In his preface to the second edition of the Blackwell Companion to Social Theory, then Professor of Sociology at the University of Cambridge, Bryan S. Turner (2000), argues that the ‘decorative theory’ of textual analysis threatens to destroy the intellectual credibility of the social sciences. Constructing an impassioned critique of cultural versus social theory, Turner (2000: xv) argues that the cultural theory underpinning textual analysis has ‘become an end in itself’, merely ‘the narcissistic study of its own textual traditions’. For Turner, the decorative theory of textual analysis is symptomatic of metaphysical impasse within the social sciences, where sociological inquiry is being abandoned for the pointless ‘reading’ of cultural relations and media texts, the substance of which is reified and removed from a socio-historical context.

Tumer was not, of course, railing against the study of the media; which he believes is a ‘duty’ of the sociological enterprise. Rather, Turner’s cri de coeur is a response to the intellectual challenge made by (postmodern) cultural studies, a quasi-social scientific discipline which he sees as having forsaken its more sociological roots in the work of those scholars associated with the early Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies (or those identified as part of the movement of ‘British Cultural Studies’). In other words, Turner is not arguing that the study of culture and cultural products, such as those produced by the media, is unimportant. On the contrary, he is arguing that their study is too important to be left to ‘armchair’ intellectuals with a talent for pretty prose, but with an aversion to real empirical inquiry.

Here, then, is a ‘divide’ worth re-considering, if only briefly (for a deeper exploration, see Mirchandani, 2005). On one side of this divide reside those scholars who hold to the teachings of postmodern iconoclasts, the most common lesson of which is that texts are imbued with complex power relations and can serve to distort reality and the nature of existence. On the other reside all those who still believe in the importance of understanding social structures and their influence. These camps are not equal in their adherents. Nor is this divide between academics always clear. Yet the existence of the epistemological rupture has shaped how sociologists study the media, and has resulted in lacunae.

As Turner’s criticism of ‘decorative theory’ aptly exemplifies, for much of mainstream sociology, textual analysis is a questionable enterprise, a pointless form of empirical analysis. Accordingly, many sociologists of the media choose the safer terrain of the institution—with its observable organisational hierarchies, technological apparatuses, workplace practices and institutional rationalities—as the appropriate field of inquiry. Such accounts are invaluable, and are a fundamental part of understanding the role and effect of the media. Yet the methodological scope of the institutional analysis dictates what knowledge can be garnered from such research. If sociology ignores the textual qualities of the cultural goods produced by the cultural industries, then it cannot fully appreciate the social and political effects of the media.

This begs the question: how can sociologists of the media engage in relevant forms of textual analysis? Following the methodological arguments of Robert R. Alford (1998), I believe multiple paradigms of inquiry are the strongest form of analytical critique. As such, I advocate a triadic method of textual analysis, where researchers combine both qualitative and quantitative methods in the study of the text. Based on the principle of triangulation—using three different vantage points to rigorously assess and verify empirical findings—the triadic method of textual analysis is capable of exposing both the ‘manifest’ and ‘latent’ content of media products (see Byman, 2004: 183-184).

For instance, ‘quantitative content analysis’ can be used to track the manifest content of a series of texts, with tabulations of keywords and measurements regarding the space provided to certain authoritative sources suggestive of the dominant political disposition of a newspaper or a news program (Krippendorff, 2004). Likewise, ‘interpretative (or qualitative) content analysis’ can be used to identify and assess the ideological frames which shape and signify the meanings of a story, classifying words and phrases indicative, perhaps, of the ideological distortion of a particular event (Byman, 2004: 189). Within this longitudinal framework, there is room for a ‘semiotic case study’ of certain ‘key texts’ symptomatic of different ‘story types’. Semiotic analysis can be used to pull apart the linguistic and visual signs used in communication, providing a detailed and intimate understanding of how meaning is textually constructed and signified (Gottdiener, 1995).

Such textual methods must be used in conjunction with institution focussed research (Murdock and Golding, 2005). The common failing of textual analysis is that, in the wrong hands, the research tool can be ill-defined and implemented, and used merely to describe the content of a text without providing a meaningful analysis of the issue under investigation. As Roger Silverstone (1994; 995) once argued, sociology ‘relativises, historicises and thereby fixes the particular’, while cultural studies, at its best, has the ability to produce ‘dramatic insights’ through its close analysis of specific texts.
‘engagement with the particular’. If we combine these two strengths in the study of ‘particular’ texts, meaningful textual analysis is possible. Indeed, it can even be used to tell us something about the social and institutional context in which the media text was produced.

Bryan Turner (2000) is correct in his condemnation of decorative theory. Yet textual analysis need not be pure method or meaningless prose. Provided that care is taken in relation to the formulation of its methodology, textual analysis can be employed by researchers seeking to grapple with issues of great sociological significance, such as those posed by misrepresentation and media bias. As is the case within all the branches of sociology, sociologists of the media must ask: why does my research matter? The introspection such a question inevitably entails will (so it is to be hoped) ensure that one avoids the emptiness of ‘abstract empiricism’ or the unintelligibility of obscure ‘grand theory’ (Mills, 2000).

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