Book Review

Why Study the Media?
ROGER SILVERSTONE, 1999
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As the title implies, this book is intended for those who are interested in studying the media: those who want to understand more about how media organisations operate, how messages are mediated through a rapidly increasing range of technological devices, how people receive and make sense of those messages, and how they access and appropriate devices, etc. While this is clearly aimed at students of media and cultural studies, it should also be of great interest to practitioners in the burgeoning media industries and to educators who are increasingly making use of the media for teaching and learning. Silverstone enables his readers to explore why the media constitute an important field of social scientific enquiry.

Throughout the book, emphasis is placed upon the active nature of people's interaction with media: it is not merely a matter of passive consumption of media products and output, but of participation in the communication and meaning-making processes. The expanding array of 'new media' both facilitates and reveals our active participation. So the book is of interest to those wanting to develop their understanding of the very many ways in which media influence our daily lives, and about how we actively make use of and engage with the media within our personal and social circumstances:

It will involve an examination of media as process, as a thing doing and a thing done, and as a thing doing and a thing done at all levels, wherever human beings congregate both in real and in virtual space, where they communicate, where they seek to persuade, inform, entertain, educate, where they seek in a multitude of ways, and with varying degrees of success, to connect one to the other. (p. 4)

It is a scholarly book of ideas, drawing upon a wide range of perspectives and raising a multitude of questions and challenges. However, it is not particularly suited to students just commencing their study of the media, since the breadth of Silverstone's analysis requires his readers to have a reasonable amount of familiarity with the existing literature. For example, his critique of some current forms of media
analysis calls for at least a little knowledge of what those models entail, what assumptions they make and what parameters they consider to be legitimate.

The book contains 16 chapters, divided into five sections. The first three chapters – ‘The texture of experience’, ‘Mediation’ and ‘Technology’ – provide an introduction to the increasingly large terrain that is occupied by the media in the early 21st century and provide the context for the analyses presented in subsequent sections. “... it is because the media are central to our everyday lives that we must study them ... as social and cultural as well as political and economic dimensions of the modern world” (p. 2).

‘Textual Claims and Analytical Strategies’, the second section, is about the mechanics of mediation: how the media seek to connect with us, to claim our attention, and how we respond to them. Here the chapters cover ‘Rhetoric’ – how meanings and messages are constructed, shared and understood; ‘Poetics’ – how stories are told and interpreted; and ‘Erotics’ – the pleasures derived by audiences from media output of numerous kinds. In the third section, ‘Dimensions of Experience’, the focus is upon the mechanisms of engagement; ‘Play’, ‘Performance’ and ‘Consumption’. These examine how people interact with media, not just as passive consumers, but as active mediators. The fourth section, ‘Locations of Action and Experience’, is concerned with where people engage with the media – in the home, in the community and throughout the globe.

The final section, ‘Making Sense’, is concerned with exploring “the media’s centrality for our capacity to create and sustain order in our daily lives and for our capacity to find and position ourselves within that order” (p. 114). It explores three dimensions which help us to make sense of our place within the world and the social order. In the final chapter, ‘Towards a new media polities’, Silverstone returns to issues of power within society and argues that the media can no longer be considered as marginal – they are now so central to economic, political, cultural and social practices that we must study the media in order to understand global society at the beginning of the third Millennium.

In terms of physical size, this is a relatively thin volume. But in terms of its scope, the issues it addresses and the challenges it presents, this a hugely valuable contribution to the literature. It is an important book that deserves a wide readership.

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