. Or as van Dijck (2013: 29, original emphasis) writes: “to make the hidden layer visible and show *how* software is increasingly quantifying and measuring our social and every day lives”.

Summing up these arguments, the key epistemological challenge related to the algorithmic backbone of Facebook is how to make visible that which is invisible by design. This has implications from both a research and a user perspective. Seen from the side of the user, the question is, as we have attempted to outline in the last part of this section, to what extent algorithms take on the appearance of neutrality, to what extent their existence is simply forgotten or rendered neutral. In the case of research, what is at stake is rather how to de-neutralize and unpack these algorithmic black boxes – both on a cultural-meaning level and as material entities. Yet, how is this task possible? Is it only computer engineers who can come to grasp the epistemological conditions of the digital age? As we will argue below, a renewed appreciation for particularly the *materiality* of social network sites may indeed be what is needed.

Opening the Black Box

When reflecting on the intricacies of social media platforms and their underlying structural conditions, it is easy to get lost in technical language that obfuscates, rather than open up, the area of investigation. In discussing the intimate relations between user behaviour, epistemology, and technological structures, we should not succumb to a turning everything into algorithms, codes, or computational languages, working as silent, complex, and inaccessible machines behind the curtain, tracking, producing, and curating the production of subjectivity. The problem with completely *algorithmizing* social media is that it risks

turning them into black boxes, as discussed above. This argument resonates with a number of existing critical voices, and as Ziewitz states (by reference to Chun, 2008: 300): "Wendy Chun, in particular, has criticized an exclusive focus on computer code as "sourcery," suggesting that 'we need to interrogate, rather than venerate or even accept, the grounding or logic of software'" (2016: 7). Indeed, in this regard, we should remember that "[a]lgorithms are but one aspect of Facebook's software assemblage affecting the construction of regimes of visibility and invisibility" as Bucher (2012a: 1177-1778) argues. So while we should algorithmize our study of social media, this should not lead to a complete reliance on algorithms as the sole mechanisms behind such media. Placing algorithms at the centre of our inquiry should, in other words, not make us reduce social media to algorithms.

A reverse move is to disassemble not only the platforms but also our conceptual vocabularies. Such an approach can be found in the work of van Dijck (2013). Building on actor-network theory (Latour, 2005) as well as political economy (Castells, 1996), she suggests a holistic view on social network sites as given in the interplay between technologies, users, content, business models, governance and ownership. Of particular interest to our discussion of epistemology is her further graduation of the technological dimension into five key components, named (1) *(Meta)data*, the content and meta-information about the content of the platform; (2) *Algorithm*, the codes that structure, curate and pre-selects the data and meta-data; (3) *Protocol*, the way the platform is governed through its programming; (4) *Interface*, what is controllable and observable to the users (i.e. the visible interface) and to the platform owners (i.e. the invisible interface); and (5) *Default*, automatic predefined settings provided to the user, which steer their actions in certain directions.

What these terms offer is a string of concepts that can be used to dis-entangle the multiple ways in which technological infrastructures, such as Facebook, operate and guide how and what information is processed. The argument that emerges from this conceptual network is the notion that everything cannot be reduced to algorithms, however important they still appear. When discussing questions concerning epistemology, then, we should also be attentive towards these other socio-material components, as they co-structure and co-construct what and how information can be presented to the user.

In the case of Facebook, a central concern is the extent to which the *interface* provides different opportunities, conditions, and modes of action depending on the user's role. What we are attempting to get at here is essentially the difference between being a user, a page administrator, and company owners. As we will argue below, each of these roles corresponds to widely different conditions and potential options of information production and circulation. This has implications for our epistemological concerns. In the context of transparency and openness on social network sites, van Dijck (2013: 47) observes the following:

Platform owners have a vested interest in complete openness on the side of the users; the more they know about users, the more information they can share with third parties. (...) However, users' interest is not always served by complete openness; users may want to control third parties' access to the information they voluntarily or involuntarily entrust to Facebook. As a result, Facebook has a stake in promoting the first type of mechanism while diverting attention from the second type: the more users know about what happens to their personal data, the more inclined they are to raise objections. Owners' power over coding technologies thus gives them a distinct advantage over users in the battle for information control.

While the above quote is dense, its central observation concerns an ambiguity built into Facebook's interface. On the one hand, Facebook wants users to share as much information as possible publicly – public information that can then be collected, aggregated, and passed off to third parties for economic and monetary purposes. On the other hand, however, users do not want to share their information to unknown third parties. So there is a trade-off, on the users' side, between wanting to participate and not wanting to be monetized. The solution for companies such as Facebook, van Dijck (2013) argues, has been to create a distinct hierarchy and knowledge gap between users and platform owners. The interface available to users, in this case, only contains a fraction of the information visible to the company. For example, users cannot know who has access to their content or how it is used.

This knowledge gap is mirrored, albeit in a slightly different way, in the relation between users and page administrators. In being designed for commercial interests, Facebook provides a large set of tools to admins of pages: they can moderate comments, filter out unruly voices, manage data, see information about users, remain completely anonymous, and have a distinct visual hierarchical position on their page (see Schou et al. 2015; Lillqvist et al., 2015). The users, who want to connect and share content, have to accept this fundamentally asymmetrical premise: they can never get to know what the page admins know, as they do not have the same tools available. This technologically-supported dis-symmetry has fundamental consequences for our epistemology interrogation. For if indeed the admin holds the potential to moderate and filter information, then what is presented to the user as e.g. comments on a given page, may, in fact, be only vaguely indicative of the actual totality of content. Furthermore, in being completely anonymously operated, these pages also offer new ways of spreading false information with little to no potential consequences for those behind, other than perhaps their pages being removed by Facebook. Not only is there not a gatekeeper controlling the validity of sources and information, as Daniels (2014) highlighted in relation to cloaked websites, but there is also no way of verifying content and sources. In the end, there is not even potential retaliation towards those spreading such subversive content. So the user operating on Facebook is, indeed, at a distinct disadvantage: a disadvantage that essentially has to do with the material constitution of the platform itself. What the user can and cannot come to know is conditioned by the material structure and potentials inscribed into the platform and its code. Different actors – company owners, page administrators, and users – are positioned within different epistemic positions created through a complex assemblage of code, materiality, commercial interests, and human agency.

Returning to the example presented at the beginning of this paper – the case of the Danish youth party tactically misleading the public – we can see that part of their intentional withholding and manipulation of information was in fact tied to the material possibilities offered by Facebook. Their ability to structure information was tied up with their appropriation of already existing technological potentials. It was *because* these admits held the ability to curate, moderate, and operate under anonymity that they could manipulate what and how information was presented to potential users. The youth party, in turn, appropriated and exploited the interface provided by Facebook. Now, in this case, algorithms did not provide a prominent feature, yet this does not mean that what was at stake was not the negotiation between human and non-human actors. In this case, it was simply the interface, rather than the algorithms, that provided particular means to control and filter the circulation of information.

Overall, to distil our argument to its very core, what we have tried to unfold in this section is the notion that the pre-selection of information is not only tied to “silent” algorithms. Rather,

as part of Facebook's interface, there are also numerous potentials for epistemological challenges and uncertainties. Not merely being a neutral tool, the different "subject positions" – admit, user, owner – offered by Facebook co-structures communicative relations and their room for manoeuvrability. This structuring has epistemological consequences for what and how information appears to the user, as different types of users will be able to process information in fundamentally different ways.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have reflected upon emergent epistemological challenges in the digital era using Facebook as our point of departure. What we have attempted with this discussion has not so much been to provide fully formed answers, but rather to widen the potential range of questions that may be posed in relation to new media technologies. While Daniels (2014) first and foremost pointed towards the epistemological challenges related to deliberate misinformation, we have tried to suggest the always-already present linkage between epistemology, the processing of information, and media. In this sense, our attempt has been to broaden the questioning to a wider set of issues with a wider set of implications. It is important to underline that the arguments made in this paper are obviously not exhaustive and go beyond Facebook as a particular technological structure. Furthermore, we should be conscious of the fact that new media do not simply introduce potential challenges to our perception of the world but also provide new outlets for information exchange, participation, and even protest against oppression. Rather than merely a hindrance, they become a part of already existing and necessarily material epistemological networks conditioning our processing of information. In this sense, new media modulate rather than obfuscate epistemic capacities. With this paper, using Facebook as our particular case, we have attempted to show how this modulation takes places vis-a-vis the underlying algorithmic pre-selection of information, the interface governing interaction on Facebook pages, and the actions performed by human collectives. We have argued that each of these socio-technical processes provide complex epistemological challenges. Yet, we have also attempted to problematize and reflect upon the intricate nature of algorithms in particular, as important objects of research. How can we open up these black boxes without simultaneously fetishizing these as the only matter of concern?

Further reflections on this new field of inquiry, we argue, are of fundamental importance to understanding the implications of information sharing and circulation on social network sites. There is a continuous need to question the complex interrelations between materiality and the processing of information. How do media condition, shape and pre-select the information that we can come to know? How can these socio-technical processes be excavated and disentangled? And how can we develop adequate conceptual vocabularies? As Bucher (2012a: 1778) rightly argues:

What is needed is research that not only attends to changes in editorial media practices as increasingly delegated to algorithms, but also to the changes in cultural assumptions about the nature of social networking that are being built into algorithmic architectures.

With this paper, we hope to have contributed to this exciting field of research by beginning to showcase the complex links between material structures, cultural and communicative practices, and epistemology.

References

- Berry, D. M. (2010) *The philosophy of software: Code and mediation in the digital age*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bowker, G. and Star, L. (1999) *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*. MIT Press.
- Bucher, T. (2012a) “Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook.” *New Media & Society* 14(7) 1164–1180. [CrossRef](#)
- Bucher, T. (2012b) “The Friendship Assemblage: Investigating Programmed Sociality on Facebook.” *Television & New Media* 14(6) 479–493. [CrossRef](#)
- Bucher, T. (2016a) “‘Machines don’t have instincts’: Articulating the computational in journalism.” *New Media & Society* First published on January 14, 2016 [CrossRef](#)
- Bucher, T. (2016b) “The algorithmic imaginary: exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms.” *Information, Communication & Society*, First published on February 25, 2016 [CrossRef](#)
- Castells, M. (2010 [1996]) *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture Volume*, second edition. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Chun, W. H. K. (2008) “On ‘Sourcery,’ or Code as Fetish.” *Configurations* 16 (3) 299-324. [CrossRef](#)
- Daniels, J. (2009a) “Cloaked websites: propaganda, cyber-racism and epistemology in the digital era.” *New Media & Society* 11(5) 659–683. [CrossRef](#)
- Daniels, J. (2009b) *Cyber Racism: White Supremacy Online and the New Attack on Civil Rights*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.
- Daniels J (2014) “From Crisis Pregnancy Centers to Teenbreaks.com: Anti-abortion Activism’s Use of Cloaked Websites.” In Martha McCaughey (eds.), *Cyberactivism on the Participatory Web*, pp. 140-154. Routledge.
- Gillespie, T. (2014) “The Relevance of Algorithms.” In Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski and Kirsten A. Foot (eds.), *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, pp. 167-194. London: MIT Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1962) *Being and Time*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Kittler, F. (1999) *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Laclau, E. (1990) *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*. London: Verso.
- Latour, B. (1996) *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*. Harvard University Press.
- Latour, B. (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Langlois, G., Elmer, G., McKelvey, F., and Devereaux, Z. (2009) “Networked publics: The double articulation of code and politics on Facebook.” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 34 415-434.
- Lillqvist, E. Louhiala-Salminen, L. Kankaanranta, A (2015) “Power relations in social media discourse: Dialogization and monologization on corporate Facebook pages.” *Discourse, Context, and Media*. First published on November 17, 2015 [CrossRef](#)
- Milan, S. (2015) “When Algorithms Shape Collective Action: Social Media and the Dynamics of Cloud Protesting.” *Social Media + Society* 1(2) 1-10. [CrossRef](#)
- O’Callaghan, D., Greene, D., Conway, M., Carthy, J. and Cunningham, P. (2015) “Down the (White) Rabbit Hole: The Extreme Right and Online Recommender Systems.” *Social Science Computer Review* 33(4) 459-478. [CrossRef](#)
- Pasquale, F. (2015) *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information*. Harvard University Press.

- Schou, J., Farkas, J. and Hjelholt, M. (2015) "The Double Conditioning of Political Participation: Grassroots Politics on Facebook." *Conjunctions: Transdisciplinary Journal of Cultural Participation* 2(2) 29-47. [CrossRef](#)
- Skeggs, B. and Yuill, S. (2015) "The methodology of a multi-model project examining how Facebook infrastructures social relations." *Information, Communication & Society*, First published on October 20, 2015 [CrossRef](#)
- Skeggs, B. and Yuill, S. (2016) "Capital experimentation with person/a formation: how Facebook's monetization refigures the relationship between property, personhood and protest." *Information, Communication & Society* 19:3 380-396. [CrossRef](#)
- Van Dijck, J. (2013) *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Dijck, J. (2014) "Datafication, dataism and dataveillance: Big Data between scientific paradigm and ideology." *Surveillance & Society* 12(2) 197-208.
- Ziewitz, M. (2016) "Governing Algorithms: Myth, Mess, and Methods." *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 41(1) 3-16. [CrossRef](#)

When Ants Move Mountains: Uncovering a Media Theory of Human Agency

KOME – An International Journal of Pure
Communication Inquiry
Volume 4 Issue 1, p. 50-68.
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and Permission:
kome@komejournal.com
Published by the Hungarian Communication
Studies Association
DOI: 10.17646/KOME.2016.14

Patricia W. Elliott

University of Regina, School of Journalism, Canada

Abstract: Just as Smythe argued communication was the “blindspot of western Marxism,” western communication and media theorizing itself suffers a blind spot, when it places media power in the hands of dictators and captains of industry as if no others might put pen to paper and change history. Meanwhile, theoretical explorations of how media praxis might be understood and employed for emancipation – not subjugation – emerged through the experiences of people in the Global South and Indigenous communities. This article examines and contrasts the theoretical silos, seeking moments of cross-over and synergy between static, top-down conceptualizations of Western mass media theory, and the more people-powered media praxis of colonized people seeking liberation. Building on the literature of differing experiences, the author draws a framework to encompass the full spectrum of media power. Here scholars, policy planners, and media practitioners alike may find common ground from which to recognize and support grassroots media producers as agents of meaningful social change.

Keywords: communication theory, media theory, media studies, cultural studies, Global South

Introduction: A blind spot of media theory

Somewhere in the world, at this very moment, a press is turning not to stupefy, sell or enslave, but to liberate. We know not where until the moment the dictator’s statue topples, surprising even close observers of events. A sudden flowering of broadsheets in a Rangoon market, a rush of voices on the air in the Guatemalan highlands, an expanding universe of online journalism in Jakarta, together signal that media once viewed as nonexistent or, at most, hopelessly marginal, was stronger and more widespread than imagined. Just as Smythe

(1977) argued that communication was the “blindspot of western Marxism” (p. 267), one might argue that communication theory itself suffers a blind spot, namely a tendency to place media power in the hands of dictators, colonialists, and captains of industry, as if no others might put pen to paper and change the course of history.

It is no great revelation, however, that dominant theory misses a large portion of the picture -- nearly anyone who engages in the study of alternative media raises this lament sooner or later. At some point, though, one must dig into how and why the theoretical deficit occurs, and offer up alternative perspectives. Downing (2001) posits the blind spot exists because “the established research and theory agenda...has a predilection for the seemingly obvious and easily counted” (p. v). I agree, however I will argue there is more than lazy science at work. A critical reading of literature of the past three centuries reveals the blind spot has historical roots in the industrialized West, where communications and media studies first emerged alongside theories of mass society, *de facto* privileging mass media as the only media of account. Meanwhile, the historical experience of colonized peoples in the Global South and the Americas contained a different view. Grounded in popular movements and anti-colonial struggles, theorists and practitioners such as Ngũgĩ (1983), Espinoza (1969/trans.1979), Diallo (2008), and others revealed the possibility of social change through action. Importantly, their worldview placed human communication, rather than material production, at the centre of social life, leading to explorations of how media praxis might be constructed and employed differently, a dialogue long muted in the academy of the industrial West.

This article examines and contrasts the theoretical silos, seeking moments of cross-over and synergy between static, top-down conceptualizations of Western mass media theory, and the more people-powered media praxis of historically marginalized communities. Building on the literature of differing experiences, it builds a framework to encompass the full spectrum of media power -- one that lays common ground for scholars, policy makers and media practitioners alike to recognize and support grassroots media producers as agents of meaningful social change. Through equal parts critique of dominant literature, followed by examination of alternative literature/praxis, the intent is to encourage the application of a much wider array of perspectives to contemporary media problems. A discovery of media theory ‘from below’ moves one out of a one-dimensional world where, as Hachten (1971) has argued, “Lack of *mass* media, which implies technology, does not mean that no media have been in use” (p. 11). Without an expanded framework, myriad grassroots newsletters, community radios, online projects, and other socially impactful media projects remain obscured when theorists speak of ‘the media’ -- and, wherever theory seeps into action, this blind spot matters. It matters, for example, when progressive social movements frame ‘the media’ as a hegemonic Other, rather than terrain to be explored and liberated from the marketplace. It matters when governments, aid agencies, and international non-governmental organizations gather at the tables where media development support and regulatory frameworks are dispensed to a communication-hungry world. Without a theory of alternatives, the potential for liberating, human-centric communication policies becomes replaced by market models aimed at mass audiences. We re-create rather than create, leaving some of the world’s most vibrant and consequential media sitting on the sidelines, unacknowledged and unsupported.

Seen From Above, We Look Like Ants

Writing as someone raised in, and fully enculturated by, Western industrial society, I have a sense of how narrow and engrained the Western gaze may be, even as our hubris assumes this

gaze is shared by all of the world's eyes. For example, over the course of recent history, we in the West have absorbed the idea of people as ants marching to the beat of machines, holding little agency or desire to break away from their path. Even our own histories -- the Civil Rights movement, women's liberation, flower power, Occupy -- fade under a totalizing capitalist haze. It is not surprising, then, that in academic circles and popular discourse alike, we often hear ourselves speaking of 'the media' with emphasis on the word 'the,' imaging a single, unifying industrial product that beckons and enslaves a mass audience. The roots of this image are not universal but are deeply entangled in the emergence of mass society and industrialization in Europe. To speak of 'the media' as a single global condition, like a bad case of the flu, therefore contains a dose of Eurocentric conceit.

A review of Western literature helps diagnose this conceit's origins. In Europe, media theory developed hand-in-glove with mass society theory at a time when modern humans began to extend their social ties well beyond family and village. Early modern media in the West are historically tied to the emergence of the masses, a historical development welcomed by some, feared by others. As early as the 17th Century, English elites began to take notice of the gathering 'mob' or 'crowd' as a social phenomenon. With the French Revolution, "the power of the crowd for the transformation of society was realized" (Marshall, 1997, p. 28). Cultural elites expressed alarm at penny press novels, racy newspapers, and dancehall tunes that threatened high culture, while political and social theorists grew even more alarmed at the crowd's potential to pelt gendarmes with paving stones (D. Schiller 1996; Ely, 2002). Members of the scholarly class foresaw "a permanent threat to civilization" (McClelland, 2010, p. 214). In 1848, the crowd flexed its political strength; by the 1890s, workers' strikes and May Day parades occupied European streets, occasionally resulting in police suppression and riots. From a criminological perspective, Scipio Sighele argued that the crowd's "unified soul" was "more susceptible than the individual to the baser emotions of a primitive man" (cited by Marshall, 1997, p. 34). Social psychologist Gustave Le Bon (1896) described the crowd as feminine: emotional, feeble-minded, and easily led by strong men. The crowd's ability to form organizations, establish newspapers, and elucidate political demands in well crafted statements such as the People's Charter of 1838 did little to elevate its status among propertied elites who feared those who might "fire the cornstock and the barn" (as cited by Epstein & Thompson, 1982).

In contrast, early working class radicals understood themselves as contributors and providers, "those that are willing to work" as opposed to "those who are not" (*The Poor Man's Guardian*, as cited by Epstein & Thompson, 1982). Indeed, both agrarian and urban workers of the 19th Century spent their major efforts not in wanton revolt, but in the formation of combines and co-operatives, forging rational alternatives to the negative impacts of industrialization and urbanization (Giddings, 1887; Hammond & Hammond, 1947; Fairbairn, 1991). Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels stood among 19th Century thinkers who welcomed the emergence of this new force, elevating 'the crowd' to 'the masses' and 'the proletariat,' the only social entity capable of resisting the exploitation of a rising capitalist class. Far from emotional and primitive, Marx and Engels' proletarian masses comprised the rational, organized forces that humanity needed to survive and progress in a rapidly evolving world. This was not pitchfork-waving counter-reaction; rather, the working class was deeply tied to the process of industrialization: "with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more" (Marx & Engels, 1848/ 1959, p. 16).

The concept of mass society as an outgrowth of industrialization came to be shared by both followers and critics of Marx. In the telling and re-telling, the tools of power were divvied up, and radical thinkers -- perhaps deaf to the clanking of their own presses -- tended to sort media into the capitalist toolbox. In the words of Ferdinand Lassalle (1892):

The true enemy of the people, its most dangerous enemy, and even more dangerous since it appears in the guise of a friend, is today's press! Be sure to remember with burning soul this motto which I hurl at you: hatred and contempt, death and destruction to today's press! (1892, p. 14; trans.by Theobald, 2006, p. 22)

In fact, Marx himself had little to say about media, but what he did say often ran counter to later socialist/Marxist discourse on communications. Grosswiler (1998) observes, for example, that 20th Century Marxists soundly rejected Marshall McLuhan, even though Marx had earlier observed that the printing press, as a replacement for epic poems and ballads, fundamentally changed how stories were constructed and told -- a decidedly McLuhanesque notion. Williams (1975/2005), for example, critiqued McLuhan's idea that media alone, independent of the market, holds power to determine social relationships and set historical trajectories, and from this standpoint concluded that early newspapers were merely messengers of "an expanding system of trade" (p. 13). Yet Marx himself was considerably less confined by market determinism than were his later interpreters. "The press is the most general way by which individuals can communicate their intellectual being. It knows no respect for persons but only respect for intelligence," he wrote, adding that conflicts over censorship represented a struggle between authorized and unauthorized voices, not an indictment of newspapers and journals themselves (1842/trans. 1975, p. 175).

It is worth noting that Marx, himself a journalist and editor, arrived in London as a refugee of censorious press policy (McChesney, 2007; McLellan, 1973). With this in mind, it seems plausible that a Marxian view of media should simultaneously occupy a place in hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourse, as described by the early 20th Century writings of Antonio Gramsci (1916/trans. 1996). Just as Marx drew a distinction between freedom of the press and free enterprise, Gramsci drew a distinction between "the bourgeois press" and "the Socialist press," urging workers to boycott the former ("Newspapers and the Workers," para. 7). However, Gramsci's works were not translated or widely distributed until the 1970s. By this time, a generation of theorists had already firmly situated media as having no purpose or potential beyond a mode of production, subject to the iron law of profit. In the words of Bücher, a founder of the field of media research: "The modern newspaper is a capitalist enterprise, a kind of news-factory in which a great number of people ...are employed on a wage, under a single administration, at very specialized work" (cited by Splichal, 2006, p. 44).

The idea of media as an industrial product, rather than a form of communication, was advanced in North America by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944/1986), who arrived in the United States in the 1930s as refugees from Nazism, having witnessed the worst abuses of media power (Theobald, 2006). While Marx experienced media as a place of struggle, Horkheimer and Adorno experienced totalitarianism's triumph. Hitler's use of film and art to maneuver the German populace appeared to substantiate Le Bon's theory of the easily swayed 'feminine' crowd. Little wonder, then, that Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1986) came to view the masses as mere pawns in a cultural industry where "something is provided for all so that none may escape" (p. 123), and where even oppositional voices are ultimately "one in their enthusiastic obedience to the rhythm of the iron system" (p. 120).

Dallas Smythe's political economy framework further deepened the idea that when scholars speak of 'media,' they mean mass media aimed at controlling mass society. Under this influence, Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's (1963) *The Four Theories of the Press* equated 'the press' with "all the media of mass communication" (p. 1). This work framed media as operating under authoritarian, libertarian, 'social responsibility,' or Soviet dictums, all of it serving the U.S.-U.S.S.R dichotomy and owned by either states or capitalist profiteers. First published in 1956, *The Four Theories* became assigned reading for media students for decades to come. Thus, in the halls of the western academy, the outlook for the common

person was geographically limited and decidedly gloomy. Speaking to the Adult Education Council of Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1960, Smythe (1960/1994) explained:

Modern media man is a personable, likeable chap. And he means well. But he cannot be understood unless one recognizes that he lives and works in a corporate environment. (p. 109)

If there was any latent sense of optimism in the Western academy, it did not find easy purchase. Authors such as C. Wright Mills (1986) described media in their entirety as “a malign force” (p. 35) that served only to build markets and facilitate “psychological illiteracy” among the populace (p. 32). Far from the revolutionary potential of the masses envisioned by Marx, the academy’s prevailing view was of legions of dupes who were universally subject to, in the words of U.S. theoretician Dwight MacDonald, “the deadening and warping effect of long exposure to movies, pulp magazines and radio” (as cited in D. Schiller 1996, p. 65). In an essay titled ‘Of Happiness and Despair We Have No Measure,’ Ernest van den Haag (1968) encapsulated a dystopian media landscape, writing, “The mass media do not physically replace individual activities and contacts -- excursions, travel, parties, etc. But they impinge on all...and everywhere it isolates the bearer from his surroundings, from other people, and from himself” (p. 5). Furthermore, there was little sense that these debilitating effects could be challenged. McChesney (2007) recalls:

Even the most brilliant work of the late 1980s, say Herman and Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent*, allowed little hope that changing the media system of the society as a whole was a plausible goal. We were simply learning how the system worked for intellectual self-defense. We were speaking truth to power, but we had no illusions that we were in any position to contest that power. (p. 84)

Yet to ascribe such an inescapably totalitarian, industrial view to all western thought simply manufactures its own blind spot. In truth, no academy is so homogeneous, and indeed there are many counter-narratives: Gramsci’s (Gramsci, 1916/ trans. 1996) respect for grassroots intellectualism; Klapper’s (1960) media effects studies, which suggested audiences are less easily manipulated than assumed; Marcuse’s (1964) identification of individual audience identities within the masses; and Habermas’s (1979) mixing of empirical conditions with social agency. From these less iron-clad positions, alternative futures were glimpsed. Bagdikian (1971), for example, imagined cable television might one day turn the tables on the media industry by placing an affordable, user-friendly platform in the grasp of local citizens. Williams (1989) echoed the possibility of co-operative community television, and warned that mass media critique, taken to far, engenders a hopeless stasis on the Left (1979). Feminism and queer studies influenced the edges of media discourse, offering a sense that resistance is possible, and that oppressed people can construct alternative mediated cultures (Collins, 1990). Significantly, the emergence of cultural studies transformed passive audiences into active co-authors (Hall, 1972; 1993). Cultural theorists unearthed Bakhtin’s (1935/1981) ontology of dialogism from the dustbin of history, allowing for the development of a more fluid communications theory capable of responding to the uses of media technology, whether new or old, as wielded by grassroots actors. However, this theoretical work and its sense of political project experienced a rather soft landing amid the rapid ascendancy of new topics such as virtuality, cyber-reality, and hyper-reality (Baudrillard, 1993; Everett and Caldwell, 2003; Hayles, 1999), along with a heightened interest in visual images over spoken-word culture (Mirzoeff, 1998), and fascination with spectatorship and celebrity (Rogoff, 1998; Marshall, 1997). Although these texts proved valuable for understanding some aspects of western media culture, they tended to globalize the experience

of a tiny minority of the world's people who happen to be highly mobile, connected through technology, and largely disconnected from oral and traditional culture. This presents a problem for researchers traversing the majority world. For example, contemporary theory such as "late modern transnational mobility" (Tsagarousianou, 2004) was a poor fit with my research on the media work of migrants and refugees from Burma, who travelled long distances on foot, who experienced borders as formidable, life-threatening obstacles, and whose access to communications technology was restricted by law in both Burma and Thailand. Indeed, the theoretical assumption of a rootless, globalized world provides little incentive to pay attention to media tied to local ethnic and cultural identity struggles, including the rich array of media production by and among colonized and oppressed populations (Kamalipour & Mowlana, 1994). It has been further argued that the initially political, activist edge of cultural studies was blunted as the field became more mainstreamed in the academy (Mellor, 1992; During, 1993; Agger, 1992). Informed by my encounters with refugees and journalists in exile, I am drawn to Said's (1994) critique of "incoherent" post-structuralism that has little to do with the daily political and economic conditions of ordinary people around the globe (p. 168). In these scenarios, the broad field of cultural studies, while providing room for human agency, offers surprisingly limited space to economically and politically marginalized voices engaged in very real struggles for survival and social change, in some locations facing exile, imprisonment, and execution as a result of their media work.

Viewed From Below, Ants Can Move Mountains

Western media theory is not entirely bereft of human agency. As previously stated, authors such as Gramsci (1916/ trans. 1996) and Williams (1983) offer glimpses into ordinary people's capacity to collectively recognize and break their chains, and to create media of their own, while later cultural theorists depict grassroots actors in a state of dialogue with power centres. Feminists such as Collins (1990) and hooks (1994) draw pictures of dissent, while Scott (1990) reveals hidden transcripts of resistance. However, these glimpses are shaded by a generalized equation of 'media power' with mass media that is exclusively hinged to a highly industrialized capitalist economic system. While this perspective offers much to our understanding of hegemonic influences, too seldom is the gaze of dominant media theory lifted beyond corporate-controlled (and largely American) mass media, to where there might be alternate models. Thus a global tapestry of ethnic, Indigenous and local media has been overlooked and understudied by major media theorists of the West. Even McChesney (2007), one of North America's most staunch advocates of progressive media reform, writes in *Communications Revolution* that he cringes at the prospect of reading student essays that "glorify some lost cause social movement or alternative media, many times in some locale like Bolivia or Central America" (p. 88). Yet in locations like Bolivia, unheralded by western scholarship, a communications revolution had been underway for several decades. To understand it, or even see it, requires listening to an entirely different set of voices from new locations. To wit, Lassalle's identification of the press as "the true enemy of the people" (1892, p. 14, trans. by Theobald, 2006, p. 22) can find no sharper contrast than the words of Moses Kotane:

Of what use is a newspaper to a people? A newspaper is a very useful weapon in the hands of a people or a class or to whoever possesses it. Without a newspaper we would never know what other people want, see, think or do; and what was happening in the

world today.... We need a paper which will tell the people the truth of what is happening and what is to be done. (as cited by Jones, 1997, p. 352)

How may we account for such disparate views? The aforementioned *Four Theories* (1963) would classify Kotane's view as libertarianism standing opposite communism. Yet Kotane wrote the above passage for the maiden issue of *Inkululeko* (Freedom), launched by the South African Communist Party in 1921 (Jones 1997; Tomaselli & Louw 1991). It is important, therefore, to look beyond the familiar dichotomies of the West for answers. To begin with, it is worth considering that Africans communicated with each other quite effectively for thousands of years before the arrival of the modern press. Societies were highly mobile, and word flowed along the 'bush telegraph' of drums and market grounds (Hachten, 1971). When the printing press arrived, it was not solely delivered by the hands of capitalists, for there was little profit in trekking bundles of papers across the continent's far-flung, challenging geography. Following the flow of the bush telegraph, some of the first and most popular newspapers were produced by Christian missions for native African readers in rural settings, some published in the local vernacular. Launched in 1873, the Presbyterian-sponsored Xhosa-language *Isigidimi* enjoyed some editorial autonomy under an African editor, and contained "a sustained, albeit muted, level of protest" against colonial rule (Switzer, 1997, pp. 25-24). Through such publications, the ground was laid to adapt the press to later Africanist and nationalist discourse, leading to a vibrant black media culture. In 1884, when the Presbyterian mission felt *Isigidimi* had gone too far, editor Tengo Jabavu resigned and started his own paper, *Imvo Zabantsundu* [*Native Opinion*], becoming one of the first editor-nationalists in a growing continental trend (Switzer, 1997). In Egypt, turn-of-the-century newspapers such as *Al-Liwa'a*, *Muayyad* and *Al-Garida* were the first voices to openly challenge colonial rule and call for democratic reform (Dabbous, 1994). Speaking of British West Africa, Hachten (1971) writes:

The press gave to nationalism its prime means of diffusion, the medium through which the idea could be disseminated. Nationalism gave to the press its principal message, its *raison d'être*, in extending circulation. But the separation of the two is not feasible because they were wedded by a common heart and a mind -- that of the editor-nationalist. (p. 144)

Some editor-nationalists, such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, founder of Ghana's *African Morning Post* (and, later, president of Nigeria), launched their publications as liberal-entrepreneurial projects (Hachten, 1971). Other papers, such as *Inkululeko*, were connected with left-wing movements and parties. Yet their pages shared the central idea that African media were fully joined to anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles.

At the same time, the anti-colonial struggle reshaped Marxism to African ends. Similar to early British Chartists, African Marxists were willing to seek alliances across class divides, linking with students, soldiers, and "progressive members of the middle class" (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 2). This included progressive journalists, publishers, and writers. Literary critic Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o (1983) argues the experience of imperialism influenced cultural expression more deeply than class struggle:

On the cultural level, in the colonies and neocolonies there grew two cultures in mortal conflict: foreign imperialist; national and patriotic. And so, out of different nationalities often inhabiting one geographic state, there emerged a people's literature, music dance, theatre, art in fierce struggle against foreign imperialist literature, music, dance, theatre, art imposed on colonies, semicolonies and neocolonies. Thus the major contradiction in the third world is between national identity and imperialist domination. (p. 80)

Placing media and culture within the field of change, instead of acquiescence, expanded the possibilities and expectations surrounding the expected role of media in society. In his address to the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists, held in Rome in 1959, Sékou Touré stated:

To take part in the African revolution it is not enough to sing a revolutionary song; you must fashion the revolution with the people. And if you fashion it with the people, the songs will come by themselves, and of themselves. (as cited by Fanon, 1963, p. 206)

This activist stance seems a polar opposite to the dark and despairing world of Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1986). Indeed the circumstances of colonized peoples afforded no other response. As well, the idea of people power was no pipe dream in the global south. While the industrialized world grew mired in the social stasis of advanced capitalism, Ghandi's non-cooperation movement led India toward independence, and Mao Zedong's army of peasants and workers marched into Beijing. The Viet Cong defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu, while in Cuba, Castro and Guevara assembled highland farmers into a successful revolutionary army. In Kenya, the Mau Mau battled British forces; the Algerian FLN battled the French (Ngũgĩ, 1983). Throughout Africa, 35 new nations emerged between 1956 and 1966 (Hachten, 1971). One could not defend the idea that liberation was impossible, when liberation seemed to be happening all around. Further, the liberation framework entertained polarities that, although fading from Western worldviews, remained an undeniable presence in people's daily lives in the South. In the words of Frantz Fanon (1963): "The colonial world is a world cut in two.... It is obvious here that the agents of the government speak the language of pure force" (p. 38). Fanon, a Martinique-born psychiatrist who practiced in Algeria, instantly recognized Algeria's anti-French resistance as his own, a struggle shared by millions around the globe. Taking direct aim at western mass society theory, he called for a new 'native intellectual' capable of leading change: "Instead of according the people's lethargy an honored place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature" (Fanon, 1963, pp. 222-223). A turn toward local wisdom marked a further divergence from prevailing Western theory. Fanon urged intellectuals to "discover the substance of village assemblies, the cohesion of people's committees, and the extraordinary fruitfulness of local meetings and groupments" (p. 47). It was a worldview that looked beyond unenlightened masses to "the enlightened actions of men and women" (p. 204). In other words, the study of humanity required a return to humanity:

Today we are present at the stasis of Europe. Comrades, let us flee from this motionless movement where gradually dialectic is changing into the logic of equilibrium. Let us reconsider the question of mankind. Let us reconsider the question of cerebral reality and of the cerebral mass of all humanity, whose connections must be increased, whose channels must be diversified and whose messages must be re-humanized. (p. 314)

Such a perspective, when applied to media theory, opens space for recognizing the power of localized, particularized communications channels to promote progressive change, rather than broad-brushing ethnic, local media as necessarily retrograde, communalist, and inconsequential in comparison to national mass media. Some 20 years later, Ngũgĩ (1986) echoed the call to view local knowledge not as an island, but as part of the sea that moves history. Further, he argued communications was the central process by which this is accomplished. Although Ngũgĩ acknowledged the Marxist dictum that production is the birthplace of communication, he added: "But there is more to it; communication between human beings is also the basis and process of evolving culture" (p. 15). The movement from

a production-centric view of human relations toward a communications-centric view was a significant development in Southern media theory. “Communication is at the very heart of social experience,” wrote Washington Uranga (1985), a pastor based in Argentina (p. 72). This position has the effect of elevating cultural production, including media, above material production in terms of defining the basic construction of social relations, introducing more multi-sited avenues for contestation and change.

Like McLuhan’s ‘global village’ theory, Ngũgĩ (1983) anticipated the development of what would become an essential tenet of alternative media praxis: the idea of a pluralist, diverse, particularist approach to media production “very much like a universal garden of many-coloured flowers” (p. 24). Yet he noted that to engage in the nationalist project, he and many of his contemporaries were forced to communicate in the language of their oppressors, a contradiction that led him to write in Gikuyu or Ki-Swahili instead of English (Smith, 2005). This method was confronted by hooks (1994), who advocated reclaiming and changing the language of oppressors as a space of political resistance. Addressing Ngũgĩ’s dialectic also became a signature contribution made by Indigenous peoples to anti-colonialist discourse. Indigenous activists demonstrated that cultural and linguistic preservation could occupy an important place in anti-colonial struggles. This was made possible in part by breaking away from the strategy of forming a singular nationalist counter-identity within what were essentially colonial geographic boundaries. Calling their peoples the Fourth World, pan-Indigenous leaders understood that, while Indigenous Peoples were connected to specific territories, they traded and communicated across and between continents (Masaqueza & B’alam, 2000). The result was an activism that was simultaneously global, and “decidedly localist, respecting the autonomy and distinctiveness of disparate Indigenous groups” (Wilson & Stewart, 2008, p. 8). This local-global stance was articulated in the Zapatista movement’s email communiqués, linking Indigenous resistance in Chiapas to social movements around the world. Although *The First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle* (1993) was addressed to “Mexican Brothers and Sisters,” its call was clearly intended for the world, its authors identifying themselves as among “the dispossessed, we are millions” (EZLN [Zapatista Army of National Liberation]. General Command, 1993).

Another Media

It stands to reason that against this emerging theoretical background, a different media praxis should emerge. Throughout Latin America, Africa, and Asia, new movements developed around alternative media constructions and theories. In the words of Raghu Mainali of Nepal:

We are trying to produce an act of communicating. We are not manufacturing consent. We are not manufacturing the news. We are trying to develop discussion and consensus about common issues. (as cited by Deane, 2008, p. 40)

Over decades of development, certain shared principles emerged in practice. An early step was the introduction of the ‘amateur’ journalist. Following the idea that media worked best when they flowed along traditional communication lines, *Inkululeko* attempted to recreate the bush telegraph in print, calling on readers to become reporters. In a 1944 article, the editor of the day explained:

Inkululeko has no paid writers. Those who write for our paper are ordinary people who have no training in journalism. From towns and villages in all parts of South Africa they send news to *Inkululeko* of what is happening in their lives...What is news?...Suppose

that in some location there is no street lighting and a donga [hole] in the road. A man is walking on this road at night and falls and breaks his leg. That's news -- and we want to hear about it. (as cited by Jones, 1997, p. 352)

Similarly, the New Latin American Cinema movement of the 1960s called for 'imperfect' filmmaking. Espinosa's 1969 manifesto 'For an Imperfect Cinema' argued that films attempting to achieve the high production values of a Hollywood film were "almost always reactionary" (Espinosa, 1969/ trans. 1979). In response, he called for a new poetic, embracing film and video production in the style of "folk art" tied to human liberation:

For imperfect cinema, "lucid" people are the ones who think and feel and exist in a world which they can change. In spite of all the problems and difficulties, they are convinced that they can transform it in a revolutionary way. (Espinosa, 1969/trans. 1979, para. 32)

The concept migrated beyond cinema to other media forms, contributing to present-day theorization of the citizen journalist:

We think of Indigenous film and video in particular as 'imperfect media' whose locally based 'embedded aesthetics' and concern for making political and cultural interventions may contribute to the theorization of a politically emancipated form of citizen's media. (Salazar & Córdova, 2008, p. 55)

While African nationalists centred much of their work on newspapers, theatre, and novels, Latin American activists experimented with emerging broadcast technology. As in the case of early African print media, small-scale, low-wattage FM radio was introduced to rural areas by Christian missionaries, rather than profit-seeking corporations. On October 16, 1946, a Catholic priest's assistant named Joaquin Salcedo Guaurin launched a volunteer-run community radio station to help disseminate information among the farmers of Colombia's Tenza Valley, 80% of whom were illiterate (Ibrahim, n.d.; Gumucio Dagron, 2003). Two years later, Bolivian tin miners established *Radio Sucre* in the mining town of Cananiri and *Radio Nuevos Horizontes* in the southern city of Tupiza (Buckley, 2000). Supported by union dues, tin miners' radio represented "an extension of literally centuries of struggle by workers against the exploitative oligarchy" (Huezca, 1995, p. 151). Thus radio entered a space that Adorno (2006) had declared could only be occupied by the iron voice of authority. Importantly, the adoption of radio technology allowed for the introduction of dialogue, a process more difficult to achieve in print media. Tin miners' stations were set up not as broadcasters, but as communications hubs for public meetings and discussion among the workers. It was an idea that had been briefly floated in the west by Bertolt Brecht (1932):

The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him. (p. 1)

Brecht's suggestion was destined to be drowned out by Adorno's dictum that the technology of radio allowed only monologue, as theorized in *Current of Music* (2006). To give credit to western scholars, though, there were attempts to introduce dialogic media concepts, a difficult task in a non-receptive environment. Convinced it was too late to introduce two-way TV in the U.S., Dallas Smythe (1973/1994) tried to take the idea to China. At meetings with Chinese officials and academics in late 1971 and early 1972, he argued that technically it was "quite possible to design it as a two-way system in which each receiver would have the

capability to provide either a voice or voice-and-picture response to the broadcasting station, which might then store and rebroadcast these responses or samples of them” (p. 232). His Chinese colleagues never took up the idea, which Smythe attributed to their inability to see the capitalist tendencies of a one-way television signal. It is plausible, however, that Chinese officialdom knew very well the potential of two-way broadcast communication, including the potential for diversity and dissent on the air. In any case, Smythe returned from China with a deeper appreciation of anti-imperialist struggles. In an essay distributed to members of the UNESCO international communications research committee, he argued that Western ideological content arrives hand-in-hand with media development strategies -- a position that prompted his swift removal from the committee and a severing of his long-standing ties with UNESCO (Smythe, 1973/1994; Guback, 1994).

In Latin America, however, the field for such ideas was fertile. The model of dialogic, empowering media fit hand in glove with Freirian (1969/trans. 1993) education reforms and community-based action research units set up by scholar-activists such as Orlando Fals Borda (2008). The open structures of grassroots media attracted the participation of women, ethnic minorities, and Indigenous communities. In the words of a Mixe woman from Oaxaca:

The information we are looking for and that we broadcast on the radio has to do with our culture and the recognition of our language, but also we deal with important themes for women that men have not dealt with. For example, they will never talk about how men are beating their women and children, or at least not talk about it the way we do, with a woman’s sensibility. (as cited by Chávez, 2008, p. 103)

By 2008, there were an estimated 10,000 community radio stations in Latin America, spread from Mexico to Argentina (Gumucio Dagron, 2008). Indigenous communities in particular enlisted community radio in the quest to reclaim cultural sovereignty (Murillo, 2008).

Community radio arrived somewhat later in Africa, with the deregulation of state media in the 1980s (Karikari, 2000). No longer considered an important technology in the West, radio adapted well to local conditions of isolation and illiteracy, practical because “almost everyone has one at home and people have only to stretch out their arm to turn it on” (Boussof & Medani, 2008, p. 68). Grounded in Freire’s Cultural Action for Freedom, station managers understood “the biggest challenge we have is to change our society” (Tiemoke Kone, as cited by Perkins, 2000, p. 1). Flattened hierarchies and democratic decision-making were considered the ideal structure for this to take place:

I have been the Director of Radio Bélékan in Kati, Mali, since 2000 and I have always directed the organization with a high sense of responsibility, in other words democratically.... Decisions are taken collectively and by consensus. (Diallo, 2008, pp. 61-62)

As these and other participatory media initiatives -- such as video collectives, village media centres and vernacular newspapers -- spread through Africa and Asia, they attracted loyal audiences and state repression in equal doses. Taking a cue from pan-Indigenous movements, many grassroots media organizations today defend their existence within the discourse of international human rights. The essential argument is that communication is the foundation of human experience, and that therefore the right to communicate must be guaranteed. After decades of debate, the right to communicate has never been successfully established in official multilateral declarations; however, it continues to be consistently expressed in activist statements such as the People’s Communication Charter (n.d.):

Communication is basic to the life of all individuals and their communities. All people are entitled to participate in communication within and between societies. (People's Communication Charter, n.d.)

There has been debate, however, regarding the limitations of a rights-based emphasis under current legal frameworks. Alice Munyua and Emmanuel Njenga (2004) advised a Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) campaign meeting that "communication rights campaigns as a lone concept would not be easily understood in many African countries particularly outside civil society groups unless linked to livelihood issues and civic education activities" (p. 21). Speaking of the Asian context, Siriuvasek (2004) agrees that a narrow rights-specific focus does not adequately address the broad challenge of gaining freedom to express and to dissent. With this in mind, addressing grassroots media as a communications rights project requires a broader view of human rights, one that accepts that rights can be developed and contested locally, placing everything from the re-ordering of interpersonal relations to the drafting of municipal bylaws on the same field as universalist multi-lateral statements and initiatives. A people's media framework therefore envisions rights not only through the narrow frame of a legalistic master narrative, but also encompasses a broad field of specific local and personal struggles -- between farmer and district governor, husband and wife, panhandler and police officer, for example -- as part of the struggle to communicate and relate to others in fairness, equality, and dignity. Central to this thinking is the idea that media and social movements are one and the same, deeply tied to processes of democratization and people's empowerment. This position is clarified by the Association Mondiale des Radiodiffuseurs Communautaires/World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC):

What is Community Radio? Not the media moving into community but the community moving into the media. We...are not the media but the facilitators of social movements, the voice of civil society. (AMARC, 2007, p. 22)

Conceptualizing media activity as a social movement geared toward social change has given grassroots media a central role in people's democracy movements around the globe. It also results in media activity that is less tied to a particular technological approach than to the movements themselves, resulting in a fluid use of communications tools according to available opportunities and circumstances. For example, following the 2005 military coup in Nepal, an order came down that barred the broadcasting of news on the radio, and allowed only music. Kunda Dixit (2008) of *The Nepali Times* describes how radio operators reacted:

They resisted in creative ways and not without a sense of humour. One radio station in central Nepal...started singing the news in popular folk tunes. Another community station in Dang district took its entire studio down to the sidewalk and read the news to passersby every evening at 6PM until large crowds started to gather and the news reading ritual itself became a form of protest. (Dixit, 2008, p. 24)

Nepal's community radio networks facilitated the organizing of protests and linked remote communities to national-level conversations about the future of democracy. By April 2006, hundreds of thousands of rural dwellers marched toward Kathmandu, leading to the restoration of parliament (Dixit, 2008). Following the crisis, community radio continued to play a role in the reorganization of government by providing horizontal communications channels:

Throughout this political transition community radio stations took the news from the capital to the remote rural areas, and brought feedback and reaction of the nation to Kathmandu. Several syndicated services for radio exchange were set up to facilitate this two-way conversation between the centre and the periphery. The end result was that there was maximum public participation in the political evolution through horizontal nationwide communication via the FM network. (Dixit, 2008, p. 28)

A similar scene played out in Venezuela, when the government of Hugo Chavez was threatened by a military coup in 2002. After the mainstream media refused to cover street demonstrations, grassroots media came to the fore:

Grassroots radio and television stations broadcast the initial resistance to the coup and consequently helped to mobilize tens of thousands of people who took to the streets in protest. The resistance was further amplified through the use of cell phones to distribute information and mobilize popular resistance. Two days after it had begun, thanks in part to grassroots media, the coup regime collapsed. (Uzelman, 2008, p. 26)

But nowhere was the connection to social movements and the fluidity of technological innovation more apparent than in Seattle in 1999, when the Independent Media Centre (IMC) movement introduced to the world an Open Source content management system that allowed easy uploading of text, video, audio, and photographs to the Web. Five hundred IMC reporters covered events from inside the protest, attracting more viewers than CNN (Coyer, 2005). At the same time, radio pirates roamed the streets with suitcase radio stations and climbed into trees and other high points with transmitting equipment hidden under their clothes; from these vantage points they delivered reports via low frequency FM simultaneously broadcast on the Internet (Van der Zon, 2005). Seattle also marked the coming-of-age of media as temporary autonomous zone, following the ideas of anarchist Hakim Bey. Employing moveable autonomous media in the form of pirate radios and event-specific IMCs and blogs, “activists are able to build global networks, offering an alternative vision of our world, and challenging the corporate control over media at a fraction of the cost” (Van der Zon, 2005, p. 34). This contrasted mightily with the corporate media’s early fumbblings with the Internet and social media, viewed as an external threat that could not be molded to existing business models (Quandt, 2008).

In addition to frequent reference to Hakim Bey, indy media activists point to Zapatismo as a guiding influence. A communiqué issued by IMC New York, in response to the shooting death of indy reporter Brad Will in Oaxaca, stated: “Indymedia was born from the Zapatista vision of a global network of alternative communication against neoliberalism and for humanity” (New York City Independent Media Centre, 2006). Frequent exchanges between global activists and Chiapas have clearly figured in the development of a ‘third option’ media philosophy that looks beyond the binaries introduced by traditional Western media theory. In a video communication to a Free the Media Teach-In held in New York City, Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos (2001) summed it up as a choice between inertia and action:

We have a choice. We can have a cynical attitude in the face of the media and say that nothing can be done about the dollar power that creates itself in images.... Or we can simply assume incredulity. We can say that any communication by the media monopolies is a total lie. We can ignore it and go about our lives. But there is a third option that is neither conformity, nor skepticism, nor distrust. It’s the option to construct a different way. (pp. 174-175)

This call for another media -- a third option -- challenges a dominant theoretical position that for centuries has been largely oblivious to the possibility of a liberating, people-powered media praxis. It calls on us to break open the inertia of critical theory and stasis of late capitalism, described by Habermas (1979) and Fanon (1963), instead of accepting our conditions as iron law.

Conclusion

In summary, our theorizing need not be confined to the study of audiences, owners, and material production. As Fanon (1963) so simply and elegantly suggested, "Let us reconsider the question of mankind." In reconsidering this question, our eyes are opened to the presence of human agency, where before we saw only immovable systems. We see communication and cultural production rise above material production as the anchor and builder of social relations. Our easy assumptions on media power are challenged, and the singular becomes plural. From this position, our thoughts on media are transposed to a wider universe, where voices are diverse and change is possible.

References

- Adorno, T. (2006). *Current of music: Elements of a radio theory*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Agger, B. (1992). *Cultural studies as critical theory*. Philadelphia: The Falmer Press.
- AMARC. (2007). *Community radio social impact assessment: Removing barriers, increasing effectiveness*. Montréal: AMARC.
- Bagdikian, B. H. (1971). *The information machines: Their impact on men and the media*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M.M. Bakhtin*. (M. Holquist, Ed., C. Emerson, & M. Holquist, Trans.) Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Baudrillard, J. (2002). The precession of simulacra. In M. K. Durham, & D. M. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies: Keywords* (pp. 521-549). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Bousof, M., & Medani, Y. (2008). Women and the hopes for community radio in Algeria. In *Women's empowerment and good governance through community radio: Best experiences for an action research process* (pp. 67-72). Montréal: AMARC.
- Brecht, B. (1932). Radio as an apparatus of communication. *Bjitter des hessischen landestheaters* (16), *English ed. Originally published as Der Rundfunk als kommunikationsapparat*. Retrieved from <http://home.freeuk.net/lemmaesthetics/brecht1.htm>
- Buckley, S. (2000). Radio's new horizons: Democracy and popular communication in the digital age. *Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3(2), 180-187. [CrossRef](#)
- Chávez, M. E. (2008). Women in community radio in Mexico: Contributing to women's empowerment. In *Women's empowerment and good governance through communitiy radio* (pp. 101-104). Montréal: AMARC.
- Coyer, K. (2005). If it leads it bleeds: The participatory newsmaking of the Independent Media Center. In W. de Jong, M. Shaw, & N. Stammers (Eds.), *Global activism, global media* (pp. 165-178). Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press.
- Dabbous, S. (1994). Egypt. In Y. R. Kamalipour, & H. Mowlana (Eds.), *Mass media in the Middle East* (pp. 60-73). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

- Deane, J. (2008). The role of community radio in the Nepali crisis: An interview with Raighu Mainali. *Fighting poverty: Utilizing community media in a digital age. Practitioners' reflections from an interactive roundtable at the World Congress on Communication for Development* (pp. 34-41). AMARC, SDC and UNESCO.
- Diallo, H. (2008). The issue of governance within radio and women in society. In *Women's empowerment and good governance through community radio: Best practices for an action research process* (pp. 61-65). Montréal: AMARC.
- Dixit, K. (2008). The rescuing of democracy: The contribution of community radio in Nepal. In *Fighting poverty: Utilizing community media in a digital age. Practitioners' reflections from an interactive roundtable at the World Congress on Communication for Development, October 2006* (pp. 22-33). AMARC, SDC, UNESCO.
- Downing, J. (2001). *Radical media: Rebellious communication and social movements*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- During, S. (1993). Introduction. In S. During (Ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader* (1st ed., pp. 1-28). New York: Routledge.
- Ely, G. (2002). *Forging democracy: The history of the Left in Europe: 1850-2000*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Epstein, J., & Thompson, D. (1982). *The Chartist experience: Studies in radicalism and culture, 1830-60*. London: The MacMillian Press Ltd.
- Espinosa, J. G. (1979). For an imperfect cinema. *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*(20), 24-26. (J. Burton, Trans.) Retrieved from <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinesays/JC20folder/ImperfectCinema.html>
- Everett, A., & Caldwell, J. T. (2003). *New media: theories and practices of digitextuality*. New York: Routledge.
- EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation). General Command. (1993, December 31). First declaration of the Lacandon jungle: Today we say enough is enough. Chiapas, Mexico.
- Fals Borda, O. (2008). Participatory (action) research in social theory: Origins and challenges. In P. Reason, & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of action research: participative inquiry and practice* (pp. 27-37). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth*. (C. Farrington, Trans.) New York: Grove. Originally published as *Les damnés de la terre*, Ed. Francois Maspero, Paris, 1961.
- Freire, P. (1969/trans. 1993). Education as the practice of freedom. In P. Friere (Ed.), *Education for critical consciousness* (M. B. Ramos, Trans., pp. 1-61). New York, Continuum. Originally published as *Educação como prática de liberdade*, Rio de Janeiro: Editoria Paz e Terra, 1969.
- Giddings, F. (1887). Co-operation. In G. E. McNeill (Ed.), *The labour movement: The problem of today* (pp. 508-531). Boston: A.M. Bridgman & Co. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/aeb4570.0001.001.umich.edu>
- Gramsci, A. (1916/ trans. 1996). Newspapers and the workers. *Avanti! Piedmont Edition*. Trans. Mitchell Abidor. Retrieved from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/1916/12/newspapers>
- Grosswiler, P. (1998). *Method is the message: Rethinking McLuhan through critical theory*. Montréal: Black Rose.
- Guback, T. (1994). Editors note to 'The role of mass media and popular culture in defining development'. In D. Smythe, *Counterclockwise: Perspectives on communication* (pp. 245-247). San Francisco: Westview Press.
- Gumucio Dagron, A. (2003). Art of arielists: Sustainability of community media. *OURMedia II*. Barenquilla, Colombia.

- Gumucio Dagron, A. (2008). Perspectives on 21st century community radio in Latin America. *Fighting poverty: Utilizing community media in a digital age. Practitioners' reflections from an interactive roundtable at the World Congress on Communications for Development* (pp. 42-49). AMARC, SDC, UNESCO.
- Habermas, J. (1979). *Communication and the evolution of society*. (T. McCarthy, Trans.) Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Ltd.
- Hachten, W. A. (1971). *Muffled drums: The news media in Africa*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.
- Hall, S. (1973). *Encoding and decoding the television discourse*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.
- Hall, S. (1992). Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, & P. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural Studies* (pp. 277-294). London: Routledge.
- Hammond, J. L., & Hammond, B. (1947). *The bleak age* (Revised ed.). New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Hayles, N. K. (1999). *How we became posthuman: virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature and informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hill Collins, P. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment*. London: Harper Collins Academic.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. (1944/1986). *The dialectic of enlightenment*. New York: Continuum. Originally published as *Dialektik der aufklärung*. New York: Social Studies Assoc., 1944.
- Huesca, R. (1995). Subject-authored theories of media practice: The case of Bolivian tin miners' radio. *Communications Studies*, 6(3-4), 149-169. [CrossRef](#)
- Ibrahim, Z. (n.d.). *Community radio*. Retrieved June 22, 2013, from Radio Africa: The power of culture: <http://www.powerofculture.nl/uk/specials/radio/community.html>
- Jones, E. C. (1997). Inkululeko: Organ of the Communist Party of South Africa, 1939-1950. In L. Switzer (Ed.), *South Africa's alternative press: Voices of protest and resistance, 1880-1960* (pp. 331-372). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kamalipour, Y. R., & Mowlana, H. (Eds.). (1994). *Mass media in the Middle East*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Karikari, K. (2000). The Development of Community Media in English-speaking West Africa. In K. Bofo (Ed.), *Promoting community media in Africa* (pp. 43-60). Paris: UNESCO.
- Klapper, J. (1960). *The effects of mass communication*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Lassalle, F. (1892). *Die feste, die presse, und der Frankfurter Abgeordnetentag: drei Symptome des öffentlichen Geistes*. Berlin: Vorwärts. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/diefestediypress00lass>
- Le Bon, G. (1896). *The Crowd. 1st English edition*. London: Ernest Benn.
- Macnamara, J. (2003). *Mass media effects: A review of 50 years of media research*. Broadway, NSW, Australia: Carma International.
- Marcos. (2001). *Our word is our weapon: Selected writings*. (J. Ponce de León, Ed.) New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Marcuse, H. (1964). *One-dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Marshall, D. P. (1997). *Celebrity and power: fame in contemporary culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Marx, K. (1975). Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly. First article. In *The Collected Works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Vol. 1: Karl Marx 1835-43*.

- [*Rheinische Zeitung No. 125, May 5, 1842, Supplement*] (Vol. 1, pp. 132-182). Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1848 / 1959). *The Communist Manifesto*. In L. S. Feuer (Ed.), *Marx and Engels: Basic writings on politics and philosophy*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Masaqueza, M., & B'alam, P. (2000). A pan-Indigenous vision of Indigenous studies. *Indigenous Nations Studies Journal*, 1(1), 3-9.
- McChesney, R. (2007). *Communication revolution: Critical junctions and the future of media*. New York: The New Press.
- McClelland, J. (2010). *The crowd and the mob: From Plato to Canetti*. London: Unwin Hyman Ltd.
- McLellan, D. (1973). *Karl Marx: His life and thought*. London: McMillan.
- Mellor, A. (1992). Discipline and punish? Cultural studies at the crossroads. *Media, Culture and Society*, 14(4), 663-670. [CrossRef](#)
- Mills, C. W. (1986). Some effects of mass media. In A. Casty (Ed.), *Mass media and mass man* (pp. 32-35). Toronto: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston.
- Mirzoeff, N. (1998). What is visual culture? In M. Mirzoeff (Ed.), *The visual culture reader* (pp. 4-13). New York: Routledge.
- Munyua, A., & Njenga, E. (2004). Communication rights: What issues for Africa? In C. Rodriguez, & S. Ó Siochru (Eds.), *Framing communications rights: A global overview. A report on the CRIS campaign meeting, Geneva, Dec. 8, 2003* (pp. 18-21). Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS).
- Murphy, R. D. (1977). *Mass communication and human interaction*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.
- Ndlela, N. M. (2010). Alternative media and the public sphere in Zimbabwe. In K. Howley (Ed.), *Understanding community media* (pp. 87-95). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- New York City Independent Media Centre. (2006, October 29). *New York Independent Media Center responds to the death of Brad Will*. Retrieved May 3, 2010, from NYC IMC: <http://publish.nyc.indymedia.org/en/2006/10/77958.html>
- Ngũgĩ, T. (1983). *The barrel of a pen: Resistance to repression in neo-colonial Kenya*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Ngũgĩ, T. (1986). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. London: J. Currey.
- People's Communication Charter. (n.d.). *Charter text*. Retrieved from People's Communication Charter: <http://www.pccharter.net/charteren.html>
- Perkins, I. (2000). *The African community radio station manager's handbook: A guide to sustainable radio*. AMARC Africa.
- Quandt, T. (2008). (No) news on the World Wide Web? A comparative content analysis of online news in Europe and the United States. *Journalism Studies*, 9(5), 717-738. [CrossRef](#)
- Rogoff, I. (1998). Studying visual culture. In N. Mirzoeff (Ed.), *The visual cultural reader* (pp. 14-26). New York: Routledge.
- Said, E. (1994). *The pen and the sword: Conversations with David Barsamian*. Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press.
- Salazar, J. F., & Córdova, A. (2008). Imperfect media and the poetics of Indigenous video in Latin America. In P. Wilson, & M. Stewart (Eds.), *Global Indigenous media: Culture, poetics and politics* (pp. 39-57). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Schiller, D. (1996). *Theorizing communications: A history*. New York: Oxford.
- Scott, J. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven: Yale.

- Siebert, F., Peterson, T., & Schramm, W. (1963). *The four theories of the press* (Illini books ed.). Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Siriyuvasek, U. (2004). People's media and communications rights in Indonesia and the Philippines. *Paper prepared for the Third Asia Public Intellectuals Workshop on the theme 'Power, Purpose, Process and Practice in Asia. Nov. 30 - Dec. 4.* Fukuoka, Japan.
- Smith, L. T. (2005). On tricky ground: Researching the Native in the age of uncertainty. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 85-107). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Smythe, D. (1977, Fall). Communications: Blind spot of western Marxism. *Canadian Journal of Social and Political Theory*, 1(3), 1-27. Retrieved 12 27, 2015, from <http://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/download/13715/4463>
- Smythe, D. (1994). *Clockwise: Perspectives on communication*. San Francisco: Westview Press.
- Spivak, G. C. (1998). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson, & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271-313). Basingstoke: MacMillian Education.
- Splichal, S. (2006). In pursuit of socialized press: Ferdinand Tönnie's critique of the press and his predecessors. In D. Berry, & J. Theobald (Eds.), *Radical mass media criticism: A cultural geneology*. Montréal: Black Rose.
- Switzer, L. (1997). Introduction. In L. Switzer (Ed.), *South Africa's alternative press: Voices of protest and resistance, 1880-1960*. Cambridge University Press.
- Theobald, J. (2006). The intellectual tradition of radical mass media: A framework. In *Radical mass media criticism: A cultural geneology* (pp. 59-72). Montréal: Black Rose.
- Tomaselli, K., & Louw, P. E. (1991). *The alternative press in South Africa*. London: James Currey.
- Tsagarousianou, R. (2004). Rethinking the concept of diaspora: Mobility, connectivity, and communication in a globalized world. *Westminster papers in communication and culture*, 1(1), 52-65.
- Uranga, W. (1985). The New World Information and Communication Order. In P. Lee (Ed.), *Communication for all: New World Information and Communication Order* (pp. 70-104). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Uzelman, S. (2008). Hard at work in the bamboo garden. In A. Langlois, & F. Dubois (Eds.), *Autonomous media: Activating resistance and dissent* (pp. 17-24). Montréal: Cumulus.
- Van den Haag, E. (1968). Of happiness and of despair we have no measure. In A. Casty (Ed.), *Mass media and mass man* (pp. 5-11). Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Van der Zon, M. (2005). Broadcasting on our own terms. In A. Langlois, & F. Dubois (Eds.), *Autonomous media: Activating resistance and dissent* (pp. 31-45). Montréal: Cumulus.
- Welsch, W. (1999). Transculturality: The puzzling form of culture today. In M. Featherstone, & S. Lash (Eds.), *Spaces of culture: City, nation, world* (pp. 194-213). London: SAGE.
- White, R. A. (1993). The new world order and the Third World. In G. Gerbner, H. Mowlana, & K. Nordenstreng (Eds.), *The global media debate: Its rise, fall and renewal* (pp. 21-34). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Williams, R. (1975 / 2005). *Television, technology and cultural form*. Taylor & Francis e-Library edition.
- Williams, R. (1979). *Communications* (3rd ed.). Markham, ON: Penguin.

- Williams, R. (1983). *The Year 2000: A radical look at the future - and what we can do to change it*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Williams, R. (1989). Television and teaching. In A. O'Connor (Ed.), *Raymond Williams on television: Selected writings* (pp. 203-215). Toronto: Between the Lines.
- Wilson, P., & Stewart, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Global Indigenous media: Culture, poetics and politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Loving “Mapple Store” but Hating “Sprawl-Mart”: A Case Study of Brand Parodies in *The Simpsons*

KOME – An International Journal of Pure
Communication Inquiry
Volume 4 Issue 1, p. 69-83.
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and Permission:
kome@komejournal.com
Published by the Hungarian Communication
Studies Association
DOI: 10.17646/KOME.2016.15

Fei Qiao¹, Brandon Chicotsky² and Andrew C. Billings³

¹ The University of Alabama, USA

² The University of Alabama, USA

³ The University of Alabama, USA

Abstract: A content analysis of a total of 96 brands and 405 tweets reveal that 1) feature imitation is more frequently employed than theme imitation in brands with parodies in *The Simpsons*; 2) brands with parodies contain significantly more negative connotations than positive connotations; and 3) audiences have significantly more positive attitudes than negative attitudes toward both fictional brands and defictionalized brands. The findings are mainly consistent with 1) information processing and persuasive theory in communication and 2) brand defictionalization phenomenon in marketing, providing practical suggestions for both television and marketing practitioners. More theoretical and practical implications were further discussed.

Keywords: brand parodies, brand imitation, brand attitude, defictionalized brands, popular media

Introduction: *The Simpsons*

The Simpsons is a cultural icon of television programming; since 1989 it has broadcast nearly 600 episodes (Lascale, 2014). On August 21, 2014, FXX launched *The Simpsons* Marathon, airing all 552 episodes over a 12-day period (Snierson, 2014). According to Nielsen ratings, this marathon helped FXX move from 49th to third among cable networks, attracting an average of 1.3 million viewers for prime-time episodes (Deerwester, 2014). A survey conducted in 2006 showed that more than 50 percent of Americans were able to name at least two members of *The Simpsons* family, while only twenty-two percent of them could list one freedom protected by the First Amendment (White & Holman, 2011). People enjoy watching and talking about *The Simpsons*, creating all kinds of online fan communities. It has garnered

Address for Correspondence: Fei Qiao, email: fqiao[at]crimson.ua.edu

Article received on the 21st January, 2016. Article accepted on the 28th May, 2016.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

five People's Choice Awards, 31 Emmy Awards, and even a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame (IMDb, 2014).

One apparent reason for the show's fanatical following is that *The Simpsons* is full of satire (Irwin, Conard, & Skoble, 2013). As Irwin et al. (2013) stated, "We see layer upon layer of satire, double meanings, allusions to high as well as popular culture, sight gags, parody, and self-referential humor" (p. 1770). Such satire provides in-depth critiques on flaws and faults in American popular culture (Henry, 2007).

The Simpsons also attracts researchers' attention. Several previous studies attempt to explore *The Simpsons* from various perspectives, including politics (Woodcock, 2008), popular culture (Rhodes, 2001), public entertainment (Holbert, 2005), and philosophy (Irwin et al., 2013). These authors analyze "*The Simpsons* effect" by placing the show into a broad social and cultural background. However, the studies rarely focused on exploring the features of the show itself. One recurring, highly celebrated (by fanship), and prominent feature of the show is brand parody. An examination of brand parodies in *The Simpsons*, and the effects of such brands parodies, is a considerably relevant endeavor. Millions of fans are actively engaged in *The Simpsons* programming and fan communities, and brand values are potentially altered by parody portrayals in the show. Furthermore, this investigation may reveal necessary and unexplored research dimensions of entertainment media's brand parody phenomenon.

In terms of brand parodies, previous studies focused on the effectiveness and scope of marketing strategies (Petty, 2009, 2012), or the scope of intellectual property protection of the brands (Dogan & Lemley, 2013; Milne, 2013). The studies seldom focused on basic attributes of brand parodies. In addition, few studies attempted to explore audiences' affective responses to brands with parodies. This study fills these gaps by exploring the types of brand parodies and their interpretive intent (i.e., their connotations) in *The Simpsons*. Furthermore, this research focus includes audiences' attitudes toward both fictional brands and defictionalized brands in *The Simpsons*.

Literature Review

This study explores the types of brand parodies and their connotations in *The Simpsons*, while examining audiences' attitudes toward fictional brands and defictionalized brands. Based on the aforementioned purpose of the study, the literature review includes four parts: types of brand parodies, connotations of brand parodies, attitudes toward fictional brands with parodies, and attitudes toward defictionalized brands.

Types of Brand Parodies

The word, "parody," was first used by Aristotle in *Poetics* (Jean, 2011). The term's initial application is described as, "a comic transformation of a literary work, a piece of music or painting, but also a caricature or satire" (Jean, 2011, p. 19). For example, Marcel Duchamp put a moustache on *Mona Lisa*'s face to achieve a parody of Leonardo da Vinci's famous artwork (Jean, 2011; Shearer & Gould, 2000). This example reveals the major feature of, "parody," as, "imitation," because it comes from comic transformation or satire of a well-known work.

From the ancient era of Aristotle to today's entertainment era, the custom of using parody is maintained and applied to all different forms of mass communication. In the field of brand advertising, Zinkhan and Johnson (1994), the first two researchers to associate parody with pop culture, defined parody as, "an artistic work that broadly mimics an author's

characteristic style (and holds it up to ridicule)” (p. III). This point was expanded when Zinkham and Johnson stated that imitation and mockery were the two elements of a successful parody. Thus, “imitation,” can be considered an indispensable part of, “parody.” Brand parody is a recurring fixture of advertising parody (Jean, 2011). Advertising parody involves a brand’s presentation with humorous, exaggerated, or altered meaning. When used, advertising parody assumes that audiences understand the original, or unaltered meaning (Jean, 2011). The most functional application of brand parody is imitation, which includes *feature imitation* and *theme imitation* (Van Horen & Pieters, 2012). Feature imitation refers to the, “direct imitation of distinctive perceptual features such as letters, colors, shapes, and sounds...” (Van Horen & Pieters, 2012, p. 247). Most feature imitation focuses on creating a, “literal,” similarity between a new brand and the existing brand. For example, in *The Simpsons*, “Mapple store,” is the feature imitation (new brand) of, “Apple store,” (existing brand); and, “Pest Bye,” (new brand) is the feature imitation of, “Best Buy,” (existing brand), etc.

Theme imitation refers to the semantic similarity between a new brand and an existing brand subjected to parody, such as similar visual markers and other readily identifiable attributes associated with the new, parodied brand. These attributes are referred to in literature as packaging (Bruce, 1981; Job, Rumiati, & Lotto, 1992; Van Horen & Pieters, 2012). Compared with feature imitation, theme imitation is more, “abstract,” because it builds the connection of audiences’ interpretation of the new brand with the existing brand by creating similar brand environments for consumers. For example, in *The Simpsons*, the image of, “Krusty Burger,” can generate similar brand feelings as, “Burger King,” or, “McDonald’s”; the image and settings of, “Blockoland,” theme park can create similar brand feelings as a, “Legoland,” theme park.

Compared with theme imitation, feature imitation offers two advantages for presenting brand associations for viewers. Firstly, feature imitation utilizes prominent brands with an assumed universal or existing recognition; whereby, words of likeness to the existing brand suggest an ease of mockery (e.g. *The Simpsons*’ “Mapple store” is a clear parody of Apple store) (Van Horen & Pieters, 2012). Feature imitation can be achieved by simply changing the letters in brand names, using same colors, and adopting similar sounds of brand names (Van Horen & Pieters, 2012). This approach is a quick and effective method to generate parody effects.

The second feature imitation advantage is more straightforward than theme imitation. While theme imitation creates an environment aimed at prompting brand recall, feature imitation provides literal cues, which may be presented through audio and visual elements in media (as is the case with *The Simpsons*). These cues are designed for instant brand recall. In summary, feature imitation parodies encourage audiences to relate their knowledge of existing brands to a new brand instantly through obvious cues (Finch, 1996). Hence, feature imitation is a simpler and easier way to achieve brand parody effects than theme imitation.

The Simpsons episodes feature many brands that cannot be found in real life (Barnes & Chrysochoidis, 2010). These brands are referred to as fictional brands in the current study. Referring to literature, the ease by which audiences are assumed to relate existing brands to new brands suggests a programmatic advantage for featuring imitation selection over theme imitation. Thus, the first hypothesis is proposed:

- H₁: There will be a greater proportion of *The Simpsons*’ fictional brands using feature imitation than theme imitation.

Connotations of Brand Parodies

Based on the definition of, “parody,” using satire or irony is a common way to generate parody effects (Jean, 2011; Zinkhan & Johnson, 1994). The main underlying element in satire or irony is humor (Howard, 2014). In brand parody, humor is achieved by using information incongruently; meaning, “contrasting unexpected information with an existing schema structure” (Jean, 2011; Lee & Mason, 1999, p. 156). In other words, when audiences compare the seemingly altered, and in some cases outrageous, information delivered by brand parodies with their existing knowledge of well-known brands, laughter is potentially generated. For example, in *The Simpsons*, “Pest Bye,” is the brand parody for, “Best Buy.” The existing brand, “Best Buy,” is a well-known retail brand associated with technology products, while the fictional brand, “Pest Bye,” is shown selling rat poison, which may prompt a humorous response.

The source of brand parodies comes from a perceived outrageous, exaggerated, or altered transformation of the information (Jean, 2011). Sometimes, such parodies involve demeaning or slanderous portrayals. “Brand parody uses disparagement (hostility, derision, aggression, etc.) to reinforce the humor dimension” (Jean, 2011, p. 21). For example, in *The Simpsons*, the fictional brand, “Sprawl-Mart,” is used as the brand parody for, “Wal-Mart.” In the show, “Sprawl-Mart,” has a terrible working environment, which treats employees as slaves and prohibits their bathroom breaks (SimpsonsWiki, 2014). Such exaggerated information delivered from, “Sprawl-Mart,” is potentially perceived as a hostile and aggressive attack on, “Wal-Mart.” *The Simpsons* uses brand parodies to strategically attack well-known brands in order to consistently reach expected humorous effects (Jean, 2011). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H₂: In *The Simpsons*, fictional brands with parodies contain more negative connotations than positive connotations.

Attitudes toward Fictional Brands with Parodies

The concept of brand attitude consists of three components: 1) affective or feeling; 2) cognition or beliefs; and 3) behavioral intent (Assael, 1998; Jean, 2011; Lantos, 2010). The affective or feeling component refers to individuals’ emotional feelings toward a brand, which are expressed with statements similar to, “I don’t like Wal-Mart” (McLeod, 2014). The cognition component refers to individuals’ knowledge toward the brand, which is expressed in statements similar to, “I believe Wal-Mart provides a terrible working environment” (McLeod, 2014). Behavior component refers to how attitude influences the way one behaves, which is expressed with statements similar to, “I will avoid shopping at Wal-Mart” (McLeod, 2014).

These three components are described in literature as, “interrelated, mutually influential and mutually consistent” (Lantos, 2010, p. 504), because consumers need to achieve cognitive consistency (Lantos, 2010). The critical aspect of cognitive consistency is described as, “the valence of the attitude (both direction and strength),” which is, “congruent with the individual’s perception of the object-goal relationships” (Awa & Nwuche, 2010; Scott, 1959, p. 220). For example, if a person values a good working environment, and sees that Wal-Mart provides a terrible working environment, then the individual should dislike Wal-Mart. In other words, the valence of people’s cognition is consistent with the valence of their attitudes.

When such cognitive consistency is applied in the field of brand attitude, it is called “intra-attitude consistency” (Lantos, 2010). Consumers tend to maintain such “intra-attitude consistency” because without consistency, cognitive dissonance appears (Awa & Nwuche, 2010; Lantos, 2010). For consumers, cognitive dissonance is a state of psychological tension and discomfort caused by the inconsistency among “beliefs, feelings and/or actions” (Lantos, 2010, p. 504). Hence, in order to avoid such psychological discomfort, consumers tend to have similar beliefs and attitudes. Applying this concept to brand parodies in *The Simpsons*, audiences’ cognition toward the fictional brands with parodies should determine their attitude. As stated, fictional brands with parodies tend to have more negative than positive connotations. Therefore, when audiences receive the brand information delivered in *The Simpsons*, the connotations of such brands are assumed to potentially prompt negative recognitions. This may lead to negative brand attitudes toward those fictional brands. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₃: Audiences have more negative than positive attitudes toward the fictional brands with parodies in *The Simpsons*.

Attitudes toward Defictionalized Brands

The defictionalized brands refer to “fictional brands that begin in the virtual world and that become defictionalized and appear in the real-world” (Barnes & Chrysochoidis, 2010, p. 234). The concept of a defictionalized brand is consistent with the concept of a HyperReal fictional brand proposed by Muzellec, Lynn, and Lambkin (2012) as the brand exists in both a fictional environment and in the real world. Put simply, defictionalized brands or HyperReal fictional brands can be bought, purchased, or engaged in the real world marketplace. Such defictionalized or HyperReal fictional brands are mostly inspired by movies or TV shows (Muzellec et al., 2012). For example, The Bubba Gump Shrimp Co., a chain seafood restaurant, comes from the movie *Forrest Gump* (Muzellec et al., 2012). Duff Beer, one fictional brand in *The Simpsons*, can be purchased on Amazon.com. The brand is a novelty energy drink in the U.S. and Mexico (Barnes & Chrysochoidis, 2010). However, not all fictional brands can be defictionalized. There are two main factors that contribute to defictionalizing a fictional brand. First, the brand originates from a popular film/show/game, which is accepted and liked by audiences. Second, audiences have positive beliefs that they are likely to purchase the products (Barnes & Chrysochoidis, 2010). Furthermore, when audiences have both positive beliefs and cognition toward the show, as well as positive behavioral intention toward the product, the fictional brand could be defictionalized.

Based on balance theory, individuals tend to maintain, “balance,” in their cognitive relationships (Heider, 1946; MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986). Heider argues relationships are balanced “if all three are positive in all respects or if two are negative and one positive,” which is reflected in the classic P-O-X model (Heider, 1946, p. 110; MacKenzie et al., 1986, p. 132). In terms of analyzing defictionalized brands, the audience (P) has positive beliefs toward the show (O), leading to their positive attitudes toward brands in the show (X). As previously stated, consumers tend to have intra-attitude consistency (Lantos, 2010). The three components in brand attitude are mutually consistent with each other and influence each other (Lantos, 2010). In terms of analyzing defictionalized brands, positive purchase intention (behavioral component) is consistent with positive beliefs (cognitive component) and feelings (affective component) toward the brands. Therefore, audiences should have positive attitudes toward the brand when the following is present: (a) the brand applies to defictionalized brands in *The Simpsons*; (b) audiences have positive beliefs toward the show; and (c)

audiences have positive purchase intention to buy the brand. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₄: Audiences have more positive than negative attitudes toward the defictionalized brands in *The Simpsons*.

Method

Content analysis is employed in this study. Based on the purpose of the study, the analysis contains two parts: fictional brands and audiences responses.

Sampling

For fictional brands, the researchers refer to the brands listed under the, “brand parodies,” section of *The Simpsons* [Wiki site](#). The site attracts *The Simpsons*’ fans, who continuously update the site. The Wiki site offers retrievable, archived content and a comprehensive database of *The Simpsons* information. This resource provides an extensive list of all the brands parodied in the show. All brand information was retrieved by October 31, 2014.

For audiences’ responses to fictional brands, the researchers refer to Twitter as the platform where brand attitudes are expressed. The reason for including Twitter, a social media platform, in the study is because it has 271 million active users per month (Twitter, 2014); which means Twitter has become one of the largest social media communities in the world. Twitter has also become one of the most commonly used tools for people to communicate with others. All users can hashtag keywords, which tags terms for retrievable searches, enabling researchers to keep track of users’ online information. For fictional brands, the unit of analysis was each brand. For audiences’ responses, the unit of analysis was each tweet. All relevant tweets were collected by October 31, 2014.

Coding Procedure and Intercoder Reliability

For fictional brands, the researchers code all the brands on the list provided by *The Simpsons* Wiki in the, “brand parodies,” section. There are 96 fictional brands with parodies provided. For audiences’ responses, the coders first use, “#brand name,” to search all fictional brands on the brand list via Twitter’s official search engine and Topsy.com—a Twitter-certified social search engine. Then, the coders code all tweets containing that specific brand name. There are two coders. The two coders code 15% of all items together. Using Cohen’s *kappa* analysis, the overall intercoder reliability is .881, indicating two coders have substantial agreement on measured variables (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Measured Variables

Imitation. On *The Simpsons* Wiki list, all brand parodies come with an image clipped from the original episode. The coders use these images to determine whether it is a feature imitation or theme imitation. If it is a feature imitation, the numerical assignment of 1 is applied. If it is a theme imitation, the numerical assignment of 2 is applied. For imitation variable, the intercoder reliability is 1.0, indicating high agreement on the imitation variable.

Connotation. On *The Simpsons* Wiki list, all brand parodies come with hyperlinks. After clicking on the hyperlink, there is a description about how and when this

brand appears in the episode. If the description is negative, the numerical assignment of 1 is applied. If it is positive, the numerical assignment of 2 is applied. If it is neutral, the numerical assignment of 3 is applied. For the coding schema, “negative” refers to the description explicitly depicting the negative details of the brand. For example, for “Sprawl-Mart” *The Simpsons* Wiki site depicted “Sprawl-Mart” as a terrible place to work. A description example is, “It literally treats its employees like slaves...” (*The Simpsons* Wiki Site). In this case, this brand parody is coded as negative. “Positive” refers to the description explicitly depicting the positive details of the brand. For example, “Duff Beer” is described as “Duff Beer is the most popular brand of beer in Springfield. It is Homer Simpson's favorite drink...” (*The Simpsons* Wiki Site) In this case, the statement is coded as positive. “Neutral” refers to a description with both negative and positive details provided on the *The Simpsons* Wiki site’s “brand parodies” section. For the connotation variable, the intercoder reliability was .710.

Attitudes toward Fictional Brands. The current study uses NET method to code attitude toward the fictional brands (Van Cuilenburg, Kleinnijenhuis, & De Ridder, 1988). This method is a textual analysis method and has been used to analyze content on varying platforms. This method is employed to focus on, “core phrases,” to measure the valence of audiences’ responses (Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner, & de Ridder, 2011). A core phrase refers to the subject, predicate, and object of a statement on behalf of fictional brands. The researchers utilize NET method to analyze the valence of the expressed attitudes by those tweeting about fictional brands. The positive affective valence refers to the linkage of the new brand with the existing brand. For existing brands, subjective expressions like good, impressive, essential, etc. are factored. For example, if one tweet is, “#Mapple store, it’s a fun place,” then, the core phrase is, “Mapple store is a fun place.” According to dictionary.com, “fun,” means enjoyment or playfulness; whereby, the researchers can reasonably assume a positive attitude is expressed for the, “Mapple Store.” Therefore, this tweet is coded as, “positive.”

On the other hand, the negative valence refers to the linkage of the parodied brand with the existing brand, with subjective expressions like bad, unimpressive, nonessential, etc. For example, if one tweet is, “#Sprawl-Mart, terrible place,” then, the core phrase was, “Sprawl-Mart is a terrible place.” Therefore, this tweet is coded as a, “negative,” attitude toward, “Sprawl-Mart.” If there is no affective description for the brand, then it is coded as, “neutral.” For attitudes toward fictional brands with parodies, the intercoder reliability was .719.

Attitudes toward Defictionalized Brands. The coders select tweets, which talk about real products based on two criteria. First, if tweets have a photo of a real product it is selected. For example, if one tweet is, “#Krusty Burger is amazing,” with a photo of the user holding a Krusty burger, then this tweet qualifies. Second, if tweets explicitly express users’ consumption of the products, it is selected. For example, if the tweet states, “I’m eating Krusty burger at Orlando, it tastes good!” then this tweet qualifies. If the tweet is written as, “#Krusty Burger in *The Simpsons* looks terrible,” and the tweet does not have a picture of the real product, or fails to show any evidence that this user is consuming the real burger, then this tweet is disqualified.

In terms of analyzing affective valence, the same NET method is applied. For attitude toward defictionalized brands, the intercoder reliability was .795.

Results

The present study analyzes 96 brands with parodies in *The Simpsons*. A total of 406 relative and retrievable tweets posted before October 31, 2014 are analyzed. Each hypothesis focuses on comparing the proportions of variables in one theoretical concept. Thus, a series of non-parametric binomial tests are conducted.

Table 1: *Non-parametric Binomial Test Results*

Variables		N	Proportion	Sig
Imitation	Feature Imitation	63	66	.003
	Theme Imitation	33	34	
Connotation	Positive	1	4	.000
	Negative	26	96	
Attitude toward fictional brands	Positive	77	61	.016
	Negative	49	39	
Attitude toward defictionalized brands	Positive	260	97	.000
	Negative	9	3	

H1 examines the use of feature and theme imitation among the fictional brands with parodies. According to the binomial tests, the proportion of feature imitation is 66% ($N = 63$) and the proportion of theme imitation is 34% ($N = 33$). The p value is .003, which is less than .05, indicating that the usage of feature imitation is significantly greater than the usage of theme imitation. Therefore, H1 is supported.

H2 explores the connotation in the fictional brands with parodies. Of all the fictional brands with parodies, there are 27 brand parodies that contain either negative or positive connotations. Based on the test, the proportion containing negative connotations in fictional brands with parodies is 96% ($N = 26$), and the proportion containing positive connotations is 4% ($N = 1$). The p value is .000, which is less than .05, indicating that brands with negative connotations are significantly greater than brands with positive connotations. Therefore, H2 is supported.

H3 explores the valence of audiences' attitudes toward fictional brands with parodies. A total of 18 fictional brands are found from keywords on Twitter. All 132 tweets about these 18 fictional brands are analyzed. Of all 132 tweets, there are 126 tweets that explicitly express users' positive and negative attitudes. All 18 brands considered in this study have multiple tweets. For the purposes of this study, tweets are only analyzed if they associate, express, or describe one brand. According to the test results, the proportion of positive attitude toward fictional brands in *The Simpsons* is 61% ($N = 77$), and the proportion of negative attitude is 39% ($N = 49$). The p value is .016, which is less than .05, indicating that audiences have

significantly more positive attitudes toward fictional brands than negative attitudes. Therefore, H3 is not supported.

H4 examines the valence of audiences' attitudes toward defictionalized brands in *The Simpsons*. A total of eight defictionalized brands are found from keywords on Twitter. For the purposes of this study, tweets are only analyzed if they associate, express, or describe one brand. All 274 tweets about these eight defictionalized brands are analyzed. Of all 274 tweets, there are 269 tweets that explicitly express users' positive and negative attitudes. All eight brands considered in this study have multiple tweets. Based on the test results, the proportion of positive attitudes is 97% ($N = 260$), and the proportion of negative attitudes is 3% ($N = 9$). The p value is .000, which is less than .05, showing that audiences have significantly more positive attitudes toward the defictionalized brands than negative attitudes. Therefore, H4 is supported.

Table 2: *Tweets of Fictional brands with Parodies Dispersion Table*

Brand Names	N	Percent	Median
Abosolut Krusty	9	6.8%	2.00
Barely Regal Magazine	1	.75%	2.00
Duff Beer	2	1.5%	2.00
Blocko Store	5	3.8%	2.00
Blockoland	8	6.0%	2.00
Blood bath & beyond gun shop	2	1.5%	1.00
Diz-nee-land	4	3.0%	2.00
Funtendo Zii	9	6.8%	2.00
Kentucky Fried Panda	9	6.8%	1.00
Krusty Burger	1	.75%	2.00
Lard Lad	3	2.2%	1.00
Mapple Store	15	11.3%	2.00
Sprawl-Mart	32	24.2%	1.00
Super star Celebrity Microphone	1	.75%	1.00
Wall E. Weasel's	10	7.5%	2.00
Victor's Secret	10	7.5%	2.00
World of Krust Craft	1	.75%	1.00
Lamborgotti	10	7.5%	2.00
Total N	132		

Table 3: *Tweets of Defictionalized brands Dispersion Table*

Brand Names	N	Percent	Median
Abosolut Krusty	1	.36%	2.00
Buzz Cola	65	23.7%	2.00
Blocko Store	3	1.1%	2.00
Krusty Burger	72	26%	2.00
Lard Lad	62	22.6%	2.00
Duff Beer	69	25.1%	2.00
Kentucky Fried Panda	1	.36%	2.00
World of Krust Craft	1	.36%	2.00
Total N	274		

Discussion

By conducting a case study on brand parodies in *The Simpsons*, this research examines imitation and connotation, as well as audiences' attitudes toward fictional and defictionalized brands in *The Simpsons*. The results reveal that feature imitation is applied more frequently than theme imitation for brand parodies, and brand parodies contain more negative connotations than positive connotations. Furthermore, audiences have more positive attitudes than negative attitudes toward both fictional and defictionalized brands in *The Simpsons*. Based on these findings, the researchers present potentially significant theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

One notable result of this study is that audiences have significantly more positive than negative attitudes toward fictional brands in *The Simpsons*. This result is an opposite outcome from the hypothesis. Two explanations may include considerations of audience expressions on social media and the functions of brand parodies, which include serious attacks and playful wit. The first consideration focuses on audiences who express critical and negative attitudes toward real brands on social media by referring to fictional brands that parody the brand under ridicule. In other words, audiences are associating fictional brands with existing brands and are voicing their attitudes about real brands by reacting to fictional brands. For example, "Mapple Store," is the brand parody for, "Apple Store." Meanwhile, *The Simpsons* is sponsored by Microsoft (Barnett, 2010). Therefore, "Mapple Store," may have a rather negative brand connotation from the perspective of the writers of the show, as Microsoft and Apple are competitive brands. However, on Twitter, audiences expressed more positive than negative attitudes toward, "Mapple Store," which might reflect their real attitudes toward, "Apple Store." On the other hand, "Sprawl-Mart," a brand parody for, "Wal-Mart," also has a negative connotation in *The Simpsons*. Unlike, "Mapple Store," the audiences have more negative than positive attitudes toward, "Sprawl-Mart," which might indicate their existing attitudes toward "Wal-Mart." Therefore, audiences' prior brand attitudes play an important role in their attitudes toward fictional brands in *The Simpsons*. Such prior brand attitude cannot be easily changed because it is formed by brand beliefs, feelings, and actual purchase

experience (Awa & Nwuche, 2010). Based on information processing and persuasion theory, when encountering a new message, individuals tend to retrieve prior knowledge and experiences from their memory. Such prior beliefs and experiences represent a, “highly valid, trustworthy source of information,” for individuals (Wood, Kallgren, & Preisler, 1985, p. 74). Individuals cannot be easily persuaded by a new message because they perceive their prior knowledge as a highly credible information source. Hence, applying this theory to the current study suggests audiences tend not to accept the negative connotation delivered by brand parodies in *The Simpsons* when those negative messages are inconsistent with their prior knowledge. Therefore, negative connotations of brand parodies might not necessarily influence audiences’ attitudes toward fictional brands.

Gary (2006) believes that *The Simpsons*’ logic of using television is opposite other television genres. According to Caughie (1990), television is considered an “interrupted or interruptible space, a space of continual intertextual collisions, and of lexical fragmentation and juxtaposition” (see Gary, 2006, p. 93). Animated programs that incorporate parodies, such as *The Simpsons*, take advantage of this system of television, attempting to utilize television against advertisers and cause the collisions of intertextual, cultural and societal meanings of the advertisers or brands (Gary, 2006). Also, Gary (2006) proposes that the interaction between the entertainment show and the public sphere is actually a way of communicating the values of the show. For example, the negative connotation of, “Sprawl-Mart,” in *The Simpsons* reflects the show’s negative attitude toward Wal-Mart. When using brand parodies, negative connotations are often attached to existing brands, which is helpful to achieve desired satire effects. However, in terms of the public sphere, such negative connotations might not persuade audiences to change their perceptions toward existing brands because, if audiences’ prior brand beliefs are not consistent with the messages delivered by brand parodies, audiences might not change their brand attitudes toward existing brands (Wood et al., 1985). Hence, if producers and writers intend to incorporate brand parody, they may benefit from careful planning, caution, and tact.

Moreover, there is another potential explanation stemming from the functions of brand parodies. Brand parodies use disparaging humor to serve two functions: serious attack and playful wit (Bergh et al., 2011). If brand parodies serve the purpose of serious attacks, then the existing brands become the targets of such brand parodies; whereby, audiences expect the existing brands to be attacked or harmed (Bergh et al., 2011). If the use of brand parodies is to achieve playful wit, then such brand parodies would pay homage to the existing brands, because the humor in brand parodies serves to create a delightful emotional connection with the existing brands. It is important to note that audiences tend to have rather positive attitudes toward this kind of brand parody (Bergh et al., 2011). This study considers how audiences might perceive brand parodies in *The Simpsons* as playful wit for the existing brand because the show is positioned as an adult animated sitcom. Based on the theoretical framework and current study, the researchers can logically assume audiences enjoy the pleasant brand association, explaining why audiences have more positive than negative attitudes toward fictional brands in *The Simpsons*.

The results also show that feature imitation is used more frequently than theme imitation for brand parodies. As noted previously, feature imitation could be perceived as a more straightforward method to achieve brand parody. Therefore, when considering adopting parody as a brand strategy, using feature imitation is potentially more effective for delivering outrageous, exaggerated, or altered brand information to audiences by attacking existing brands in a direct manner.

Finally, this study presents evidence that audiences have significantly more positive than negative attitudes toward defictionalized brands. This significant finding is in line with balance theory and intra-attitude consistency. For future considerations, researchers may find

fruitful investigations in audiences' positive perceptions toward *The Simpsons* and audiences' positive purchase intentions, as they may generate positive attitudes toward defictionalized brands in the show (Barnes & Chrysochoidis, 2010). The current study's findings are consistent with the model of brand defictionalization proposed by Barnes (2010). According to the model, media is one of the three major issues that influence consumers' attitudes toward defictionalized brands. If audiences have positive perception toward a film, enjoy the film, and accept the content of the film, then audiences may tend to have positive brand attitudes toward defictionalized brands in the film. The current study's results support this behavioral and attitudinal concept demonstrated in the model of brand defictionalization.

This significant finding indicates that popular culture can exert great impact on marketing strategies. If one show is widely accepted and liked by the public, then the fictional brands in that show are potentially of great value. If those fictional brands are defictionalized then the public may have positive attitudes toward them and potentially purchase those products. This may lead to increased economic profits, consistent with reverse product placement marketing phenomena (Muzellec et al., 2012). According to Edery (2006), reversed product placement is defined as "creating a fictional brand in a fictional environment and then placing it into the real world" (Muzellec et al., 2012, p. 819). Only when the HyperReal brands are tangible in the real marketplace can the economic value of the brands be realized. As a result, popular television shows or films serve as salient vehicles for adopting defictionalizing brand marketing strategies.

Limitations and Future Considerations

The current study employs content analysis as the method to examine the hypotheses presented. Content analysis provides a direct, descriptive analysis of the variables, but it cannot explicate the thoughts and perceptions of audiences. Therefore, in future studies, survey method is suggested to explore more in depth how audiences feel, perceive, and evaluate both fictional and defictionalized brands.

Survey method included in an investigation that addresses feelings, ideas, reflections, perceptions, sensitivities, and other intangible expressions by respondents, might better define the universe in which brand parodies are viewed and internalized by audiences. For example, Muzellec, Kanitz and Lynn (2013) used survey to examine individuals' (a) perceived service quality; (b) attitude toward different television shows; (c) identification with the fictional service brands; (d) attitude toward the fictional service brand; and (e) their purchase intention of the fictional service brands, providing solid foundation of exploring an in-depth relationship between consumers' attitudinal influences on their purchase intention of fictional brands. Therefore, a future study employing the survey method may better determine whether attitudes toward brands with parodies serve as a surrogate of existing brands. In other words, researchers may factor whether a percentage of negative responses about, "Sprawl-Mart," for example, function as a mirrored percentage of negativity toward Wal-Mart. If so, parodies may provide useful heuristics for existing brands without having to directly test existing brands. Moreover, if researchers or businesses intend to explore multiple avenues for testing audiences' attitudes, they may test audiences' attitudes toward existing brands and brand parodies to generate valuable data sets for insightful comparisons.

The current study uses NET analysis to investigate audiences' attitudes. Willemsen et al. (2011) stated that NET analysis might not have high accuracy because it is based on coders' subjective judgment. Although the intercoder reliability for both fictional and defictionalized brands in the current study are relatively high, with Cohen's Kappa of .719 and .795 respectively, this analysis still needs to be further developed. In future studies, it is suggested

that different analysis methods are used to examine valence of attitudes to increase the measure of accuracy. Even though the current study attempts to investigate all retrievable tweets posted before October 31, 2014, the sample size is relatively small; future studies should seek to incorporate, more samples from different social media platforms.

Lastly, the current study only focuses on brand parodies in *The Simpsons*, which is an adult animated sitcom. *The Simpsons* tends to, “incorporate queer characters and queer themes” (Pinsky, 2001, p. 2), which is meant to explain the playfulness of the show. The themes presented in the show might influence the use of parody strategy and the connotations of brands showcased. Therefore, the researchers suggest more shows of different genres are evaluated to add to the initial evaluation presented herein.

Conclusion

In one episode of *The Simpsons*, Sideshow Bob, a common character in the show, attempts to use a nuclear bomb to destroy all televisions in Springfield (the show’s main plot setting). The dialogue offered a notable point by the character, Krusty, by stating, “Would it really be worth living in a world without television? I think the survivors would envy the dead” (Delaney, 2007). It is possible many people are inclined to agree with Krusty that a world is less desirable without television. It is even harder to “imagine a world without popular culture” (Delaney, 2007, p. 1). Popular television shows are the main source of forming popular culture (Delaney, 2007). *The Simpsons* is representative of such popular culture that originates from popular television shows. Through a case study of brand parodies in *The Simpsons*, the current research examines the attributes and connotations of *The Simpsons’* fictional brands, as well as audiences’ affective responses toward *The Simpsons’* fictional and defictionalized brands. The study adds a new dimension to the research exploring *The Simpsons* phenomenon, providing a better understanding of the influence of media within popular culture.

References

- Assael, H. (1998). *Consumer behavior and marketing action*. Cincinnati, OH: South-Western College Publishing.
- Awa, H. O., & Nwuche, C. A. (2010). Cognitive consistency in purchase behavior: Theoretical & empirical analyses. *International Journal of Psychological Studies*, 2(1), 44-54. [CrossRef](#)
- Barnes, S. J., & Chryssochoidis, G. (2010). From fiction to fact: Exploring the defictionalization of brands in media. In: *2010 AMA Educators’ Proceedings ‘Enhancing Knowledge Development in Marketing’*, 2010-08-01, Boston. pp. 230-239.
- Barnett, E. (2010). Microsoft's bing sponsors ‘The Simpsons’. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/microsoft/7422320/Microsofts-Bing-sponsors-The-Simpsons.html> [last accessed on the 24th May, 2016]
- Bergh, B. V., Lee, M., Quilliam, E. T., & Hove, T. (2011). The multidimensional nature and brand impact of user-generated ad parodies in social media. *International Journal of Advertising*, 30(1), 103-131. [CrossRef](#)
- Bruce, V. (1981). Visual and semantic effects in a serial word classification task. *Current Psychological Research*, 1(3-4), 153-161.

- Deerwester, J. (2014). Nielsen ratings: 'Simpsons' marathon, Emmy Awards. Retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/2014/09/03/nielsen-chatter-week-ending-08-31/15023061/> [last accessed on the 24th May, 2016]
- Delaney, T. (2007). Pop Culture: An overview. Retrieved from: https://philosophynow.org/issues/64/Pop_Culture_An_Overview [last accessed on the 24th May, 2016]
- Dogan, S. L., & Lemley, M. A. (2013). Parody as Brand. *UC Davis Law Review*, 47, 473-969.
- Ederly, D. (2006). Reverse product placement in virtual worlds. *Harvard Business Review*, 84(12), 24-24.
- Finch, A. C. (1996). When imitation is the sincerest form of flattery: Private label products and the role of intention in determining trade dress infringement. *University of Chicago Law Review*, 63(3), 1243-1276
- Gary, J. (2006). *Watching the Simpsons: tv, parody and intertextuality*. New York: Routledge .
- Heider, F. (1946). Attitudes and cognitive organization. *The Journal of Psychology*, 21(1), 107-112.
- Henry, M. (2007). "Don't ask me, I'm just a girl": Feminism, female identity, and 'The Simpsons'. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 40(2), 272-303.
- Holbert, R. L. (2005). A typology for the study of entertainment television and politics. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49(3), 436-453. [CrossRef](#)
- Howard, M. (2014). Satire, parody, or spoof: Types of humorous writing. [Lesson Transcript] Retrieved from <http://study.com/academy/lesson/satire-parody-or-spoof-types-of-humorous-writing.html> [last accessed on the 24th May, 2016]
- IMDb. (2014). The Simpsons. Retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096697/awards> [last accessed on the 24th May, 2016]
- Irwin, W., Conard, M. T., & Skoble, A. J. (eds.) (2013). *The Simpsons and Philosophy: The D'oh! of Homer* (Vol. 2) Chicago and La Salle: Open Court.
- Jean, S. (2011). Brand parody: a communication strategy to attack a competitor. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 28(1), 19-26. [CrossRef](#)
- Job, R., Rumiati, R., & Lotto, L. (1992). The picture superiority effect in categorization: visual or semantic? *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 18(5), 1019-1028. [CrossRef](#)
- Landis, J. R., & Koch, G. G. (1977). The measurement of observer agreement for categorical data. *Biometrics*, 159-174.
- Lantos, G. P. (2010). *Consumer behavior in action: Real-life applications for marketing managers*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe
- Lascala, M. (2014). How many seasons of "The Simpsons" are there? Just know the show has been on forever. Retrieved from <http://www.bustle.com/articles/41530-how-many-seasons-of-the-simpsons-are-there-just-know-the-show-has-been-on-for-ever> [last accessed on the 24th May, 2016]
- Lee, Y. H., & Mason, C. (1999). Responses to information incongruity in advertising: The role of expectancy, relevancy, and humor. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 26(2), 156-169. [CrossRef](#)
- MacKenzie, S. B., Lutz, R. J., & Belch, G. E. (1986). The role of attitude toward the ad as a mediator of advertising effectiveness: A Test of Competing Explanations. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 23(2), 130-143. [CrossRef](#)
- McLeod, S. (2014). Attitudes and behavior. Retrieved from: <http://www.simplypsychology.org/attitudes.html> [last accessed on the 24th May, 2016]

- Milne, E. (2013). Parody: Affective registers, amateur aesthetics and intellectual property. *Cultural Studies Review*, 19(1), 193-215. [CrossRef](#)
- Muzellec, L., Lynn, T., & Lambkin, M. (2012). Branding in fictional and virtual environments: Introducing a new conceptual domain and research agenda. *European Journal of Marketing*, 46(6), 811-826. [CrossRef](#)
- Muzellec, L., Kanitz, C., & Lynn, T. (2013). Fancy a coffee with Friends in ‘Central Perk’? Reverse product placement, fictional brands and purchase intention. *International Journal of Advertising*, 32(3), 399-417. [CrossRef](#)
- Petty, R. D. (2009). Brand parody products: Is the harm worth the howl? *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 26(2), 64-65. [CrossRef](#)
- Petty, R. D. (2012). Using the law to protect the brand on social media sites: A three “M” s framework for marketing managers. *Management Research Review*, 35(9), 758-769. [CrossRef](#)
- Pinsky, M. I. (2001). *The Gospel according to the Simpsons: The spiritual life of the world's most animated family*. Westminster: John Knox Press.
- Rhodes, C. (2001). D’oh. The Simpsons, popular culture, and the organizational carnival. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 10(4), 374-383. [CrossRef](#)
- Scott, W. A. (1959). Cognitive consistency, response reinforcement, and attitude change. *Sociometry*, 22(3), 219-229
- Shearer, R., & Gould, S. (2000). The 1919 and 1930 versions of Marcel Duchamp's series of images of the Mona Lisa with a moustache and beard, entitled L.H.O.O.Q., prove a source of confusion. Retrieved from: <http://www.duchamp.org/symposium/article1letter.html> [last accessed on the 24th May, 2016]
- SimpsonsWiki. (2014). Sprawl-Mart, from <http://simpsons.wikia.com/wiki/Sprawl-Mart> [last accessed on the 24th May, 2016]
- Snierson, D. (2014). 'The Simpsons': FXX to air every episode in 12-day marathon. Retrieved from <http://insidetv.ew.com/2014/04/09/fxx-simpsons-marathon/> [last accessed on the 24th May, 2016]
- Twitter. (2014). About. Retrieved from <https://about.twitter.com/company> [last accessed on the 24th May, 2016]
- Van Cuilenburg, J. J., Kleinnijenhuis, J., & De Ridder, J. A. (1988). *Artificial intelligence and content analysis. Problems of and strategies for computer text analysis. Quality and Quantity*, 22(1), 65-97. [CrossRef](#)
- Van Horen, F., & Pieters, R. (2012). Consumer evaluation of copycat brands: The effect of imitation type. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 29(3), 246-255. [CrossRef](#)
- White, K. M., & Holman, M. (2011). Pop culture, politics, and America's favorite animated family: Partisan bias in ‘The Simpsons’? *Studies in Popular Culture* 34(1), 87-107.
- Willemsen, L. M., Neijens, P. C., Bronner, F., & de Ridder, J. A. (2011). “Highly recommended!” The content characteristics and perceived usefulness of online consumer reviews. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17(1), 19-38. [CrossRef](#)
- Wood, W., Kallgren, C. A., & Preisler, R. M. (1985). Access to attitude-relevant information in memory as a determinant of persuasion: The role of message attributes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 21(1), 73-85. [CrossRef](#)
- Woodcock, P. (2008). Gender, politicians and public health: using ‘The Simpsons’ to teach politics. *European Political Science*, 7(2), 153-164. [CrossRef](#)
- Zinkhan, G. M., & Johnson, M. (1994). From the Editor: The use of parody in advertising, Editorial, *Journal of Advertising* 23(3), III-VIII.

Questioning the ethics of John Bohannon's hoaxes and stings in the context of science publishing

KOME – An International Journal of Pure
Communication Inquiry
Volume 4 Issue 1, p. 84-88.
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and Permission:
kome@komejournal.com
Published by the Hungarian Communication
Studies Association
DOI: 10.17646/KOME.2016.16

Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva¹ and Aceil Al-Khatib²

¹ Retired researcher, Japan

² Jordan University of Science and Technology, Jordan

In recent years, investigative journalism has been widely used by the media to obtain news of importance to the public such as headlines about exposing corruption, revealing wrongdoers, and shedding light on hidden actions (Aucoin, 2014). In their attempts to deeply research and reveal hidden news to the public, journalists may employ tactics used by law enforcement authorities such as undercover journalism or sting operations (Kroeger, 2012). For the purpose of this paper we define sting operations “as any effort by the authorities to encourage wrongdoing, with the intention of punishing the offenses that result” (Hay, 2005). While some may regard the use of sting operations by journalists to be a great and powerful tool in exposing wrongdoers, many disagree because it “would send the wrong message to young reporters everywhere that it was all right to lie to get a story, to pretend to be not a reporter but some one you were not” (Goldstein, 2012). Although sting operations are most commonly used by law enforcement authorities, they are also used by private and public organization and even in divorce cases (Hay, 2005), and more recently, in science publishing. In this opinion paper we describe recent sting operations in science publishing and explain the potential breach of ethics that may be associated with the deception employed in running such operations.

In 2013, Dr. John Bohannon, an investigative journalist, made headlines with a paper published in *Science* (Bohannon, 2013) based on a sting that involved the submission of hundreds of false manuscripts with purposefully manipulated and/or fabricated data, false authors and false institutions. As Bohannon himself states, as one example: “Ocorrafoo Cobange does not exist, nor does the Wasee Institute of Medicine.” All manuscripts were made with false declarations upon submission regarding originality, and examination of the emails revealed misleading statements until the manuscript was either accepted, or rejected. All of these submissions were made with a single intention: to show the failure of peer review in so-called “predatory” open access (POA) journals. Bohannon’s widely acclaimed results

Address for Correspondence: Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva, email: jaimetex[at]yahoo.com, P. O. Box 7, Miki-cho post office, Ikenobe 3011-2, Kagawa-ken, 761-0799

Article received on the 1st December, 2015. Article accepted on the 21st February, 2016.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

fortified the notion that the open access movement has become corrupted to some extent as a result of lax, false or non-existent peer review. Incidentally, this is also a problem in traditional publishers (Teixeira da Silva and Dobránszki, 2015). Despite Bohannon's findings, a basal premise of the Bohannon "sting" operation was widely ignored, and rarely acknowledged, namely that some or all of the requirements for submission of a manuscript to these POA journals were not met, and were either false or non-existent. For example, one of the clauses of the guidelines for submission to *Public Health Research* (PHR), a journal published by Scientific & Academic Publishing, and a journal stung by Bohannon, is that "The submission has not been previously published, nor is it before another journal for consideration" (PHR, 2015). This core publishing ethics clause was ignored by Bohannon in this and most likely all of the several hundreds of journals he "spoofed".

Shocked by this glaring violation of the guidelines of submission of manuscripts to scholarly journals, one would have expected entities involved in research communications, as well as the OA community, to issue a clear expression of concern, opinion or guidelines regarding the ethics of sting operations in scholarly publications. Sadly, this has not been the case, even almost more than three years after the first Bohannon "sting". Review upon review of Bohannon's sting primarily piled praise (e.g., OASPA 2013a), and most criticism has been lukewarm (e.g., as "dubious" by Eve in Buckland et al., 2013, p. 2), subtle (e.g., as "an iota of good" by Gardy in Buckland et al., 2013; p. 4), or restricted almost entirely to the lack of a suitable control group (e.g., as "a significant own goal" by *Science*, as referred to by Steel in Buckland et al., 2013, p. 3), or critical of a misguided "sting" (e.g., as "the problem is that he didn't sting anywhere near all the journals desperately needing to be stung" by Salo in Buckland et al., 2013, p. 6). However, these and other papers have failed to call out or question the overriding gaps in publishing ethics in the Bohannon stings. Moreover, no apology or clarification was ever offered to the victims of this sting, namely the spoofed journals, their editors, or their publishers. Bohannon in essence wasted their time and human resources, and finally their patience in dealing with fake papers and fake submissions. In order for the reader to better appreciate the nature of the ethics of those who blatantly violate the ethics of the submission process in search of a higher morale, one need only imagine if a researcher (or regular scientist) had submitted the same false papers with false names, false emails and false institutional addresses to a journal published by a mainstream oligopolic publisher like Elsevier Ltd., Wiley-Blackwell, Taylor and Francis / Informa, or Springer-Nature (Larivière et al., 2015). It is not difficult to imagine that such an action would have merited severe punishment such as a publishing ban. Despite this, the most prolific and overwhelmingly supportive opinion that has resulted from Bohannon's sting has been a praise of his actions and a severe criticism of the POA journals he stung (e.g., OASPA 2013a).

Once again, and more recently, another sting has come under additional scrutiny. As before, using a masqueraded name, a false institution and an email address that appeared to be valid, Bohannon et al. (2015) submitted a paper to the *International Archives of Medicine (IAM)* to apparently help a television reporter demonstrate "just how easy it is to turn bad science into the big headlines behind diet fads", proudly advertising that he "fooled millions into thinking chocolate helps weight loss" on the io9.com blog (Bohannon, 2015). In addition to most likely violating the guidelines of submission to *IAM*, Bohannon et al. used p-hacking, "which occurs when researchers collect or select data or statistical analyses until nonsignificant results become significant" (Head et al., 2015), with the objective of showing the beneficial effects of chocolate with a high content of cocoa on weight loss, as demonstrated by "significant" data, and it is for this reason that the paper was retracted (McCook, 2015; Oransky, 2015), as confirmed by the then editor-in-chief of *IAM*, Prof. Manuel Menendez.

Why then, if a similar false and deceptive methodology was used in both the *IAM* and *Science* papers, has the 2013 *Science* paper not been retracted, or, at minimum, why has an expression of concern not been issued, especially with clearly proven “flaws and weaknesses” (a comment by Steel in Buckland et al., 2013)? This lack of accountability by *Science* is stated by Crawford (2014) in his detailed critique of Bohannon’s 2013 *Science* paper: “*Science* has to take at least as much responsibility for the quality of this study as it does for, say, articles about arsenic-based life.”

The outcome of several stings has shown unequivocal results about false and imperfect peer review in POA journals leading to some positive ramifications such as stricter journal quality control by the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), which removed 114 journals titles from its listing, although the DOAJ also recognized the ethical flaws of the Bohannon sting: “There is one final point that DOAJ would like to make, one that we feel may have been overlooked by the majority. To carry out his exercise, as well as cooking up fake scientific papers and persistently pushing journals into accepting them, Bohannon also needed to create fake authors. We are wondering why he felt that the paper's authors had to have names hailing from the African continent?” Curiously, that document has “mysteriously” disappeared from the DOAJ public archives. Furthermore, the sting has evoked greater awareness and heightened discussion about the impact of POA journals on science publishing. There have even been more serious ramifications for those POA journals that were spoofed, for example, by OASPA (OASPA 2013b): “we are therefore reluctantly terminating the memberships of Hikari and Dove Medical Press. We have indicated that we will be willing to reconsider a membership application but not before 12 months have elapsed.” However, the method by which a sting is conducted and the publishing ethics that are violated in order to achieve an objective, or to make a statement, also needs to be focused, and rebuked where and when necessary. It does not seem right to hold scientists and regular authors to one set of publishing values, and to hold investigative journalists to a separate set of values. As far as the Bohannon “stings” or “hoaxes” go, not conforming to current professional standards and ethical conduct during the submission of a manuscript (Bastian, 2015; Haider and Åström, 2016) could set a dangerous precedent for copy-cat stings and hoaxes by those who believe that Bohannon’s actions were praiseworthy.

This is not to say that the use of stings is unjustified. Clearly, a sting operation can sometimes be the only tool to collect information or evidence on a matter of public interest, as was shown by a fairly recent sting that was orchestrated by undercover *Science* reporters. Those undercover reporters posed as graduate students investigating “corrupt publishing practices” by “paper selling agencies” which sell authorship for scientific articles (Hvistendahl, 2013) in China. Such an investigation, in our opinion, is justified, as it was perhaps the only tool – and a last resort – to shedding light on companies that provide brokered services to authors, and because the scientific community has a compelling interest in learning about such corrupt business practices supporting science publications. While sting operations can sometimes be the only way to present solid evidence on a topic of strong public interest, we believe that in scientific research and publications, such stings should be discouraged or at least a safeguarding policy should be implemented to protect the integrity of scientific research. This is because, under the claim of sting operations, fraudulent research and questionable practices can be maliciously used to advance the interests of private entities, or even violate the rights of any of those involved in scientific, academic and medical research.

Finally, a [PubPeer page](#) for open discussion on the Bohannon sting is now available.

References

- Aucoin, J. L. (2014) Investigative reporting. *Oxford Bibliographies Online* [CrossRef](#)
- Bastian, H. (2015) Tricked: the ethical slipperiness of hoaxes. <http://blogs.plos.org/absolutely-maybe/2015/05/31/tricked-the-ethical-slipperiness-of-hoaxes> (last accessed: 6 May, 2016)
- Bohannon, J. (2013) Who's afraid of peer review? *Science* 342 (6154): 60-65. [CrossRef](#)
- Bohannon, J. (2015) I fooled millions into thinking chocolate helps weight loss. Here's how. *Gizmodo* <http://io9.com/i-fooled-millions-into-thinking-chocolate-helps-weight-1707251800> (last accessed: 6 May, 2016)
- Bohannon, J., Koch, D., Himm P., Driehaus, A. (2015) Chocolate with high cocoa content as a weight-loss accelerator. *International Archives of Medicine* 8 (55), 8 pp (retracted). Archived at Wikimedia: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/39/Chocolate_with_high_Cocoa_content_as_a_weight-loss_accelerator.pdf (last accessed: 6 May, 2016)
- Buckland, A, Eve, M, Steel, G, Gardy, J, Salo, D. (2013). On the mark? Responses to a sting. *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication* 2(1): eP1116. [CrossRef](#)
- Crawford, W. (2014). Ethics and access 2: the so-called sting. *Cites & Insights* 14(5): 1-20.
- Goldstein, T. (2012). The brief against deception in reporting. *Journal of Magazine & New Media Research* 13(1): 1-3.
- Haider, J. and Åström, F. (2016). Dimensions of trust in scholarly communication: Problematizing peer review in the aftermath of John Bohannon's "Sting" in Science. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*. [CrossRef](#)
- Hay, B. (2005) Sting operations, undercover agents, and entrapment. *Missouri Law Review* 70(2): 387-431.
- Head, M. L., Holman, L., Lanfear, R., Kahn, A. T., & Jennions, M. D. (2015) The extent and consequences of p-hacking in science. *PLoS Biology* 13(3), e1002106. [CrossRef](#)
- Hvistendahl, M. (2013) China's publication bazaar. *Science* 342(6162):1035-1039. [CrossRef](#)
- Kroeger B. (2012) Why surreptitiousness works. *Journal of Magazine & New Media Research* 13(1): 1-3.
- Larivière V, Haustein S, Mongeon P (2015) The oligopoly of academic publishers in the digital era. *PLoS ONE* 10(6): e0127502. [CrossRef](#)
- McCook, A. (2015) Chocolate-diet study publisher claims paper was actually rejected, only live "for some hours." Email, however, says... *Retraction Watch* [blog] <http://retractionwatch.com/2015/05/28/chocolate-diet-study-publisher-claims-paper-was-actually-rejected-only-live-for-some-hours-email-however-says/> (last accessed: 6 May, 2016)
- OASPA (Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association) (2013a) OASPA's response to the recent article in Science entitled "Who's Afraid of Peer Review?" <http://oaspa.org/response-to-the-recent-article-in-science/> (last accessed: 6 May, 2016)
- OASPA (2013b) OASPA's second statement following the article in Science entitled "Who's

Afraid of Peer Review?” <http://oaspa.org/oaspa-second-statement-following-the-article-in-science-entitled-whos-afraid-of-peer-review/> (last accessed: 6 May, 2016)

Oransky, I. (2015) Should the chocolate-diet sting study be retracted? And why the coverage doesn't surprise a news watchdog. *Retraction Watch* [blog] <http://retractionwatch.com/2015/05/28/should-the-chocolate-diet-sting-study-be-retracted-and-why-the-coverage-doesnt-surprise-a-news-watchdog/> (last accessed: 6 May, 2016)

PHR (Public Health Research) Author guidelines. <http://www.sapub.org/journal/authorguidelines.aspx?journalid=1068> (last accessed: 6 May, 2016)

Teixeira da Silva JA, Dobránszki J. (2015) Problems with traditional science publishing and finding a wider niche for post-publication peer review. *Accountability in Research: Policies and Quality Assurance* 22(1): 22-40. [CrossRef](#)

Van Noorden, R. (2014) Publicly questioned papers more likely to be retracted. *Nature* [CrossRef](#)

Erratum

KOME – An International Journal of Pure
Communication Inquiry
Volume 4 Issue 1, p. 99.
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and Permission:
kome@komejournal.com
Published by the Hungarian Communication
Studies Association
DOI: 10.17646/KOME.2016.111

To: Jaime A. Teixeira da Silva and Aceil Al-Khatib (2016) Questioning the ethics of John Bohannon’s hoaxes and stings in the context of science publishing. *KOME – An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry*, 4 (1): 84-88 DOI: 10.17646/KOME.2016.16

The authors and the publisher would like to correct the reference ‘Van Noorden, R. (2014)’ that has been erroneously published in the original version of the article. This entry was not cited in the text, therefore, should not have been included in the list of references. The authors and the publisher regret this error.

Halim Rane, Jacqui Ewart, John Martinkus: Media Framing of the Muslim World. Conflicts, Crises and Contexts. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, ISBN: 9781137334817, p.216.

KOME – An International Journal of Pure
Communication Inquiry
Volume 4 Issue 1, p. 89-91.
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and Permission:
kome@komejournal.com
Published by the Hungarian Communication
Studies Association
DOI: 10.17646/KOME.2016.17

Lilla Vicsek

Corvinus University of Budapest, Institute of Sociology and Social Policy, Hungary

Portrayals of Muslim people proliferate in many media outlets in the non-Muslim world. Yet, as Halim Rane, Jacqui Ewart and John Martinkus; authors of the book *Media Framing of the Muslim World* argue, despite the number of news pieces dealing with this topic, the type of stories that tend to be told are rarely varied, but instead are restricted to a few kinds of interpretative packages or “frames” (Entman 1993). Despite the variety in cultures, societies, experiences, ethnicities of the people of the Muslim world, these distinctions are often neglected in the media. Muslims are associated in the media with terrorists, extremists, hostility toward the West, and asylum seekers.

The book gives a rich overview of the literature, drawing on a wealth of previous research on the topic, as well as presenting the authors’ own research from Australia while also detailing the experiences of one of the authors as a journalist in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the introduction, the authors introduce the main ideas of the book as well as the theoretical underpinnings (news values, framing, agenda-setting, orientalism). The later chapters of the book discuss the following topics: 1. information about the Muslim World, the issue of integration of Muslims in the West; 2. portrayal of the Muslim world in Western media; 3. how it was possible to do reporting in Iraq and Afghanistan and how that influenced the nature of the reporting; 4. Muslim asylum seekers in Western countries (including research results on how they are portrayed in the Australian media and how the Australian public views them); 5. the nature of coverage of terrorist suspects and what influences this coverage; 6. the role of social and mass media in the events of the Arab Spring; 7. freedom of expression in Islam and considering cases where the work of Western journalists/artists have triggered outcry from part of the Muslim world; 8. results of a media analysis and focus group research conducted by the authors of the book in Australia looking at the media portrayal and audience reactions a decade after the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001.

For the present reviewer, two main questions were relevant when assessing the book: 1. Looking at the theoretical relevance of the book: What from a theoretical perspective is new in this book? What is an important result for the discipline of communication? 2. About the empirical information: How does it add to the reader’s existing knowledge on the topics of the Muslim world and the media? Is there substantially new information? Something surprising?

Regarding question one, the book relies on the connections between media influence on the theoretical background of media framing and agenda-setting. These well-established approaches to media content and influence are emphasized, with the book favoring Entman’s

(1993) framing approach. Both framing and agenda setting are interpreted as theories showing that media is influencing audience opinions. Hardly any emphasis is placed on other media influence approaches in the book, some of which have questioned the assertions of framing and agenda setting. A more sophisticated theoretical background could have taken into account these debates on media effects within Media Studies, but could still have argued that in case of topics where most of the audience's information comes from the media, the media's role could be especially important. It is also relevant that some studies have pointed to the fact that just because we get all of our information from the media on a topic, it does not necessarily mean that the media has great power over us. For example, we can base our arguments on analogies from other topics that we are familiar with. Moreover, if we do not trust the media that is also another factor mitigating media influence. The last is mentioned in an empirical study in the book, along with some other mitigating factors, but it is not integrated into the theoretical background. In summary, the theoretical background does not seem to bring too much novelty to the field and is not nuanced enough in its approach. Ultimately, the theoretical background is not integrated into the analysis segments sufficiently to strengthen the sections.

To answer the second question, after reading the book I did not feel that I saw the issue in a fundamentally new light. Much of the main message of the book – that media often associates Muslims with extremists, terrorists, a culture intrinsically hostile toward the West, which is not representative of the “reality” – is not surprising. Still, there is a wealth of data in the book, some of which can be considered the main strengths of the book. For example, results from survey research projects conducted by the Pew Research Center (2013) are discussed in the book. Thirty-eight thousand Muslims were asked in 39 countries about their views on religion, non-Muslims, etc. Also, even if there is no big surprise in reading the book, there are some smaller surprises. I found the research results on Australia interesting, particularly since many of the readers would not be familiar with current socio-political climate. An analysis of the Australian media coverage of September 11th a decade later also hints at a possible shift in media portrayal, toward a less hostile media presentation. The audience analysis the authors conducted there, which touches upon the sensitivities of Muslim audience members is also interesting, although a great constraint is the very small sample size. Another part, which can potentially grab attention, is the experiences of one of the authors of the book as a journalist on the field. It shows how the violence in Iraq constrained the possibilities of showing certain types of stories, certain viewpoints as major media organizations had to operate from secured fortresses, and venturing outside of these fortresses was dangerous. The reader needs to take into account that the book was published in 2014, as a result the events since then have yet to be covered in the book.

It seems that the topic of gender and the Muslim world was not given enough attention in the book (it was mentioned that sometimes in the West the Muslim world is presented as oppressing women, but this theme was not really expanded upon within the book).

The presentation of research data could have been more reader friendly, with graphs, tables, etc., as after a while one can get a bit lost in the many survey results that are just discussed as part of the main text. (I looked at the Pew Research Center's (2013) original presentation of the results, and that is much more accessible to the reader, and has a lot of graphs, and instantly I was better able to understand their presentation than the same results as they are discussed in the book). Still, it is a great strength of the book is that it is a rich sourcebook: it summarizes a wide range of literature, providing a rich starting point for anyone interested in data related to this topic.

References

- Entman, R. (1993): Framing: Towards Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43 (4), 51-58. [CrossRef](#)
- Pew Research Center (2013): The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview/>, date accessed: 10. December, 2015.

Jeff Lewis: Media, Culture and Human Violence: From Savage Lovers to Violent Complexity. Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd., 2015, p. 287.

KOME – An International Journal of Pure
Communication Inquiry
Volume 4 Issue 1, p. 92-94.
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and Permission:
kome@komejournal.com
Published by the Hungarian Communication
Studies Association
DOI: 10.17646/KOME.2016.18

Juliana Cunha Costa Radek

Jacobs University Bremen, Germany, Universidade Federal de Bahia, Brazil, and CAPES Foundation, Ministry of Education of Brazil

The book *Media, Culture and Human Violence: From Savage Lovers to Violent Complexity*, released in 2015 by Jeff Lewis – a Professor and Co-director of the Human Security and Disasters Research Program at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University (RMIT) in Melbourne, Australia – is divided into nine parts, with an introduction followed by seven chapters and a conclusion. To begin with, *Media, Culture and Human Violence* contains some of the most difficult concepts to be defined within the Social Sciences and Humanities, since they carry different meanings and broad understanding. Nevertheless, the author interconnected these concepts proposing that media, as a convergence of social apparatus linked with cultural diversities of the human body, creates, shares and disputes meanings. The central inquiry of this publication is to demonstrate how the *Savage Lovers* had turned into *Violent Complexity* of contemporary through the rise of agricultural civilizations to the most recent advanced world societies. Lewis designed a magisterial, detailed and transdisciplinary analysis between these concepts, in a web of knowledge, in order to elucidate how culture and media (communication) play an important role in shaping the complexity of human violence.

Notwithstanding, the author presents the foundational basis of human nature through an evaluation of the evolutionary anthropologic standpoint of the two primate ancestors: the chimpanzees and the bonobo. While the former is a fundamentally aggressive and male-dominated species, the latter is cooperative and matriarchal; a representation of the *Savage Lovers* that evolved into the survivor human beings of the near-extinction event due to the apocalyptic environmental catastrophe in 74,000 years BC. In this way, these sparse groups and clans contributed to the territorial expansion and intergroup tensions and conflicts by migrating to new geographic regions as a survival strategy. This binary perspective – symbolized by the *noble savages*, who lived in the golden age of human history in peace and harmony with the nature, and by the *uncivilized individuals*, engaged in acts of interpersonal and intertribal violence – was applied by evolutionists to explain that human nature is intrinsically connected to the aggressive and benevolence of humanity's ancestors. Nevertheless, “we can't be defined as intrinsically good and bad, violent or cooperative, hateful or loving. We can be all of these and much more – but they are expressions of culture more than a determination of ‘human nature’” (p. 45-46).

Millennia later, the surviving humans of the near-extinction natural disaster and their descendants faced constant risks and shared collective anxieties as they were dealing with individual desires, resource competition, governance and planning issues, internal and external conflicts, etc. Under those circumstances, they were forced to experience remarkable changes in their technological, social and cultural practices, resulting in new forms of social organization among the *agrarian civilization* of sedentary human beings. Culturally modern, biologically and cognitively different from the archaic humans (*homo erectus*, *homo neanderthalensis*), the *homo sapiens* became self-conscious beings. Consequently, these hunter-gatherer-horticulturalist humans underwent an urbanization process, developed a hierarchical form of social relations, as well as experiencing a maturing self-consciousness, along with an improved symbolic culture and language system. In this book, symbolic and written languages are considered to be the primary forms of media communication, since “[...] humans are fundamentally communicational beings” (p. 6) “[...] we are all media beings” (p. 14).

The increase in population size was responsible for transforming the *Agrarian Civilization* into *Modern Urban Civilization*, which demanded labor specialization, administration, militarization, and surveillance by governance groups. As a result, the urbanization process was the key element in the development of power relations and the advent of violent hierarchies that controlled and managed human desires and pleasures. In this way, love turned into a central instrument for empowering social groups as it could organize them to fight for defense, cohesion and prosperity of their own communities. In that case, the feelings of emotional, material and political desires and affiliation of individuals to the group were regulated through social, religious and legal institutions. These institutions imposed systems that reproduced the legacy of certain social actors' roles in order to support the maintenance of the political and economic hierarchies of privilege and social advantage, consequently creating moral, political and economic authorities. In fact, the force of violent complexity began to rise in the context of cultural change of human consciousness.

The amplification of violent complexities was particularly based on the expansion of the Greek and Judeo-Christian cultural traditions, in which new forms of organizations were responsible for developing new forms of violence, notably militarism and sovereignty. The Western civilization values of the *Modern Era* supported the foundation of the *European Enlightenment* through the emergence of the print media, symbolic and knowledge systems that hold up structures of the violent hierarchical organizations in the complex social settlements. The rise of the political philosophies of liberalism and individualism, together with the middle classes rising, were essential to the expansion of the new economic and industrial systems. At the same time, these changes contributed to the reinforcement of social inequalities among the rich and the poor. Definitely, in the contemporary, “violent complexity became exercised through the expansion of electrical and digital media and consumer capitalism” (p. 169). The author argues that these tools turned into major forces that enhanced the social stratification, capitalist economic competition and violent hierarchies, likewise promoting pseudo congruence between the political state and public sphere. The monopoly of political violent complexities performed by Western authoritarian states has reached a global scale. Therefore, warfare, terrorism and social media political engagement are results of the clash among Western advanced societies and their governance, media and corporate systems against the citizens and cultures of excluded societies in a *Just War*. Lastly, the author illustrated that: “[...] the amplification of desire that marks civilization progress has largely been exercised through an unceasing human investment in

military and armaments. The advanced world, in fact, maintains the most destructive and powerful military arsenal that has ever been assembled in human history” (p. 221-222). According to Lewis “[...] people living in the advanced world are the most violent beings of all time” (p. 8 and p. 137). This prerogative justifies his critique of the decline of violence’s thesis conducted by the Canadian evolutionary psychology Steven Pinker, who argues that: “[...] most people on the planet live a more secure life than any other humans in history” (p. 205). Lewis designed his criticism on these kinds of evolutionist theories which affirmed that contemporary human violence is explained as the expression of our genetic predisposition. Nonetheless, it is clear that democratic states, militarism, liberal economy, corporation, consumerism and the global media of wealthy nations are responsible for the increase in levels of interpersonal and structural violence, producing threat and harm for cultural groups, other states and the environment.

To conclude, Lewis’ publication *Media, Culture and Human Violence: From Savage Lovers to Violent Complexity* is a cross-disciplinary study framed on the broad fields of biology, geography, history, philosophy, sociology and political, cultural and media studies. The book should be read by those who are interested in understanding or studying violence and human relations as well as the media and culture in their numerous contexts. Furthermore, it provides an exceptional perspective on the phenomenon of violence which is, intrinsically, interconnected with cultural practice and the global media system.

**Basarab Nicolescu: From
Modernity to Cosmodernity.
Science, Culture, and Spirituality.
State University of New York
Press, 2014, ISBN: 9781438449647,
p. 271.**

KOME – An International Journal of Pure
Communication Inquiry
Volume 4 Issue 1, p. 95-96.
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and Permission:
kome@komejournal.com
Published by the Hungarian Communication
Studies Association
DOI: 10.17646/KOME.2016.19

Antal Rockenbauer

Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Material and Environmental Chemistry and
Budapest University of Technology and Economics, Department of Physics, Hungary

If you want to understand the relations between the worlds of contemporary science and modern culture, you have to read the book of Basarab Nicolescu entitled “From Modernity to Cosmodernity: Science, Culture and Spirituality”. This book is full of disquieting questions: What is reality? This question was put forward in 1948 by Wolfgang Pauli, the Nobel laureate in physics, saying: “The formulation of a new idea of reality is the most important and most difficult task of our time.” More than sixty years later, this task still remains unfulfilled. This book has the aim to make a step forward toward the accomplishment of this task. A further question asks how is it that we know more about what we do and less about who we are? Why is our world running into a potential triple self-destruction: material, biological and spiritual? The author of this book claims that the major cause behind the trend is that our modern world becomes more and more the product of the blind but triumphant technoscience. It is manifested by the increasing gap between the meaning of science and in its interaction with spirituality, and by leading to the split of science and culture. Furthermore, it has a detrimental political consequence by originating totalitarianism in the abolition of sacred.

Nicolescu also raises the question of why the modern science was developed in Europe. Typically, the Christian dogmatism is considered as an obstacle of scientific progress by referring to the infamous process of Galileo Galilei. Nicolescu claims that just the opposite is true, according to him, modern science has essentially Christian origin, namely, it evolved from the dogmas of the Christian trinity and the incarnation.

The book discusses in detail the relation of two forms of our knowledge: the traditional and the scientific. The former assumes mental silence, direct perception and dissolution in the unique and complete reality; the latter needs activity of the mind, formulation of laws, existence of an objective, separate reality, independent on the observation.

In contemporary physics, the quantum mechanics requires introduction of new principles for determinism and causality distinct from the comprehensive causality of Aristotle. It places the whole reality between brackets, as an obscure, ontological and unnecessary concept, and even a new axiomatic logic should be developed. The new logic is illustrated by examples of modern art, which is called quantum aesthetics and quantum theater by Gregorio Morales. This concept is represented by the antitheater of Peter Brook and Ionesco. Its ideology is

developed by Jung and Lupasco assuming isomorphism between the world of quantum and psyche, where the observer is separated from the real by the wall of the unconscious.

Nicolescu describes in detail the major strive of modern physics for developing a theory of everything, in which all four forces – gravitation, electromagnetism, the weak and strong nuclear forces – could be united in a common field theory. This theory is not yet successful, but there are promising efforts, in particular, the superstring theory. Certain features of this theory however, look extremely absurd. Even our imagination encounters great difficulty for understanding the four-dimensional space-time of Minkowski, but how can we perceive a model where the theory assumes twenty-six dimensions for the interaction mediating bosonic strings, and ten dimensions for the fermion strings, respectively? And what we can do with the bootstrap theory suggesting the existence of 10^{11} pocket universes?

When we are searching for the secrets of the smallest object of our universe, we are coming closer in the understanding of the nature of the giants in the cosmos. When we look at what is happening in the shortest time interval of physical processes, we can understand what happened in the remote past when the big bang took place and the universe started to evolve. When you want to understand the nature of the simplest objects, you have to grasp what is the essence of the most complex things in the universe: human beings. This leads to the question of the relation between the Subjects and the Objects, which is the crucial problem of philosophy. This relation has varied in the different periods of human culture. The major steps can be described as premodernity, modernity, postmodernity and cosmodernity. In this long journey of human culture, Nicolescu can be our excellent guide.

Andreas Hepp, Monika Elsler, Swantje Lingenberg, Anne Mollen, Johanna Möller, Anke Offerhaus: *The Communicative Construction of Europe. Cultures of Political Discourse, Public Sphere and the Euro Crisis.* Palgrave MacMillan, 2015, p. 296.

KOME – An International Journal of Pure
Communication Inquiry
Volume 4 Issue 1, p. 97-98.
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and Permission:
kome@komejournal.com
Published by the Hungarian Communication
Studies Association
DOI: 10.17646/KOME.2016.110

Ewelina Gutowska – Kozielska

University of Gdańsk, Poland

The Euro crisis we are witnessing appears to be one of the most difficult challenges to the very existence of the European Union, threatening its powers and structures on numerous levels. The multidimensional character of the crisis has called into question the European Union's identity and governance. The member countries of the EU have suffered long-term effects of the phenomenon in terms of economy and politics, and the political divisiveness has resulted in the growth of support for EU opponents.

The Communicative Construction of Europe: Cultures of Political Discourse, Public Sphere and the Euro Crisis, a result of an extensive twelve-year research conducted across a carefully chosen representative country sample – in order to investigate the communicative construction of Europe during the course of the Euro crisis – offers a portrayal of the European Union and transitional Europe between 2003 and 2014. The book presents the European public realm as a “thickened communicative space articulated mainly through certain patterns of transnationalisation” and, simultaneously, provides empirical evidence confirming the existence and importance of the phenomenon. In the times of often prevailing narrative about the end of the EU in the aftermath of the Euro crisis, Andreas Hepp et al's analysis presents powerful arguments against a claim that it can and should be perceived as a phenomenon resulting in a collapse of the European communicative construction. The book examines the character of the communicative construction of Europe, and the way journalists and the public relate to the European public sphere and influence it in the context of the Euro crisis. *The Communicative Construction of Europe* is unique in its approach, focusing its attention not on the political and financial elites, but on the journalistic practices and the citizens' relationship with and reaction towards the public sphere, and explores the topic in eight well-constructed chapters. The first chapters of the book provide an analysis of communicative construction both in terms of the European public sphere and cultures of political discourse fundamental to the process of that construction. The interviews with EU and foreign news chief editors and editors and correspondents from quality, regional and tabloid newspapers together with a detailed analysis of the political news coverage (1982-2013) and newsroom observations (2008, two newsrooms per country) were carried out to present the framing of the European contemporary situation. Newsroom studies and a content analysis of increasingly transitional political news coverage in the press prove that despite the fact that particular elements of European public sphere remain segmented, its downfall - despite the Euro-skeptic attitudes – as a result of the Euro crisis did not actually take place:

“while the Euro crisis year 2008 has gained special prominence for political institutions, trends towards Europeanisation that were already apparent had been consolidated, there being only a small degree of instability, if any.” Nevertheless, the mediated representation of Europe, i.e. how journalists from Austria, Britain, Denmark, France, Germany and Poland tend to “re-articulate cultures of political discourse – national as well as transitional” - present Britain and Denmark defining Europe as, in a way, external – with “the Other”, the remaining countries normalizing European news, and Poland – at the time of research – leaning towards the latter approach. At times, the authors' not entirely unbiased perspective seems to surface: journalistic practices normalizing European news are seen as progressive in the right direction in contrast to those with the more distanced attitude towards the EU.

The second part of the book focuses on the way EU citizens participate in the discussion of the Euro crisis. The analysis of the social media content (125 comment threads from political news from social and mainstream media as well as political blogs) carried out during the Euro crisis summit of the European Council in 2012 demonstrated that the Euro crisis created a context for citizens’ engagement in the process of the communicative construction, and the qualitative audience research based on 182 thorough interviews with citizens representing different social backgrounds confirmed that “having a public connection to Europe is a common ground”. Andreas Hepp et al define three main types of European public connection – *noticing* i.e. acquainted and connected, *centered* i.e. interested in particular issues/phenomena, and *multi-perspective* i.e. representing a multiplicity of different, often contradictory views. Surprisingly, the interpretation of the Euro crisis appears to be, to a large extent, similar for the citizens of all six countries despite the fact that only three of them do in fact belong to the Euro zone.

The book concludes that the Euro crisis is not synonymous to, and does not result in a collapse of the European communicative construction or the fragmentation of European identity; on the contrary, the process of defining, understanding and surviving the Euro crisis contributes to the strengthening of that identity. As the question remains whether these conclusions are still accurate in the light of current events in Europe, *The Communicative Construction of Europe: Cultures of Political Discourse, Public Sphere and the Euro Crisis* is a landmark contribution to the field of European public sphere and political discourse, and a great introduction to further discussion, both political and academic.