

Getting Back to “So What?”

Teaching to the ‘So What?’ in Critical Media Studies

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Radio, television, film and the other products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities . . . Media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values . . .

– Douglas Kellner, “Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism and Media Culture”

I often begin my media studies courses with the above reading by Douglas Kellner. It’s a great way to introduce new students to media culture and the political project of critical media studies, as well as to refresh the memory of those already familiar with our field and its objectives. Kellner’s piece is clear and concise, and it typically produces excellent discussions about the ubiquity of media in our everyday lives, media’s connections to power, and the larger stakes of media literacy and scholarship. At this point, I also talk with students about the nature of research as one of accumulation and conversation, as scholars build their knowledge from those who have delved previously into similar material, as well as expand those discussions in ways that allow others to join in. Many of the students get this early on, and tell me of continuing our classroom discussions with their friends and family members.

Later in the semester, as I’m discussing guidelines for final projects, I remind students that their work is meant not only to explore questions about media texts, consumers, and/or producers, but also to connect those bits of popular culture to the larger sociopolitical contexts of which they are part. Additionally, I encourage them to reflect critically on why their research matters, to attend to the “So what?” questions of relevance to which Kellner calls attention. I often drive this point home by reading the final paragraphs of two of the most influential texts in feminist media studies: Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema” and Julie D’Acci’s “Defining Women.” For in both texts, the authors move beyond their particular research topics and conclusions via a call to arms meant to motivate readers toward progressive sociocultural change.

Whenever I do this, the students typically sit silent and rapt, as if this moment were profound, revelatory, significant. And for most it is. In being asked to connect the dots between text and context, between discourse and power, between research and social change, they understand themselves not just as students but also as political subjects engaged in meaningful work and dialogue that has significance beyond academe. Many turn their final papers into blog posts, conference presentations, or journal articles to amplify their findings and continue the conversations.

I raise these pedagogical practices because, when I began graduate school in the early 1990s, there was little need for such reminders of the relevance of media scholarship. Poststructuralist theorists were challenging ahistorical and universalizing master narratives, cultural studies was all the rage, research on identity was proliferating, and the mainstream media were still massified enough to be a common point of concern for media scholars. Questions of power were central to almost everyone's research at that time, and practically everyone saw their scholarship as relevant on a large scale.

I don't see that investment among many media scholars today, nor do I see that theoretical foundation as underpinning a good portion of the work in our field. As neoformalist approaches to aesthetics and narrative have diffused, as celebrity and media industries have become "hot" topics, and as studies of participatory culture and social networking take consumer agency for granted, questions of power seem increasingly shunted to the side, if not ignored altogether. Meanwhile, most questions about the relevance of media scholarship seem to be about career advancement and public exposure more than social change.

I'm beginning to develop some theories as to why this trend is happening, and I hope we can use them for discussion during this roundtable. In particular, we might discuss the effects of neoliberalism and corporate professionalization on academic research and values, as well as the expansion of media studies into subfields resistant to questions of power and the ghettoizing of such questions within identity-based research.

That said, I'd also like us to talk concretely about how we might re-center questions of power and relevance in media studies today, particularly by discussing our pedagogy. How do we as teachers instill concerns about power and politics in our students? How do we model this practice for them? What examples from media scholarship and media culture do we use? What opportunities do we create for students so that they can model this practice for those outside our classrooms? How might our approaches to these practices change based on the level of students we teach, the rank of instructor we are, and the type of institution where we're employed?