

Digital media studies futures

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Television and media studies embraced diverse methodologies as scholars sought to interrogate textuality, social contexts, economic and industrial imperatives, and policy and audience formations. Media studies has always existed on the fuzzy boundary line (or border war, depending on your perspective) between the humanities and the social sciences; its hybrid nature has often provoked debates about the future of the field. Current prescriptions for the future of media and cultural studies from John Hartley and Graeme Turner provide new directions for researchers; our attempt here is to add to their provocations and think through some of the research and collaboration opportunities of digital media studies futures while pointing toward the economic, institutional, and disciplinary challenges of further enriching and hybridizing media studies. While we take seriously the critiques made by Graeme Turner (2012) against a small slice of scholarship on creative industries, new media studies, and/or convergence culture studies, we find it important to stress the variety and depth of digital media scholarship as well as the theoretical and methodological vigor of “new” media studies. We also want to stress a wider array of digital media scholarship than Turner acknowledges and point to the ways that critical race, feminist, queer, postcolonial and globalization scholars interrogate digital poetics and politics and open up new pedagogical and research horizons.

As scholars interested in game studies and digital media studies, we argue that future media scholars will need to do even more to talk and work across disciplinary boundaries. Game studies and digital culture studies are not simply media studies. Computer scientists, software studies scholars, game designers, designers (in fields from interaction design to human computer interaction to industrial design), cultural anthropologists,

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sociologists, psychologists, and education policy and curriculum researchers, to name a few, are interested in creating and analyzing games and using games to address social and cultural issues. As scholars, we must rethink the ways that digital technologies ask us to grapple with diverse methodologies necessary to produce research questions and knowledge, and how conversations about digital culture must work within and among the sectors mentioned above. Since game studies is not always media studies, how can media studies scholars participate in fields that transect technology, design, humanities, and social science departments, and in conversations that happen both inside and outside the academy? What methods of inquiry, what questions about participation, access, context, or engagement can we explore, and what do we need to learn to be able to participate in conversations about media cultures that are increasingly algorithmic and code-based? It is our contention that media studies scholars have important things to say about web-, network-, and game-based communication forms and experiences, but we risk irrelevance if we do not grapple with both the opportunity and the challenge of the digital. As John Hartley argues, media studies increasingly requires “new competencies,” “new horizons,” and “new problem situations” in order to explore the dynamics of systems that depend on technological protocols and scientific principles as much, if not more, than linguistic, visual, and sonic style (2012: 9).

Scholars, activists, and educators are using games and digital media to teach 21st-century literacies and approaching various media forms as opportunities for teaching system-based and design-based thinking. Too many scholars to mention are working through the relationship between diverse but interlinked media platforms, technologies, and experiences, challenging “medium-specific” modes of analysis that have been central to some cinema and television studies approaches. New models of spectatorship, sharing, the dynamics of platforms, ecosystems of communication activity, norms and transgression, and distribution and circulation are being elaborated and debated. Feminist/queer digital media studies expands our understanding of the effect of networks on the creation and evolution of gendered and sexual subjectivities.

But excitement about digital media can bleed into scholarly apprehension. Scholars interested in the open and international flow of “born digital” work worry about geotracking; we need to recognize the often national contingency of material used in multimedia/digital scholarship. Scholars interested in writing histories of emerging media wonder how technologies/platforms and post-structuralist historiographic method mix. Researchers examining online and networked identities and cultures revise ethical guidelines for new types of research projects and wonder how to exercise good judgment when conducting research on provocative issues such as sexting, how to be fair to participants/communities, and how to resist the cooptation of research to feed moral panics.

The products of digital media are too often discussed as objects void of materiality – ethereal objects or simply “experiences” without a physical presence. However, Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller remind us: “Before there can be a story to analyze, a message to decode, or a pattern to identify in collective or individual media use, there has to be a physical medium, a technical means of communication” (2012: 10). These technical means – cell phones, laptops, game consoles, e-readers, server farms, and so on – contribute to the increasing amount of e-waste generated every time we search, text,

play, tweet, remix, or update our Facebook statuses. Digital media studies should not ignore the significant environmental impact of the material outputs of our digital lives. This involves tracing related objects through their entire life cycle – extraction, processing, assembly, distribution, consumption and disposal.

Digital media studies also means thinking through a variety of issues involving the nature, type, and speed of academic labor. How will media futures affect scholars and teachers working in a variety of contexts and types of institutions? How much do we need to know about coding and programming? If we didn't learn coding or design skills in graduate school or our prior professional lives, how do we go about acquiring these skills within the frenetic rhythms of academic life? How do we combine established research methodologies with emerging ones (e.g. data visualization, big data, etc.)? Given resource differences between institutions, who gets to work and play with new methods?

We love platforms such as *Flow*, *MediaCommons*, and *In Media Res*, but we believe that there needs to be a recognition that not everyone will be able to (or needs to) build their own platforms and that we need to find ways in the digital humanities and media studies to value both the creation and use of software and platforms. We are afraid that in an era of shrinking budgets, institutions and departments may be attracted by the allure of digital media studies' "newness" and the way that "new" media courses attract students without realizing the significant investments of time and resources that doing digital media studies well requires. Digital media studies depends on capital for the purchase, maintenance, and space for computer lab/studio space and new forms of learning environments. We also want to make sure that "new" media studies remains a felicitous space for work on gender, sexuality, race, and class and for diverse scholars who challenge the too often described conflation/caricature of the new media scholar as an apolitical white heterosexual male academic. We also want to keep and expand "new" media studies' focus on the particularity of place and conversation between disparately located researchers, as transnational and translocal flows have always been integral to "new" media analyses (in contrast to the lingering influence of the national cinema paradigm and the historical national focus of broadcasting in both commercial and public service broadcasting systems).

New opportunities for pedagogy have been created by the emergence of new networks and platforms. How can we bring media production, even low-level production activities such as blogging, Twitter, basic video editing, and simple game design, into critical studies classrooms? This is not just to move beyond the traditional expository essay, but to allow students interested in media production, design, and expression to start using theories, concepts, and critiques as potential inspirations for narratives, experiments, and projects. Pedagogical models that separate conceptual material from applied skills must be, at long last, replaced with the lessons learned from critical media literacy approaches that do not simply integrate theory with praxis, but fundamentally address these objectives as mutually constitutive. The process of creating something (a blog, a video, a game) will often reveal the constraints of a medium or set of practices, thus underscoring significant conceptual constraints that theory can explain. The limits of a theoretical approach are, similarly, best seen through application and case studies. This theory-praxis model should not only guide a curriculum program overall, but also be reflected in individual courses through what we would call critical production

assignments. Are there ways that the future of media studies could work out the production versus theory/studies issues that often plague our departments?

Theory–praxis models also extend to the relationships media studies scholars should seek to forge with industry, relationships that will benefit our teaching and our research. Too often industry views the academy as outmoded and irrelevant, and sees scholars as misinformed, at best, and threatening, at worst. For example, this is illustrated by the incorrect assumption often held by game developers that game studies researchers are universally investigating the negative effects of game play on young people. Given the early history of game studies, particularly in North America, one can understand the origins of this view. However, by pursuing opportunities to discuss our research to members of the industry at events such as the annual Game Developers Conference (GDC) – as Mia Consalvo, Jane McGonigal and Ian Bogost did for years at their “Game Studies Download” GDC session – we can correct misunderstandings about our work. This can facilitate access to the industrial processes digital media researchers wish to investigate. As we open industry–academy relationships, it is important, of course, to recognize that the objectives of our research will most often not align with the objectives of industry. And thus, collaboration is a negotiation between often incongruous goals.

In the future, it will be harder to define oneself as a television, film, or game studies scholar, in part because economic imperatives in hiring are increasingly demanding multifaceted candidates. Too many people to mention have weighed in on the issues articulated in this thinkpiece, but we hope that this piece elicits further conversation about what types of scholars we are and hope to be and how we can respond to the opportunity and challenge of digital media.

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