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Power, Pleasure, Patterns: Intersecting Narratives of Media Influence

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In a classic joke of observer bias, scientists of different nationalities studying rats "discover" in the rats the behavioral traits associated with the stereotypical conceptions of the scientists' own nationalities. One group of scientists sees the rats operating in organized hierarchies, another group of scientists sees the rats responding to the impulses of the moment, yet another group of scientists sees the rats engaging in creative long-term adaptations to the environments in which they are placed, and so on. Each group of scientists sees what its members already "know" to be the nature of mammalian life. Each has difficulty seeing what the other groups of scientists observe.

The humor in such anecdotes typically fades, of course, for any scholars who are asked to consider the possibility that their own research is similarly shaped and limited by preconceptions of the subject at hand. Yet, this process probably underlies all ways of knowing about human communication. My focus in this article is on the manner in which something analogous to the examination of rats in the different scientists' laboratories has been operating in the study of media in different research camps. In observing (or imagining) a family watching television news, for example, different media analysts see different forces at work. One research camp sees a family being subjected to a dominant ideological "text" (to which they may succumb or develop oppositional or negotiated "readings"). Another research camp sees a family actively employing media for useful and pleasurable ends, such as surveillance of their world, exposure to sample interpretations of social events, anticipatory social-ization for the children, and shared topics for conversation. Yet another research camp focuses less on the content of the news program or the motivations of the viewers than on the medium-afforded structure of the interaction—that is, on how television, more easily than newspapers, includes family members of different ages and genders in the same experience at the same time. And so on.

Like the rat-observing scientists, many scholars who describe the "obvious" nature of such interactions with media have difficulty appreciating, or sometimes even comprehending, what other media observers see. Yet, there is a good case to be made that fuller understandings of human interactions with media, as with the

behavior of rats, could be generated from broadening the observational frames, even to the point of employing a range of perspectives that, on the surface at least, appear to be contradictory. In a preliminary pursuit of that goal, this article analyzes three narratives of human experience that I argue underlie three different ways of studying media influence: critical/cultural studies, uses and gratifications research, and medium theory. This manner of categorizing media studies is neither exhaustive nor universal. Yet, it offers a useful model for demonstrating how seemingly incompatible research perspectives could do a better job of learning from each other.

Broadly speaking, the critical/cultural studies approach views media as sites of (and weapons in) struggles over social, economic, symbolic, and political power (as well as struggles over control of, and access to, the media themselves); the uses and gratifications approach views media as some of the means through which people actively and consciously attempt to meet their personal and social needs and desires; and medium theory sees each communication technology as having material reality that—like climate and geographical features—interacts with human bodies and institutions to foster some interactional possibilities and discourage others. I will argue that each of these approaches is built on a broader "story" about human experience, a story that begins long before the use of modern media but in which media then come to play a predictable part. Each narrative, though simple in form, offers an enticing conceptual setting for explorations of media that has been fruitfully exploited. Each narrative holds valuable insights for the other two approaches. Yet, the resulting research agendas have usually excluded each other.

After analyzing the root narratives that underlie these three research traditions, I will offer a sample topic that highlights each narrative's special explanatory strength, thereby suggesting that, for some media issues, members of each camp should consider that their own typical perspective is not as valuable as the perspective embraced by another camp. To conclude, I will describe two sample topics that clearly benefit from analyses based on all three perspectives.

Fragmentation in approaches to media

Critical/cultural studies, uses and gratifications, and medium theory are among the frameworks that have developed as reactions against the earlier mass communication models that predicted simplistic short-term responses to media stimuli, usually in the form of imitation or persuasion. The space for these newer models grew as it became clearer that the stimulus-response concept (even when refined through studies of individual and group differences in response to messages and even when explored in terms of the modulating influence of the opinions of influential peers) did not sufficiently account for the complexity of interactions with media. Each of these more sophisticated approaches has led to a major edifice of research and theory. In the process, the communication discipline has both gained and lost. We have gained rich and textured terrains of media scholarship that have each filled dozens of journals and scores of books, exposed students of media to thoughtful and

provocative arguments that extend far beyond the popular discourses about media, and provided meaningful, lifelong careers to hundreds of scholars. And yet, the earlier relative coherence in studies about media has been lost. It is not simply that different media research camps disagree with each other; that was true from the start. It is rather that the current subareas of media exploration rarely even engage in extensive debate and respectful discussion with each other. Indeed, a look through the citations and bibliographies in articles and books about interactions with media suggests that each of these three research traditions has become a *de facto* subdiscipline of media study. The "must-cite" figures in one subarea are typically absent in the references in the other subareas, except when they are being critiqued (I confess that this has been true in much of my work as well). The different camps rarely even acknowledge each other's existence, except to ritualistically dismiss the other approaches. Each camp has built walls around itself that isolate it from other camps. These boundaries keep insiders in and outsiders out. Members of each of these subdisciplines of media research tend to act as if their camp has the one "true" approach, which leads them to turn their focus inward. Criticisms from outside, rather than encouraging openings to alternative approaches, tend to lead to enhanced fortifications. Disciples are trained to carry on the faith and defend it from heretics. Probing questions from neophytes are greeted with exhortations to read more deeply into the founding "holy" texts or more recent exegeses of them. Although many interesting extended media debates and discussions still occur, they are usually bounded debates in the sense that they tend to occur *within* groups that share basic worldviews about media. As a result, many major assumptions are left unquestioned and unchallenged, and each research camp tends to insulate itself from the possibility of learning from the other camps. Even when some crisis of faith within a research camp occurs—such as when there is a sense of hitting a conceptual dead end or being unable to explain some significant social phenomenon—adherents tend to search for the solutions deeper within their own faith's narrative of origin, rather than by looking outward to the potential contributions of the other camps.

In effect, then, these three media research camps often function like tall towers with thick walls and small windows that afford only limited glances at the other structures. The openings are large enough to take some potshots at the other edifices, with nodding approval from one's tower mates, but too narrow for meaningful engagement with those who might actually expose cracks in the foundations or walls of one's beliefs. Some researchers, to be sure, have tried to break down the distinctions. Katz (1987), for example, points out that there is more of a shared heritage among perspectives than is typically acknowledged. Alasuutari (1999) heralds the trend toward "third-generation" audience studies that could close some of the methodological gaps between uses and gratifications and cultural studies. Some scholars have managed to string precarious rope bridges, or build stronger structures, to at least one of the other research towers (e.g., Grosswiler, 1998; Jenkins, 2006; Livingstone, in press; Poster, 2006). A few have even managed to be recognized

as at least partial members of all three research camps (one thinks, e.g., of the late James Carey, whose eclecticism and geniality allowed him to cross through the territorial checkpoints with atypical ease). Yet, for the most part, those who attempt to squeeze through the windows to reach out toward one of the other towers still confront the daunting risk of crashing to the ground where they become novices again, faced with a steep climb toward mastery of a new set of literature, theories, assumptions, methods, and terminology that was functionally nonexistent from the perspective of their initial research camp. Rather than being praised for their intellectual openness, such adventurers may face reproachful critiques from their original colleagues, who often treat those who choose to explore new theoretical terrains as traitors or apostates who are no longer as welcome, or trusted, at the home camp. Similarly, their new associates often find the immigrant's original orientations puzzling and sometimes threatening. Whether such wandering scholars are welcomed into the new territory as converts or treated with lingering suspicion, there is a palpable sense that significant boundaries have been crossed.

In the context of fragmented and usually well-defended territories of media research, there are relatively few attempts to draw on multiple perspectives across research camps, even when they might be very relevant to the topic at hand. Our understanding of media could be enhanced if more researchers in each camp were open to rethinking their foundational assumptions in light of the assumptions underlying the other approaches.

Digging up root narratives

It would be impossible in a short article to summarize all the work that has developed in critical/cultural studies, uses and gratifications, and medium theory. Moreover, standard literature reviews would be counterproductive in terms of my objective because they would likely reaffirm the boundaries that separate the approaches, while also highlighting the divisions that splinter them internally. Instead, I will attempt to look beneath each research edifice to a foundational narrative about human existence on which that edifice appears to have been built. Each of these root narratives tells a relatively simple story. Each story incorporates assumptions about human nature and emphasizes particular dimensions of human experience. Each narrative provides a different way of answering the question "What do media do to us or for us?" Most significantly, each story—at least in its broad dimensions—is obviously true, and yet obviously incomplete. When dug up, then, the tangles of roots for the three narratives may be less protected from intersection with each other than the tall, imposing, and thick-walled structures that have grown from each cluster of roots. Indeed, when one looks to the insights one can gain from taking each root narrative seriously, the attacks on media research camps that are based on critiques of their practitioners' particular writing styles, or research methods, or overstated claims become less relevant.

The three root narratives could be called the *power and resistance narrative*, the *purposes and pleasures narrative*, and the *structures and patterns narrative*. Yet, for brevity and practical simplicity, I will usually refer to them, respectively, as the power, pleasure, and patterns narratives. I use the term *power* to summarize the root narrative for the critical/cultural studies approach, I use the term *pleasure* to refer to the root narrative underlying the uses and gratifications approach (choosing that term over the blander "purposes" to offset it more starkly from "power"), and I use the term *patterns* to summarize the medium-theory approach. Of course, no one research camp can claim exclusive dominion over the concepts suggested by each of these terms, as discussed in more detail later, which reinforces my argument that the three research perspectives have many implicit and underlying interconnections.

The power and resistance narrative

One key foundational narrative about human existence is that life is a power struggle. In this story, which begins thousands of years ago, it is assumed that competition for resources is a basic element of most human societies. Among hunter-gatherers, for example, social groups struggled over access to land and game. After the growth of agriculture, competition expanded for an increasingly complex array of resources, both material and symbolic. In this perspective, conflict is a "natural" feature of both intergroup and intragroup relations. Although the types of contested resources change with social and economic evolution, struggles for dominance and power remain constant across social forms. As an outcome of such struggles, inequalities among humans develop in access to resources such as land, food, water, shelter, livestock, tools, weapons, skills, knowledge, education, modes of transportation, and the labor of others. In most instances, those with more access to resources use their relative advantage to increase the inequalities.

The power narrative highlights the tendency for those who dominate to create a symbolic universe that naturalizes their domination, both for themselves and for those who are being subjugated. Whereas early humans established dominance through brute force, more complex ideological forces now serve the same function. Within a social system of inequality, there are many inducements for those subjugated to embrace the structures that subjugate them, including physical threats and punishments, as well as rewards. Acceptance of lower status also has psychological benefits, such as the relative peace of mind that comes from accepting one's situation rather than engaging constantly in struggles that are difficult, or perhaps impossible, to win. The symbolic system of domination, then, is more potent, efficient, and effective than physical power alone. As a result, the weak—with so many fewer behavioral and symbolic options than the powerful—become complicit in their own subjugation, and the frequency with which the dominant classes need to employ raw power diminishes. Yet, there are also natural impulses, both conscious and unconscious, for those of lower status to oppose those who dominate them and to

struggle to enhance their own positions. The less powerful, therefore, develop a range of strategies of accommodation and resistance and sometimes outright rebellion.

The power narrative embraces a wide range of historical and contemporary themes, social structures, and activities, including slavery and all secular and religious hierarchies such as monarchies and priesthoods. In the political–economic sphere, this narrative locates the origin of the most egregious and most intractable forms of power in large-scale capitalism and such developments as the expansion of long-distance trade by Europeans in the 16th century. The unequal benefit to the trading parties in merchant capitalism developed into more extreme forms of exploitation via colonialism and imperialism, through which "core" regions subjugated the peoples of "peripheral" regions and extracted their resources for the core regions' enrichment (Wallerstein, 1974). Similarly, the power narrative highlights how capitalist industrial production within both core and peripheral regions relies on systems of inequality in which the vast majority of populations are denied direct access to the tools and resources (such as land) they would need for their own support, which leads to their willingness to sell their labor to factory owners for less than its full economic value (Wolf, 1997). The depletion and pollution of the environment for corporate profit are also described within the power narrative, as is the current global expansion of "neoliberal" policies that privatize basic social services and typically increase poverty and inequality. The power narrative is central in critiques of so-called "free trade" agreements, which undermine subsistence agriculture and communal ownership of land and force third-world peoples into a global economic system that enriches the few at the expense of the many while also weakening or destroying indigenous cultures. Within contemporary societies, the power narrative has highlighted inequalities that exist among classes and ethnic groups and between men and women.

Those who embrace the power narrative tend to look at media in predictable ways. Media are both weapons in and sites of conflict in struggles over access to resources, wealth, information, symbolic representations, and power—and over access to the media themselves. Because the media-power story is about struggles that have very high stakes, it is not surprising that those who have grappled with media power have also often battled among themselves over who has the "correct" approach. Here, I purposely gloss over those differences in order to highlight what unites most media-power scholars, as well as what separates them from those working within other media narratives.

Marx and Engels (1932/1964) laid the foundation for the media-power narrative in the mid-19th century when they described how those who control material production (the economic "base") also tend to control "mental production" (the cultural "superstructure"). While in prison from 1929 to 1935 for his opposition to Mussolini's fascist government, Gramsci (1971) worked to explain why the masses who are oppressed by the privileged few do not revolt against their oppressors. Gramsci analyzed how the press, in combination with many other hegemonic social institutions such as schools and the Church, served to legitimize the ruling ideology

and diminish impulses of resistance among the populace. The media-power narra-tive was extended by the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/1976) of the Frankfurt School. In the 1940s, they attacked the "culture industry," which they saw as producing a top-down system of ideology that was conveyed through the mass media and whose surface variety concealed an underlying homogeneity. In their view, the accessible pleasures of popular culture (in contrast to high culture) dis-tracted the masses from their social and economic marginalization, making them passive and docile.

The power narrative has been extended and modified in more contemporary analyses of the political economy of the mass media. These studies explore how the patterns of media ownership, financing, and control usually shape and limit the content and uses of media (McChesney, 2004). Similarly, those engaged in critical analysis of news—a related subfield that has blossomed since the 1970s and 1980s—look at journalistic practices that belie the claims that "we don't make the news, we just report it" or that journalism is a simple empirical task of reporting the who, what, when, where, why, and how of events. Critical news analysis reveals the over-whelming tendency of mainstream journalism to amplify the views and voices of the powerful (Manoff & Schudson, 1986). In general, the power narrative argues con-vincingly that media institutions that are owned and financed by giant corporate conglomerates and are heavily invested in capitalist globalized economics are unlikely to encourage forms of news or entertainment that undermine their own profit-driven activities or question the overall logic of commodification and the accumulation of wealth. The corporate media's paltry coverage of the debates over their own deregulation and increased conglomeration from the 1980s to the present illustrates that concern.

The field of cultural studies, which has expanded rapidly since the 1970s and 1980s after its initiation in the 1950s and 1960s, maintains the focus on power but rejects the determinist tendencies in orthodox Marxism and the Frankfurt School. Cultural studies scholars argue that people are not passive "cultural dopes" who are wholly manipulated by capitalism and media. Cultural studies scholars distinguish between the dominant "encodings" of media texts and the variety of "decodings" by the public (Hall, 1980). Audience reception studies within cultural studies add details about the ways in which audiences resist and oppose power by "reading" media "texts" differently and "negotiating" meanings that bear on struggles for legitimation and authority (Fiske, 1987). Cultural studies research explores multiple dimensions of power, including media representations of class, race, ethnicity, and gender. Such work has highlighted how the media, and popular culture in general, function more as contested domains, rather than unchallenged or deterministic tools of the powerful. More recent work in cultural studies has moved beyond studying particular texts and audiences to focus more broadly on the implications of living in societies—and a globe—dominated by powerful media institutions that influence daily rituals and conceptions of reality, attempt to construct identities, and convey the sense of the centrality of the "media world" as it differs from "ordinary life"

(Couldry, 2003; Morley & Robins, 1995). Aggressively antidisciplinary and topically diffuse, cultural studies scholarship examines a variety of contradictory ways in which people are disempowered and empowered by all the forces and structures that organize their lives (Grossberg, 1997). While eschewing reductionist conceptions of power, cultural studies scholars nevertheless focus on historically situated economic, political, and symbolic forces of empowerment and disempowerment within advanced, and increasingly globalized, capitalism (Erni, 2001).

The media-power story is generally embraced and articulated by scholars who are critical of what they see as various forms of social domination and who want to reduce subjugation. Many members of this research camp vociferously attack those who, in approaching media from other narratives, tend to ignore or downplay media power. Uses and gratifications researchers and medium theorists, for example, are often critiqued by critical/cultural studies scholars as being the dupes or *de facto* agents of the powerful. Media-power scholars also often clash with each other. Indeed, the "war" between those engaging in cultural studies (with a typical focus on consumption and reception of media artifacts) and those engaged in political–economic critiques of the media (with a typical focus on ownership and control of media production) has become legendary (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 23). Another battle has raged between those reception scholars who focus mostly on the power of, and resistance to, dominant media encodings and "preferred readings" (Hall, 1980) and those who focus on the power of audience members to create their own meanings through the "semiotic democracy" afforded by polysemic texts (Fiske, 1987). Yet, underlying most of the subthreads of the media-power narrative are compatible attempts to improve the human condition by creating a more harmonious, egalitarian, just, and democratic world. The differences within the media-power camp, as large as they may seem to be for those engaged in the internal struggles, pale in comparison with the contrast between the power story and the other two narratives recounted here.

The purposes and pleasures narrative

Another root narrative that has fed the growth of media research is the story of people as active, conscious, and purposeful users of the human, material, and symbolic resources with which they come into contact or create. In this story, humans use features of their environment and each other's presence to meet their individual and collective needs and desires for food, shelter, social interaction, sex and reproduction, play, aesthetic experience, cultural transmission, amusement, and relaxation. Even early humans, like other animals, could distinguish between a location that provided good shelter from wind and rain (such as a cave) and a location that provided poor shelter (such as an open field). Similarly, humans select the right stones to kill small animals or use for other purposes. Humans learn to distinguish between berries that are sweet and those that are sour, between animals whose flesh is tasty to eat (and whose skins and bones serve other uses) and those that are better

left alone or used for other purposes. Humans have greater capacity than other animals to make choices about how to exploit their environment. Moreover, humans have the remarkable ability to think about and describe how and why they make the choices they make, as well as to convey their strategies and thoughts to their children and descendants. Humans learn and pass on the skills of making fires for cooking as well as warmth and of sowing seeds and harvesting crops. They take pleasure in sharing stories and song. Within this narrative, humans are not seen as the victims of each other or of their environment but rather as rational and purposeful agents who work, individually and collectively, to choose among available options to best meet their perceived personal and social needs.

The pleasure narrative sees humans as creators of tools to meet various needs, including the "tools" of human association, art, architecture, myth, religion, and other forms of creativity to serve individual and shared goals. Systems and institutions are created to meet demands and are modified to enhance their match to human needs and enjoyments. Interactions with others are seen as possessing potential for mutual satisfaction, rather than always being based on a process through which some people benefit from the exploitation of others. Whether looking at mating, employment, trade, or markets, those who embrace the purposes and pleasure narrative see the basic need for some mutual adjustment and accommodation. Despite inevitable tensions and power differences, spouses must adapt in some ways to each other's needs and desires, and they must cooperate for some common goals (such as producing and socializing children). Indeed, members of any group or society must coordinate activities to assure some level of stability and meet collective needs for shelter, food, and defense. Similarly, sellers and buyers and traders of goods within and across societies often engage in practices that address—at least partially— the needs and desires of all involved.

As with the power narrative, those who embrace the pleasure narrative also find a predictable role for media. Rather than seeing audiences as targets of media—who may be victimized by, or resistant to, the barrages of the powerful—the pleasure narrative sees audiences as active choosers and users of media who select among media (and nonmedia) options to best meet their personal and social desires and needs. Within this perspective, media systems strive to please discriminating audiences.

Activities that predated media are the implicit analogues for many media purposes and pleasures. If our human ancestors climbed up hills or trees to survey their surroundings, then people today are likely to use media to surveil the social and physical terrains of the more complex societies of which they are now members. If humans scouted their area for food options and watched their elders to learn their group's traditional means of preparing food, they will scout supermarket ads for food options at local markets and read cookbooks or recipe Web sites for guidance on food preparation. If humans once gathered around fires to enjoy a shared experience and exchange stories, with the exact shape of the flames being irrelevant, then media experiences will be used as real or virtual gathering places for friends and

families and a source of shared topics of conversation, where the particular content of the flickering images on a video screen may take a secondary place. If oral stories provided children of ancient societies with a glimpse of the roles they might assume in the future, children will similarly use media today (with or without the encouragement of their parents) for anticipatory socialization. If rituals relieved members of early societies of constant decisions, ritualistic media use today can provide similar activities of relaxation and escapism, with a welcome suspension of the need for judgment and decision making.

The uses and gratifications approach came to the fore in the 1970s (Blumler & Katz, 1974) but built on earlier foundations in motivational psychology and Maslow's (1943) theory of a "hierarchy of needs" and "self-actualization." Herzog (1941) is often seen as a media-gratifications pioneer through her research that found that women enjoyed listening to radio soap operas for emotional release, vicarious experience, and social learning. Berelson's (1949) study of what regular readers of newspapers felt they were missing during a newspaper strike gave further support for the notion of an active audience. Schramm's (1954) "fraction of selection" thesis stated that people will give preference to those media offerings that have the highest expectation of reward for the effort required. Katz (1959) called for studying the motivations of audiences as a further foundation for the uses and gratifications approach. Wright (1960) built on the earlier functionalist work of Lazersfeld, Lasswell, and Merton to offer a "formula" for studying mass communication in terms of functions and dysfunctions, both manifest and latent, of news (surveillance), editorials (correlation), cultural transmission, and entertainment—as they operate for the society, subgroups, individual, and cultural systems. Subsequent theory in this tradition has greatly expanded the list of gratifications sought. Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas (1973), for example, describe 35 needs that fall into five categories: cognitive (such as acquiring information, knowledge, and understanding), affective (such as gaining a pleasant, emotional, or aesthetic experience), personal needs that integrate cognitive and affective elements (such as enhancing confidence, credibility, or stability), social needs that integrate the cognitive and the affective (such as maintaining or enhancing connections with family and friends), and tension release (such as diversion or escape). In addition to many other proposed categories, uses and gratifications research has addressed more dimensions of the gratifications process, such as the social and psychological origins of various perceived "needs," the "expectations" that arise for satisfying needs, how the same type of media experience may meet different needs for different types of people, and how the various forms of exposure to media (or engagement in other activities) satisfy (or do not satisfy) particular needs, and how interactions with media often have other (mostly unintended) consequences (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974).

Because members of the public are seen as conscious and goal-oriented users of media within this perspective, those things that uses and gratifications researchers hope to learn can be discovered through surveys or interviews with the public. These data include the gratifications people say they actually *obtain* from media, as

contrasted with the gratifications they *seek*. The initiative to link the gratification of need with media choices is seen as resting with the audience. The media are seen as competing with each other—and with nonmediated activities—to satisfy audience needs and desires. Within this view, the media industries, rather than acting as dominating forces, are partners or even, in some ways, the servants of the public.

The purposes and pleasures narrative tells a logical and important story. Yet, it typically ignores the valuable insights about constraints on the range of people's choices, as described in one way by the power and resistance narrative outlined earlier, and as depicted in a very different way by the structures and patterns narrative outlined in the next section.

The structures and patterns narrative

A third narrative of human existence that has fostered the growth of a key branch of media scholarship is the story of how the character of human life is shaped significantly by the overall structure of the natural and human-made environment in which people find themselves. The most fundamental "environment" in which humans exist is their own biological makeup, which affords many possibilities and yet also sets basic limits. Material and technological extensions of the human senses and limbs, however, can alter humans' abilities, thereby encouraging some new forms of human activity and discouraging others.

Humans have the capacity for many different forms of culture and social organization, yet not every pattern can exist in every environment. Climate and terrain have major influences on modes of subsistence, which in turn shape human diet, mobility, and settlement patterns, forms of social and political organization, dwelling types, production, art, and ritual—all which have influence on each other. No known society engages in intensive agriculture in arctic regions, for example.

Before advances in transportation technologies, humans obviously were more likely to eat fish if they lived near rivers, lakes, or oceans than if they lived far away from bodies of water. Humans were more likely to hunt and eat large game animals if large game animals were present in their local environments. Moreover, if the herds of animals traveled to different locations in winter and summer, the hunters were likely also to have different summer and winter camps or settlements. Most rivers encourage travel *on* them, rather than perpendicular to them or through dense jungles that grow around tropical rivers. Moreover, the direction and strength of the flow of the river affects which direction of travel on it is easier and faster. The fertile banks along some rivers foster intensive agriculture, whereas the soils on the banks of other rivers do not. Although humans are free to ignore what is easily available and to work to override restrictions on what is not easily available, the natural environment tends to encourage some patterns of activity, settlement, diet, social organization, and political structure while discouraging other patterns. Arid climates, for example, are more likely to lead to small, relatively egalitarian bands of hunter-gatherers who move to other camps when they have depleted the locally

available wild plants and game. At the other extreme, fertile soils facilitate intensive agriculture that can support large, sedentary populations. The larger size of the population and the surplus production of food in fertile regions encourage more complex division of labor, bureaucracy, and hierarchy.

The environment that humans interact with and respond to also includes human innovations, such as fire harnessed for cooking and for producing ceramics or metallurgy, domestication of animals, tools, forms of housing, modes of transportation, and other features of culture. These too are encouraged or constrained by the structure of the larger environment, just as they also tend to become encouraging and constraining environments in themselves. Pre-Columbian Mexicans invented the wheel, but they employed it only as a toy, because their terrain was mountainous and rocky (Harris & Johnson, 2007, p. 61). In other geographical locations, wheeled travel expanded trade and transport, just as larger and sturdier boats facilitated more distant journeys across bodies of water.

Once created and passed down to the next generations through reciprocal typification, habitualization, and institutionalization, human-made environments are not that easily or quickly changed, and those born into societies tend to see both physical realities and socially institutionalized patterns of behavior as equally real and unchangeable (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Although children have the capacity to learn any language, for example, they almost always learn the language spoken by the adults around them.

For those who draw on the structures and patterns narrative, media also play a predictable part. The systems of communication, once in place, are seen as part of the material and symbolic environment that creates certain possibilities and encourages certain forms of interaction while discouraging others. This perspective is most associated with medium theory (Meyrowitz, 1994) and the closely related field of media ecology (Strate, 2006). Medium theorists analyze the differences among communication environments.

Oral cultures, for example, are seen as having a different social structure from writing cultures, and each subsequent development in communication form is seen to have its own additional influence. Oral cultures are heavily dependent on local memory and repetition for the preservation of ideas; writing, in contrast, "opens" the culture to more complex and novel concepts and larger territories of shared knowledge. Moreover, different types of writing have different influences. Carvings on stone, for example, are more difficult to revise and more difficult to transport over great distances. Stone hieroglyphics tend to last for a long time, preserving cultural statements in a rather fixed form, but they do not facilitate political control over large territories. Writings on papyrus and paper, in contrast, can be transported more easily over longer distances, yet their relatively transient nature can lead to more instability.

Writings systems that have thousands of difficult-to-master symbols are more likely to foster social inequalities than writing systems that have a limited number of symbols and are relatively easy to master. Similarly, writing systems, no matter how basic, typically require more stages of learning to decode them than do

representational pictorial systems, such as photography or video. Just as the nature of a physical terrain (flat vs. mountainous) or the requirements of a mode of transportation (walking vs. a large boat or a motorized vehicle) may make it easier or more difficult for people of different ages and abilities to move on their own, so does the nature of the medium make it easier or more difficult for people of different ages and abilities to employ it. Children, for example, need to be assisted for many years through the rough terrain of reading and writing, while they can usually "travel" mostly on their own at an early age through telephone conversations or television viewing. The media-patterns approach suggests, therefore, that the influences of a medium such as television—which speaks in a human voice and presents images that look a lot like "reality"—must be understood not merely in relation to the power dimensions or desirability of its messages but also in terms of the characteristics of the medium, including how it makes all its content more easily available to people of different ages and levels of literacy than similar content in books or newspapers.

Just as variations in climates and soils foster the development of different sizes of communities, so do the characteristics of different forms of communication facilitate different scales of political and social organization in terms of how many people over how large a territory can be included easily in the same communication system. Just as the hacking of a new path through a mountain range or the building of a canal through an isthmus typically encourages a significant shift away from the longer routes between two locations, so do inventions like the telegraph, telephone, and e-mail encourage people to decrease and alter their use of travel or letters as a means of personal and business communication. Medium theory also suggests that the widespread use of a medium may stimulate different modes of thought. Print literacy, for example, may encourage abstract, linear thinking, whereas television viewing may encourage concrete, nonlinear thinking.

Socrates was perhaps the earliest medium theorist. As conveyed by Plato in his *Phaedrus*, Socrates described how writing was different from oral interaction in that one could neither ask a text a question nor use it to aim specific communications only to those the communications concerned. Writing, Socrates correctly observed, would reduce the primacy of human memory. Although Socrates was perceptive in observing how writing differed from the dialogues he excelled at and favored, he had greater difficulty seeing how writing could lead to forms of communication that could not exist in oral communication. What Socrates envisioned as unengaging monologues written by forgetful writers and directed at ill-defined and forgetful audiences also led to what we now call science and philosophy—systems of thought too complex and lengthy even for their creators to memorize, let alone share widely with preliterate publics.

The first large-scale contribution to medium theory in modern times came from Innis, whose political–economic study of the ways in which rivers and canals affected the flow of the fur trade and staples in Canada evolved in the 1940s into his exploration of the flow of information through different media. Innis adapted the

principles of economic monopolies to the study of information monopolies and the ways in which different forms of media led to more or less egalitarian systems of communication. He also outlined the "biases" of various media toward lasting a long time versus traveling easily over great distances. Innis' (1950, 1951) tightly packed *Empire and Communications* and *The Bias of Communication* describe the history of human civilization—from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt through the rise of the Nazis—as the story of changes in communication media.

In grappling with Innis' overall thesis, McLuhan (1962) transformed his passion for literature into a critical analysis of the ways that the "Gutenberg galaxy" of print transformed oral modes of consciousness (based on simultaneous multisensory experiences) into a world of one-thing-at-a-time lineality, "rationality," and cause-and-effect thinking. McLuhan (1964) then pushed his thesis to explore the ways in which print-based ways of thinking and organizing culture were being subdued by electronic media, which he argued were "retribalizing" humans and creating the possibilities for village-like involvements on a global scale.

Additional work on the consequences of the shift from orality to literacy has been conducted by a number of scholars, including Goody and Watt (1963), Havelock (1976), Ong (1982), and Logan (1986). The significance of the shift from script to print has been explored in the greatest detail by Eisenstein (1979), who provides extensive documentation and analysis in support of many medium-theory claims, including Innis' arguments about how the Bible in restricted-access *manuscript* form served to support the medieval Church's monopoly over the word of God and access to salvation, whereas the Bible in widely available *print* form became a tool of Martin Luther's 16th-century Protestant Reformation.

Innis' and McLuhan's explorations of the shift from print culture to electronic culture have been further studied in terms of "secondary orality" (Ong, 1982), role-system medium theory (Meyrowitz, 1985), the rise of the "network society" (Castells, 1996), changing patterns of social cohesion fostered by mobile phones (Ling, 2008), and many other frameworks.

Medium theorists also look at the ways in which media interact with each other and with the social context. Television, when adopted in a print-saturated culture, for example, would be seen as having a different type of influence than television added to a primarily oral culture. Another medium-theory argument is that similar cultural content has different influences when placed in different media and that changes in media encourage new forms of content and interaction.

As with the media-power narrative, threads of the media-patterns story run the gamut from deterministic to open ended. In most medium theory, communication forms are seen as influencing human activities in a probabilistic rather than an absolutist manner (in the same way that studies of the influence of waterways on human settlement, travel, and trade are not meant to be taken as simplistic and monolithic "waterway determinism" in which human agency plays no part). Carpenter (2001), who edited the journal *Explorations* with McLuhan in the 1950s, described their approach as studying the ways in which "each medium is a unique

soil. That soil doesn't guarantee which plants will grow there, but it influences which plants blossom or wilt there" (p. 239). Levinson (1997) prefers the notion of a "soft determinism" that "entails an interplay between the information technology making something possible" and human "decision and planning" shaping the use and impact of the technology (p. 4). Similarly, Deibert's (1997) "ecological holism" form of medium theory explicitly shifts the focus away from the "inherent effects" of each medium to the ways in which preexisting social forces and trends are either favored or not favored by the new communication environment. He analyzes the unintended consequences of technological change in terms of the "chance fitness" between medium and message that brings ideas and movements from the margins of society to the center.

Dismissing alternative narratives

The narratives of power, pleasure, and patterns offer three simple "stories" about human existence. Each story feeds into a perspective about what media do to us or for us. Each of these simple narratives conveys basic truths: Domination and subjugation are aspects of human experience; humans do consciously and actively seek to meet basic needs and pursue pleasures, both within and apart from power struggles; the structures of natural and human-created environments, both physical and symbolic, foster some types of human activity while constraining other types of activity. Yet, if all three narratives capture true elements, then it follows that each is also incomplete and in some way "in need" of the others to tell a fuller story of human experience, including our interactions with media.

Indeed, if one stands apart from the defended research turfs that have grown from the distinct narratives, multiple intersections become apparent. As critical/cultural studies researchers have embraced and explored the notion of active audiences engaged in creating oppositional and negotiated "readings" of dominant texts, they have moved away, through "reception studies," from the no-escape "culture industry" model of the Frankfurt School and closer to the view of the active audience of the uses and gratifications perspective (albeit with elements that are foreign to most uses and gratifications research, such as an explicit, progressive political agenda and a concern for larger social forces that may foster illusions about the extent to which perceived needs and desires are dimensions of individual psychology). Indeed, many cultural studies scholars, while continuing to see the media as designed to maintain and extend dominant capitalist power, valorize the pleasures derived from media artifacts as forms of resistance to that power. When uses and gratifications researchers discover that some of the gratifications sought by audiences are *not* met, they provide data that may support the power perspective regarding what is withheld (often purposely) from the public. Similarly, when uses and gratifications researchers look at why people may prefer to use one medium rather than another (e.g., Internet news vs. newspaper news) based on its "attributes" (Katz et al., 1973), they are stepping into the terrain of medium theory. Conversely, when medium theory examines how changes in media often undermine hierarchies based on earlier

patterns of control over information flow and how new forms of media encourage new desires and new patterns of media use, they are crossing into the territories of both critical/cultural studies and uses and gratifications. Moreover, medium theory's contention that the physical characteristics of the modes of producing communications have a major influence on the structure of social interaction closely echoes the Marxist contention about the pervasive influence of the material base inherent in the modes of production (Flayhan, 1997). Finally, cultural studies scholars have headed toward medium-theory concerns through recent work that looks beyond studying specific texts and their reception to the power dimensions of broader processes, such as globalization, digitalization, interactivity, and "mediation" in general (Silverstone, 2005), which entail complex interactions of the social and the technological.

Such interconnections could easily be explored more routinely and in much more depth, should media scholars be inclined to do so. Yet, the recent overlaps in some topics and methods that could be perceived as steps toward mutually enriching cooperation often have the feel instead of nighttime raids on a competing camp to snatch a valuable resource (an insight, a finding, or a practice) and take it back to strengthen the original mission of the base camp. Ritualized assault on the other positions persists. The task is not very challenging. Because each of the three narratives of media is clearly missing essential elements described in the others, the "fatal flaws" in each are easily available to the adherents of the other stories. The differences among the three narratives lay the groundwork for predictable and formulaic "mutually assured dismissal."

From the perspective of critical/cultural studies, the other two approaches are dangerously naïve about power and serve as apologists for, or agents of, the system that shapes the development and use of technologies, constrains individual choices, and shapes perceptions of "needs" and "meanings." From the perspective of uses and gratifications, the other two approaches are too "deterministic" (regarding either forces of domination or technology) and insufficiently appreciative of the clout of a rational and active public. From the perspective of medium theory, the other two perspectives are too focused on message content while being insufficiently attentive to the unique characteristics of each media environment and to the range of technological affordances and constraints within which both power struggles and user choices operate.

In short, each of the perspectives tends to critique, marginalize, or dismiss the other two for not doing what it does. The focus on describing (often accurately) the flaws of the others distracts each camp from confronting its own shortcomings. Another logical strategy, however, could be to accept the mutual incompleteness and limitations of each of the three narratives, as they tend to operate in isolation from each other, and to explore what insights the other root stories can provide that one's own story does not. This "mutual forgiveness," in place of mutual dismissal, could also involve looking past what are oft-critiqued defects in particular executions of research in each camp to what can be learned from each camp's root narrative.

Diversifying the media analysis toolkit

My intent is not to argue for a *fusion* of these three narratives and research camps but rather for an embrace of their *utilitarian multiplicity*. The analogy I have in mind is a basic toolkit that may contain a hammer, a screwdriver, and a wrench. To say that each of the three tools is a handy item is not to claim that each is useful in every circumstance. A hammer works better than a screwdriver on a nail. Moreover, I am not arguing for the development of a combination "hamdriverench," which would be an unwieldy device and difficult to use to accomplish much of anything. Instead, I argue that the complexity of media use and influence demands more than one way of thinking about what media do to us and what we do with them. Sometimes it helps to tap a screw with a hammer to get it started into a piece of wood before finishing the job with a screwdriver. Sometimes a screw has both a shallow slot for a screwdriver and a sturdier hexagonal head that can be more effectively turned with a wrench after the screw is partially in place. Analogously, there are some interactions with media that call out mostly for one of the three narrative tools outlined in this article, and there are other interactions with media that lend themselves to multiple epistemological analyses. I suggest this pluralistic toolkit approach as an alternative to the present situation, where those who like to grasp but one tool tend to see that its application is needed everywhere to the exclusion of other tools.

As described in the next section, each of the three media narratives can out-perform the other two when applied to examples that draw on its unique explanatory strength. These examples suggest that members of each camp should sometimes yield to the approach offered by one of the other camps. Many media topics, however, are best addressed by drawing on all three narratives, as illustrated in the section that follows the next one.

The explanatory power of each narrative

Deconstructing war propaganda
On topics related to the *strategic inclusion and exclusion of media content*, the power perspective (particularly its political economy subnarrative) offers special insights not easily attained through the other two narratives. War propaganda provides a proto-typical case study. The tendency of the U.S. news media to rely on "official sources"— combined with an orchestrated strategic plan on the part of the powerful—typically leads to saturation coverage of false stories to the near exclusion of information that would correct and contextualize the propaganda (Meyrowitz, 2006). Ultimately, the public cannot know what it does not know or will not embrace consciously, which means that the uses and gratifications model, relying as it does on self-report, is very weak in addressing war propaganda. Similarly, the pervasiveness of the same pro-pagandistic themes in multiple arenas (live speeches, posters, newspapers, radio, television, the Internet, etc.) subverts the explanatory power of the patterns narrative and its focus on the differences among media.

Acknowledging the pleasures of media uses

The purposes and pleasure perspective is most applicable to situations with a very *wide range of meaningful options* for media production or use, where the temptations to be seduced by the power of dominant encodings (or to develop oppositional decodings) are not at the core of the media experience. A man and woman may choose to go to a movie on a first date in order to have a shared experience for conversation (as well as being "forced" into physical closeness in the dark without the pressure to converse). In the absence of extended family members at home, television may serve a family as a substitute parent, aunt, or babysitter for children. People may listen to recorded music for a variety of reasons, including: an aesthetic experience, relieving boredom, learning how to perform a song, becoming familiar with the music that is enjoyed by a love interest or peer group, entertaining a guest without feeling the need for constant conversation, exercising or dancing, experiencing the simulated presence of a favorite performing artist, minimizing the tediousness of housework, helping a child (or oneself) fall asleep, setting a mood for a party, fostering privacy for lovemaking or an argument, covering the noise of traffic, obscuring the sound of the less appealing music being played by neighbors or housemates, and so on. Such a range of personal choices cannot be reduced to a medium-theory focus on the facilitating or discouraging nature of each medium. Similarly, to dismiss all such satisfying choices for using media by suggesting that they are merely irrelevant variations in practices by those distracted from their subjugation would be roughly equivalent to dismissing all Gemeinschaft folk customs because they were produced by those subjugated in a semifeudal order. Life and its pleasures do not stop in wait of the revolution.

Explaining structural shifts in communication patterns

The structures and patterns approach offers the most insights when one is looking at *macrolevel changes in communication that cannot be explained only by examining dominant content and the initial purposes for which content is employed*. If one applied only the power perspective to the early control of Western printing by the Church and Crown, for example, one might predict that the long-term impact of such controlled printing would be the increasing religiosity of society and the strengthening of monarchal authority (modulated perhaps by "negotiations" with and "resistance" to these dominant powers by readers of such texts). The pleasure narrative might focus on the how and why of readers' uses of religious and other available writings among other communication options. Medium theory, in contrast, would look at the ways in which printing technology differed from oral communication and manuscripts, such as allowing for more democratic distribution of writing; for innovative ways of organizing, standardizing, and citing texts (e.g., page numbers, tables of contents, and indexes); and for incremental improvements and corrections that are essential to scientific and scholarly advances. The structures and patterns narrative, therefore, seems best at explaining how the new medium of print and spreading literacy ultimately undermined the powerful forces that initially controlled

the content of the medium. In the long run, printing encouraged the scientific revolution that secularized modern society and led to the development of constitutional systems that undermined monarchal authority (Eisenstein, 1979). Similarly, medium theory offers unique insights into the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Role-system medium theory would argue that the civil rights and feminist movements were fueled by the changing *patterns of relative access* to social information through television's erosion of the link between physical location and experience, rather than simply by "resistance" to the racist and sexist content of television, which was not that much different from the content of earlier media (Meyrowitz, 1985). Indeed, given the difference between the narrative of media power and the narrative of media patterns, it is no surprise that many in critical/cultural studies were caught off guard by the way that feminism "broke in," as Hall (1992) puts it, "as a thief in the night… interrupted, made an unseemly noise … crapped on the table of cultural studies" (p. 282).

Multidimensional analyses

Although there are some situations where one of the three root narratives of media influence seems to trump the others—at least as an initial tool of analysis—most complex interactions with media would benefit from drawing on all three narratives. Two such examples are celebrity culture and the explosion of independent, or nonmass, media.

Three perspectives on celebrity culture

The focus on celebrities in the media clearly serves the interests of power and capital through such emphasized themes as individualism ("anyone can make it") and money and consumption as a source of success. Most significantly, celebrity coverage distracts the public's attention from more crucial events and trends, including systemic problems and inequalities. Nevertheless, members of the public draw many significant pleasures from their "relationships" with celebrities, including simulated companionship, emotional release, motivation, inspiration, encouragement to engage in issues promoted by celebrities, anticipatory socialization, identity formation through comparison with others, establishing common ground with real-life friends, negotiating a subcultural identity, and so on. Most people feel enriched by their "associations" with their favorite media figures. Finally, the evolution in media (from writing and drawings to photographs, film, radio, TV, handheld video, and so on) has encouraged an increasingly intimate view of public figures. The current sense that we personally "know" hundreds of people who are *de facto* strangers to us was something that was almost impossible with earlier, more abstract media. In short, a full understanding of celebrity culture requires at least the three narratives of media power, media pleasure, and media patterns (Meyrowitz, 2008).

Three perspectives on independent, nonmass media

New forms of independent, citizen-produced media have developed in recent years in reaction to the domination of the major media and their alignment with powerful multinational corporate agendas, including neoliberal policies. The use of such independent media to expose what the corporate media hide or distort, therefore, clearly fits into the power narrative of resistance to dominant forces. At the same time, such overtly "political" uses of new media blend structurally with the ways in which people use e-mail, blogs, social networking sites, YouTube videos, and citizen-to-citizen online sales and trades (through e-Bay, craigslist, freecycle, etc.) to create their own relatively egalitarian communities of interaction. The collaborative "bee-hive" efforts of such online phenomena as Wikipedia, as well as the thousands of online forums where people exchange news, opinions, and advice on seemingly everything—from personal, technical, and medical situations to consumer products and celebrities—give strong support for the notion of active, rational uses of media to meet personal and social needs largely independent of communications used for domination and subjugation. The online world certainly has its share of fraud and distortions (and data mining that enhances corporate and government power), yet it is also filled with a remarkable amount of individual and collective sociability, pooling of knowledge, and generosity of spirit. Finally, all the new forms of independent media are prime examples of the patterns narrative that highlights the facilitating potential of new media environments to make possible these forms of previously impossible content and patterns of interaction. Light, inexpensive digital cameras, audio recorders, and camcorders, in combination with copy, forward, and cut-and-paste options and the noncentralized power of the World Wide Web, have afforded the development of alternative sources of news, entertainment, and personal communication that are inexpensive to produce and virtually free to access and distribute widely once the technology is in place. Thus, a combination toolkit of narratives—power, pleasure, and patterns—enhances our understanding of a complex matrix of use of, and interactions with, new media.

Conclusion: Toward pluralistic analyses of media

This article has outlined three narratives that underlie competing camps of media research and theory: the power and resistance narrative, the purposes and pleasures narrative, and the structure and patterns narrative. Each narrative offers a different answer to the question: "What do media do to us or for us?" Each media narrative grows from a broader "story" about human existence in which media play a predictable part. When exposed to the elements, the root narratives underlying each research approach reveal essential truths while also calling out for some reinforcement from each other. Yet, most adherents of each narrative tend to ignore the adherents of the other narratives, except to attack or dismiss them. In contrast to this mutual dismissal, I have argued here that understandings of media would be enriched if those who work within each of these three subdomains—as well as those

not covered by this three-part framework—would engage each other in more respectful discussion and debate with the goal of gaining more textured and nuanced understandings of media through multiple root narratives. Ultimately, employing a more complete toolkit for media analysis would enhance the credibility and the goals of all research camps. Undesirable traits that have resulted from inbreeding within isolated camps—such as blind spots, methodological provincialism, obscure vocabularies, and exaggerated claims—could be minimized. The same argument for drawing on multiple epistemologies and methodologies could and should be applied to other nonmedia content areas within the broad domain of human communication.

Acknowledgments

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