

How to Do Media and Cultural Studies

Second edition

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS THIS BOOK ABOUT?

How do you start to conduct your own research? Where do you go to get ideas? How do you design a good research project? How does it relate to the rest of your studies? What is the objective of doing research? This book aims to address some of these questions. When you start your first independent research project you are joining a research community with a long and diverse history. How can you know for sure that you are making a genuinely new contribution to the field? How do you know that you have something relevant to say? How can you be confident that your research will be credible? *How to Do Media and Cultural Studies* asks you to think about the philosophy behind the research as you engage in the practicalities of conducting research. It is aimed primarily at students of media and culture and explains some of the most common and useful methods of research that students can undertake, and describes the processes of designing, conducting and writing a successful student research project.

Research methods in media and cultural studies

This book introduces students to a range of research methods which they can draw on in conducting their own investigations. It is designed to be used by students working independently or in the classroom to support modules in research methods or dissertation preparation. Research methods classes are relatively recent additions to the rostra of modules taught on media and cultural studies courses at undergraduate level with the consequence that the teaching of research methods can lag behind other teaching in media and cultural studies. However, an understanding of research methods is a crucial element underpinning what any researcher does, whether this is explicitly acknowledged or not. How we operationalize our ideas; how we interrogate our field; how we construct our questions – these are important questions which go to the heart of epistemology of the field. Without thinking about these issues we relegate ourselves and our field to unreflective, subjective description. In order to address these concerns directly, this new edition includes two new chapters in Part 1.

PART 1: THINKING, THEORY AND PRACTICE

This second edition includes a new section, which presents some ideas for considering, firstly, *How we know anything about anything?* and secondly, *Why do we do Media and Cultural Studies?*

The first chapter of Part 1 investigates some of the principles which underpin research in most fields of study. Here we ask whether it is possible to know anything at all. How can we prove what we think we know? Chapter 1 investigates **epistemology** or the science of knowledge – what are the means by which we can prove or test our ideas and theories? What is it possible for us to say about the world? This chapter offers a general overview of the history of ideas and considers how important concepts such as epistemology, logic and argument inform our thinking. We discuss four different ‘ways of knowing’ which we label: ‘orality’, ‘classical’, ‘modern’ and ‘post-modern’. Understanding these shifts in epistemology will help you to build a well-constructed argument and to understand some of the principles behind the research methods we discuss later.

The second chapter, ‘Why Do We Do Media and Cultural Studies?’, looks at the rationale and motivation underlying communication, media and cultural studies as fields of research. Here we consider how these fields came to be academic fields of study. The title of this book elides the difference between ‘media’ and ‘cultural’ studies and does not refer to the related field of ‘mass communication’ at all; this may cause some controversy among certain quarters as it may suggest a lack of recognition of the differences between these quite discrete academic areas. However, it is my contention that the fields have more in common than not, and this will continue to be so as the media blend into everyday life and all aspects of our cultural lives become increasingly ‘mediated’. Scholars from every field may benefit from a consideration of what is happening in the neighbouring fields. For inter-disciplinarity to rise above the hollow buzzword it sometimes seems to be, it is necessary for us to look beyond the artificial boundaries which separate our fields, to consider what motivates us to research media and culture. In this chapter we briefly survey the history of research into media and culture and consider its location within academe. Chapter 2 explores the political motivation which is at the heart of our academic research, and touches on the institutional imperatives which shape it.

PART 2: METHODS OF ANALYSIS

The second part of *How to Do Media and Cultural Studies* offers practical guidance to help you conduct your own research. We begin, in Chapter 3, with some ideas for getting started on your research project. Some suggestions are offered on how to originate your own ideas and how to design your

research question; we also give advice on how to write a project proposal and how to design and conduct your project. The subsequent three chapters of Part 2 present you with more detailed support and advice, targeted to whether you are researching *industries*, *texts* or *audiences*.

We have learned the three-stage model of communication almost as a mantra: 'sender–message–receiver' or 'encoding/text/decoding' – it doesn't matter what you call it – we often conceptualize the communication process as constituting two distinct sets of people, *producers* and *audiences*, brought together through the *media*. As academics we could choose whether to study media *texts*, the readers or *audiences* who consumed those texts, or the *industries* which produced them. Yet today the reality of the media landscape is undergoing a revolution in the way media and culture are produced, distributed and consumed. The 'Arab Spring' of 2011, for example, taught us that many of our established ideas about mediated communications demand reconsideration. When people protesting in Tahrir Square used their mobile phones to generate, send and receive information via social network sites, we recognized that the traditional distinctions between media producers and consumers had been radically transformed.

In many regards we can see this as a revolution in media control. And at the same time this is an illusory revolution, as the economics of the media industry are still rooted in capitalist modes of production. The material reality is that the ownership of the means of producing messages rests in the hands of multinational corporations such as Microsoft and News International. The precise names may be different ones from those of ten years ago, and perhaps they will be different ones again by the time you read this sentence, but the location of power and wealth in the capitalist system we all inhabit remains unaltered. However much the look of it might change, the feel of it even, the fact remains that our media continue to be dominated by large corporations. At the same time, we realize that culture is increasingly media-dominated with people spending more time than ever using the media in cultural pursuits which are increasingly monetized. The factory system may be dead; we may well live in a 'post-Fordist' society; but it is far from being a post-capitalist one. There is a separation, fundamental to the operation of capital, between 'supplier' and 'consumer' which is echoed in the relationship between 'producer' and 'audience', 'writer' and 'reader'. This relationship is powerfully embedded in a culture dominated by the concept of exchange value. When studying the media (the means by which messages are exchanged), it is necessary to be mindful of the relationship between the party of production and the party of consumption; between the point of origination of the point of consumption, between those crucial functions of capitalist exchange – buying and selling. We would ignore the fundamental power base central to our media system if we did otherwise. It is for this reason that we follow the traditional divide to the study of media in the following chapters which are devoted to the study of *industry*, *texts* and *audiences* respectively.

Chapter 4 examines some of the ways we can research the media and cultural *industries*. The methods we focus on here are *archive research*, *discourse analysis*, *interview* and *ethnography*. The advantages and disadvantages of studying media and culture as the product of industries are discussed and the particular issues of access to media producers are considered. In Chapter 5, we think about the methods best suited to the research and analysis of the products of the media and cultural industries, the media *texts* themselves. The films, television programmes, music and performances which form the content of the media are more readily accessed and form the object of analysis for some of the most typical methods of media analysis for undergraduate researchers: *semiotics*, *content analysis* and *discourse analysis*. We also explore a set of methods I label ‘*typological*’ – that is, those methods which consider texts as belonging to particular sets or types. In this section we look at *genre*, *auteur* and *star* study – all methods associated with film studies but applicable to any form of media and culture. The final of these large chapters, Chapter 6, looks at how to research the *audience* or the users or recipients of mediated messages. There are some special considerations to be taken into account when researching audiences. Here we concentrate on how you might use *surveys*, *focus groups*, *ethnography* and *oral history interviews*. Each of these methods are discussed and guidance given on how to conduct them.

An important characteristic of each of these main chapters is the presentation of ‘case studies’ to illustrate the various research methods covered. These ‘case studies’ are not proposed as canonical or typical; they are simply examples of the relevant research method and have been chosen to help students understand how that method is used and applied. Some are ‘classics’ of the field; others are relative newcomers. They are a rather subjective collection of books and articles which I hope will illustrate the methods discussed and inspire you to conduct your own research. I am sure that lecturers and students will find examples of their own to supplement those suggested here. Suggestions for further reading are given at the end of each chapter along with some ideas for activities to take your studies further. There are also weblinks to some relevant examples of research papers to support your learning.

PART 3: PRESENTING YOUR WORK

In the final chapter, Chapter 7, matters of how to complete your dissertation are considered – how to write up the dissertation and how to present it. This edition also includes a new *glossary* of key words which are highlighted in the text in bold. I hope you will find *How to Do Media and Cultural Studies* a useful book; it is intended to be helpful and constructive. The proof of its worth is in your work. I wish you every success in your research project.

Jane Stokes