Approaches to media analysis.

Soc 2026

This second year module will be taught by Graham McBeath, Sian Lincoln, and Ted Sullivan. It is concerned with exploring the traditions of media research analysis from the 1920s onwards.

Learning Outcomes:
On successful completion of the module students will be able to:
Knowledge and Understanding

a) Understand the points of similarity and difference between media analysis and social research more generally.
b) Recognise the relationships between different theoretical approaches and associated methods.
c) Demonstrate awareness of the practical advantages and disadvantages of different methods of researching media.
Subject - specific Skills
c) Distinguish between methodological approaches focused on media producers, texts and audiences.
d) Justify particular methodologies both practically and theoretically.
e) Plan and undertake small-scale media research.

Key Skills
g) Communicate ideas in written and oral form.
h) Participate effectively in group seminar discussions.
I) Show an ability to plan, organise and work as part of a team.

The Rise of Research Methods in Media Analysis.

The rise of media studies in America in the late 1920s and the setting up of graduate schools in US universities in the 1930s led to a development of methodologically aware approaches to analysing the media (mostly newspapers). Harold Lasswell with his 'Languages of Politics' and Theodore Abel who studied, as did Lasswell, the organisation and basic units of Nazi party members language and Nazi speeches, took the lead in this 'scientific' approach.

The 20th century itself saw the emergence of 'social science' as a systematic study of what made society tick and furthermore the acceptance of social science disciplines within leading Universities such as London School of Economics (Department of 'Government' = for the study of politics), Cambridge, Oxford (Barnet House for training of social workers and studying social policy) The most important US university, Harvard, developed the Department of Social Relations, and other US universities such as Columbia, and Princeton had research programmes and Ph.D. degrees in the social sciences. But before these developed, American

scholars such as Albion Small and Talcott Parsons did their Ph.D. degrees in German universities such as Berlin and Heidelberg. Equally in the 1940s, as many jewish and/or marxist and liberal scholars fled Germany and Austria, and more generally Europe, so they came to either Britain or America. Theodor Adorno initially came to study at Merton College, Oxford in 1938 but went to the US as did most of the famous Frankfurt School critical theorists.

Germany in particular, having had a very distinguished record of being at the cutting edge of social science since the middle 19th century, had produced the world's best, notably Marx (1818-1883) and Max Weber (1864-1920). Not surprisingly therefore, the influx of German and Central European scholars into the US and Britain had big impact upon the direction of social science in these host countries. (note: a sizeable part of Central Europe was part of the Austrian Empire until the latter collapsed in 1918) These émigré scholars brought new methods and ways of doing social scientific study. Princeton University (US) for instance inaugurated the radio research project under the direction of the ex-Frankfurt school, Paul Lazarsfeld, who found Adorno a job when Adorno emigrated to the US. Adorno went on to write an analysis of the Los Angeles Times' astrology column (The Stars down to Earth). If you just look at the names of the major sociologists in the US in the 1940s – 1960s you find that a very high proportion of them have German or German-Jewish names. In Britain, the gradual acceptance of 'social science' was in part a response to issues of the political, cultural, and economic relations with people native to countries within the British Empire. This led to important work in anthropology. But the other force for 'social science' in Britain was public concern over poverty and the appalling conditions brought about by the 'capitalist' Industrial Revolution from the late 18th and early 19th century onwards, and also, the conditions brought about by the World economic depression in the 1930s.

The idea of research methods:

It can be said that **'methods' link theory to facts**. They provide the rules and procedures by which we organise facts *consistently*. In so doing they reflect the terms and values of a theory, (of which the rules and procedures are expressions). For instance, Marxist theory argues that social class interactions and the achieving of dominance of one class over another (= class power), are basic to explaining how social and economic phenomena including media, work. To do a Marxist media analysis then, we need to have some rules or procedures for doing a class analysis. What rules do we apply to get a consistent recognition and identification of any particular class such that we can categorise people as falling into this or that class? And then, what rules do we apply to decide which forms of class interactions are relevant for getting at the heart of a Marxist analysis? For instance, supposing a capitalist says 'Hello' to one of his workers in the street. Whilst this is a 'class interaction' it may not be a primary example of a type of evidence we would want to collect about class interactions when there are rather more significant exercises of class power to explore, e.g. the effects of wage cuts or profits at the expense of jobs.
We start with a theory (eg. Marxism) but need to 'operationalise' it to apply it to the real world. Thus we need to turn the concepts of a 'theory' into a usable method or 'methodology' – develop rules for applying theory. (e.g. how we apply the concept 'class')

(nb. some say you can, and others say you cannot distinguish 'method' from 'methodology'. Look at David Silverman's books if you want to fuss about this.)
So in the above sense, **a method gives us a way of 'interpreting' a theory for the purpose of using that theory to analyse the real world.**

Let us then say a few words about the character of theory.

Theory

We always start from theories: that is we have a network of anchoring values, beliefs, concepts which we tend automatically to use to explain how the world works or is organised. We have them lodged inside our heads because of socialisation, background, values of parents and so forth. In say the 14th or 15th centuries people were far more likely to explain events in terms of God's power that in terms of scientific processes of cause and effect. Their theoretical world turned on religion - theologically based concepts which a deeply embedded part of their culture. We could call them: theoretical assumptions. Often their validity is felt rather than thought through by us because they are so much part of 'the way we think'. We do not consider that we have to justify them...because they are so much part of us, they seem self-evidently a right way of thinking and explaining how things happen. Karl Popper, the great Austrian philosopher of science who taught at the London School of Economics, called these 'tentative theories'; others have called them 'tacit' theories. For instance many people assume that, when they buy a new television they are making an individually arrived at choice..and that is *the* reason for purchase. That is, their theory of 'buying a TV' (of consumer behaviour) is to be explained in terms of individual choice and probably concepts such as 'personal satisfaction'. This type of explanation is a very 'individualistic' form of explanation though; others might argue that we have not explored the matter deeply enough - that there are underlying factors which are identified by concepts and theories to do with social pressure, status and even class culture. Thus our easy explanation for why we bought the new TV - because I wanted it/chose to - is 'necessary' (you have to want a TV in some sense, even if someone is making you do so at gunpoint, to buy it) but not 'sufficient' - there may be other more complicated reasons as well eg. the psychological aspects of status and social pressure which are theoretical concepts typically used to explain motivations for buying things. Thinking and discussion helps us to criticise and challenge our taken for granted theories (tentative/tacit) and deepen them. Thus we refine our *theoretical intuitions* (the theories we immediately call on) to improve our theories and explanations of how things happen.

Try this quick thought-experiment: How would you know a space is a 'room' unless *you already* had a little theory of what a 'room' is? So does this mean that we start with theories first, and then our observations and experiences fit together afterwards?
Question: What is the relation between theory and experience?

Some theories are bigger than others: Einstein and Newton both held theories about the nature of universe and what made it tick; Marx had a theory only about the history of humankind and what made it tick. Some of us hold theories about why, toast when dropped always lands butter side down.

Theories then, explain how groups or 'domains' of objects (planets, humans, toast) work in general. The leading terms that give theories their particular identities and their power of explanation are 'concepts' and their relations to other concepts (making up a whole explanation or framework of understanding). When these concepts are used in methods they are called 'variables' - they can vary qualitatively or quantitatively – 'an audience' can vary in the number and political views of the people who are members of it, BUT the idea or concept of an audience does not in itself change. *Theories generalise*.

Theories have basic components (concepts) which are arranged and assembled into an explanatory structure: viz. 'the theory'. So we have to grasp the meaning of the concepts involved AND how the theory relates them to each other. Think about the theory of 'semiotics': it uses the concepts of sign, signifier, signified, syntagm, paradigm....and these are all related parts or theoretical concepts making up the whole theory that is the basis for a method of how to make sense of media images and text.

Theories can be nested, that is one theory can operate inside another, thus making one theory 'larger' – more encompassing or 'higher' than another. We might call this a 'meta'-theory ('meta' = ancient greek for 'beyond') Thus I may have a theory about the nature of bias, but this could be dependent upon a theory about how media works in general. In this sense my theory of bias is 'nested' (snuggled into) my larger theory about how media works.

Theories establish ontological commitments. 'Ontology' means 'thinking about what exists' and the nature of existence. So an ontological commitment is when one holds that such and such must exist - as opposed to fictions, speculation, and ghosts. For instance some people have an ontological commitment to 'the mind'. Others do not because they say that, the mind is merely a woolly generalised concept of the brain's physical processes. In this sense 'beliefs' are not real but are shorthand for a complex set of material brain processes. Equally some claim that for Marx, class is an ontological commitment. He believes that classes really exist and are basic to his theoretical explanation. Other argue that 'class' is a useful descriptive shorthand for complex interactions between choice-making individuals who seem to act in similar ways under certain stimuli. This latter example entails the claim that individuals are more ontologically basic than 'social classes'. If we analyse social phenomena such as the media by beginning with the interactions between individuals out of which organisations are generated, then our method of analysis is called 'methodological individualism'. So our theoretical and ontological commitments give guidance to what method of analysis we use.

So when you say to someone "You don't really believe they exist do you?" you are doubting that persons 'ontological commitments'. *Theories give an account of what exists in the world (its' ontology) and the ontological factors (the bits) fit together - what exists and how it exists. How the world or the bit you are interested in (e.g. media) is constituted.*

Epistemology.

Other than ontology, ***another mega word you need to know about is 'epistemology'***. This simply refers to the means by which we know things. How do we come to know stuff? Are we primarily led by reason or experience?

Rationalist epistemology starts with the idea of the primacy of reason and consciousness – that there are inherent devices of reasoning and understanding in our heads that sort out data and experiences. In this sense the reasoning devices are PRIOR to the experience we have. We can only make sense of the latter because of the former. Rene Descartes famously said in is Meditations: "Cogito Ergo Sum" – 'I think therefore I am'. He argues that we grasp ourselves and thus *know* at least one piece of certain definite knowledge because of inner reason – that I know I am thinking (inner self-reference). Descartes wishes to establish a foundation for knowledge that is definite and that he can be certain is definite. He suggests that there could be a great deceiver who always makes me have illusions when I observe. So he asks is there any thing I can definitely know for certain? He answers: self-consciousness – the Cogito. For Descartes and other rationalists, the empirical, experienceable world is a secondary phenomenon of a primary rational consciousness.

In terms of communication, the famous linguistics scholar, Noam Chomsky sketched an argument which suggested that we had innate mental devices - mental structures which were 'a-priori' (before experience) inside our heads to permit us to organise and make sense of language. Thus there is a a given rationality in us which allows us to sort langauge into meaingful syntactic (word order/grammar) structures.
Thus: Reason before experience.

Empiricist epistemologies argue that we start with experiences the regularity of which gives us knowledge. I do not know how cars in relation to traffic lights work because of any inner reason; I know it because through experience I see the regularity of the interaction of red lights and cars – *knowledge by acquaintance* (or it is reported to me – an indirect version of a primary experience – *knowledge by description*) (see Bertrand Russell, *Problems of Philosophy*, chp. 5) Equally, we define genre in TV programmes, not because of some abstract reasoning, but by generalising about the similarities between various programmes. *Thus:*

Experience before reason.

Question: can I have a concept before some experience to fill it with meaning?

Empiricists often argue for foundationalism. That is that, there are sets of experiences which are more basic than others. And on the basis of those we move on to make sense of other bits of the world. If I am shown that things are caused by other things – billiards balls move when hit by a cue, I start to realise that we can explain movement not by appealing to a mystery of God, but by terms of cause and effect which I acquire the sense of through regular experience of this process. I can then apply my empirically acquired understanding of the powers of cause and effect to experiences beyond cues and billiard balls. Thus empirically arrived-at knowledge (of causes etc.) becomes the *foundation* for gaining further knowledge of how things relate and work.

Helping foundationalism along is induction. This is the process by which regular experiences become basic beliefs. If I keep on seeing a thing looking a certain way, I *expect* it (probability) to look that way the next time I see it. The inference from past to future experiences is known as *'inductive reasoning'*. One has seen the sun rise for past 20 years, one *expects* (is pretty sure) that it will rise tomorrow (even though one has not yet seen it do that). Experience of watching Channel 5 at around 11 -2am in the past is a reasonable 'warrant' (justification) for believing that sex is likely to be (probably) splattered across our screens on Channel 5 at a similar time tomorrow.

Our inductions come to form basic knowledge even though it rests on the expected rather than the certain.
Questions: Is our way of acquiring knowledge really as orderly as foundationalism suggests?
Is expectation and induction a solid basis for 'knowledge'?

When the idea of 'epistemology' escapes the terms of philosophical argument and enters into more concrete arenas of social science *(in that social science is interested in what and how we know about definite social objects and processes, as opposed to philosophy which is concerned with defining the concept of 'knowledge' in itself)* , it can be used in a number of contexts. The most obvious and arguably contentious area is that of feminism. There is a claim that somehow women's processes of knowledge and experience are fundamentally different to that of men. That they reason differently because of brain structure or because of socialisation. In other words instead of assuming that the nature of knowledge and the act of knowing is a universal - applicable to all humans, ought we to adopt regional epistemologies which start from a more relativistic view, namely that certain parts of the human species reason and know in ways fundamentally separable from other parts eg. males from females. More than a few feminists have emphasised that women are essentially disposed to be 'caring' (Gilligan; Noddings) and thus this could give us a methodological starting point from which to evaluate and make predictions about the sexist nature of say, the press. How deep is the concept of 'difference'?

In some applied sense then, 'epistemology' is about the nature of knowledge (how do we define 'knowledge) and the foundations of acquiring knowledge (what is it to 'know' something as distinct, say from believing, feeling; thinking something).

Seminars/Workshops:

In the first terms there will be 4 seminars and in the second term there will be 4 workshops.

YOU RE EXPECTED TO ATTEND ALL OF THESE

Seminar timetable:

Seminar 1	18th October	Positivist and Ethnographic methods
Seminar 2	15th November	Mass Observation
Seminar3	29th November	Critical Theory
Seminar 4	13th December	Media and psychological analysis

Students will be divided in to two groups (A + B) for workshops which for each group will be every other week.

These will be intensive 2 hour sessions based on either a graduated set of readings that MUST be read in advance OR on some practical preparation, e.g. data gathering/interviews etc.

Again all students MUST attend each workshop for their group. (see timetable in Spring term below)

Assessment:

Essay (2000 words)	28th January 2005.
Research Presentation	May 2nd / May 9th 2005
Research project report (1500 words)	May 16th 2005

The Research presentation will be a group effort (4 – 6 students) based upon an original research bringing to the fore an application of one or more methodologies. Primarily you will be questioned by the tutors on your use and understanding of the methodology.

The report will be an individual students analysis of the group presentation they were involved in that incorporates a critical literature review and contextualisation of the methodology used in and results from their presentation.

The Lecture Course:

1) The meaning of Empirical, Positivist methods. (GMcB) (11.10.04)

2) The Meaning of Ethnographic Reflexive Methods (SL) (18.10.04)
As a research tradition ethnography has been used in a number of different disciplines in the social sciences. This lecture explores the rise of the disciplines in the social sciences. This lecture explores the rise of the tradition, what the term ethnography actually means and entails and how its reflexivity can be applied to the study of media specifically. Might ethnography be problematic given that an academic framework works alongside the cultures of informants?
Readings
Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P (1995 2nd ed) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice Routledge* **Chs 1,8,9**
Burgess, R.G. (1984) *In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research*, **Routledge Chs 4,5**
Fetterman, DM (1998) *Ethnography: Step by Step*
Atkinson, P. (2001) *Handbook of Ethnography*, Sage
Denzin, N. (1997) *Interpretive Ethnography,* Sage
Ethnography (journal)
Journal of Contemporary Ethnography
SEMINAR 1 - Positivism and ethnography as methods

3) The meaning of critical, Marxist methods. (SL/TS) **(25.10.04)**
What can be understood by 'critical' theory, how did it emerge and what influence has it had on research methods in a media setting? This lecture gives an overview of the role of Marxism in critical theory as a way to make sense of modern and post-modern society and assesses the usefulness of a 'supra-disciplinary' approach to media studies.
Reading:
Kellner, D. (1989) Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity, Blackwells
Jessop, B. (1982) The Capitalist State, Robertson, Chs 1,4,5
Stevenson, N. (1995) Understanding Media Cultures: Social Theory and Mass Communications, Sage Ch 2

4) Communication research: Models and formal analysis. (GMcB) **(1.11.04)**
Reading:
Rosengren (1999) *Communication.*
Fiske, J. *Introduction to Communication studies.*
McQuail and Windahl. (1990) *Models of Communication.* Longmans.

SKILLS/READING WEEK (8 – 14ᵀᴴ OCTOBER)

5) Mass Observation (IB) 15.11.04)
SEMINAR 2 ON MASS OBSERVATION

6) Mass culture and the discovery of Mass Society: Media and democracy. (SL) 22.11.04)
What do we understand by the term 'mass culture' and who or what is it referring to? Is mass culture 'bad' culture, a 'dumbing down' of cultural values making its receivers 'cultural dopes'? Is it really 'sex in shiny packets' (Hoggart)? These questions will be examined with reference to Leavis, Hoggart and Williams.

Readings

Tudor, A (1999) *Decoding Culture: Theory and Method in Cultural Studies* (this book provides an excellent overview of the theorists discussed in the lecture)
Leavis, F.R. (1933) *Culture and Environment*
Leavis, F.R. (1979) *Mass Civilisation*
Hoggart, R. (1982) *The Uses of Literacy*
Hoggart, R. (1971) *Only Connect*
Williams, R. (1961) *Culture and Society*
Williams, R. (1974) *Television, Technology and Cultural Form*
Hoggart, R (1958) *The Uses of Literacy*

7) Critical theory under positivism – the Stars down to earth. (GMcB)
Reading: Adorno, T. The Stars down to earth. Routledge.

Seminar 3: Astrology and Adorno (29.11.04)

8) But what are the media saying? Discourse and Content. (GMcB) (6.12.04)

9) The emergence of psychological media research. (TS) (13.12.04)
Reading: Gunter, B. (1997) Media Research methods. Sage.

SEMINAR 4: Psychology and Media

SPRING TERM

Media research methods – practice

1 (Group A) workshop on Content Analysis 17TH JAN

2 (Group B) workshop on Content Analysis 17TH JAN

3 (Group A) Discourse Analysis 31st JAN

4 (Group B) Discourse Analysis 31ST JAN

5 (Group A) Ethnography Workshop 21st FEB

6 (Group A) Ethnography Workshop 21ST FEB

7 (Group A) Mass society/Mass Culture workshop 7th MARCH

8 (Group A) Mass society/Mass Culture workshop 7TH MARCH

9 Preparing for group presentations. 14TH MARCH