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Cultural Diamond in 3D? (Diamond in the Rough)

Clarifying the Relationship between Media Studies

and Cultural Sociology

By Peter Brinson

The nascent field of cultural sociology can be described as anything but unified. Its multidisciplinary roots and influences have left a lasting imprint on scholarly activity in this broad field of study: classical social theorists, cultural studies scholars, linguists, philosophers, anthropologists, communications scholars, historians, and sociologists are frequently cited in contemporary cultural sociology. Given the unique social contexts and disciplinary conventions of all these contributors, it is no wonder that there is widespread disagreement about what culture is and what the goal of studying “culture” should be. It is instructive, for example, that few scholars accept others’ definitions of culture without modification or qualification. “Culture” is a term that defies simple definition, and

it would be a Herculean task to incorporate the essence and significance of the cultural realm in any parsimonious way. As is to be expected in these circumstances, strong theoretical arguments and polemics abound about what is legitimate enquiry in the field of cultural sociology (Alexander 2003; Bourdieu 1977; Peterson and Anand 2004; Swidler 2001; Wuthnow 1987).

Rather than add to this contest, I have a different agenda in this paper. I aim to draw together some of the diverse theories, methods, and goals of cultural sociologists in a pragmatic way. I use the term “pragmatic” to indicate both the everyday use of the word and in the philosophical sense, what William James meant when he spoke of the pragmatic method as “primarily a method of settling metaphysical dispute that otherwise might be interminable” (James 1981, p. 25). For social science, pragmatism offers a perspective that judges a theory or analytic approach by the contribution it makes towards explaining some empirical phenomenon. Theories are tools for understanding; not just ends in themselves. Although I acknowledge the vast intellectual and scientific gains that can be made from competition among strong theories through rigorous critique, the benefits come only from moderation or the emergence of a middle ground. One wonders what is gained, for example, by Alexander’s (2003) polemic defense of thick description and structuralism and against the work of Pierre Bourdieu and sociologists working in the production perspective (e.g., Peterson and Anand 2004), while he simultaneously ignores Bourdieu’s (1977) own critique of structuralism and Swidler’s (2001) critique of thick description! Such works tend to result in an endless circling about the shortcomings of the other’s approach given the criteria of “good” cultural sociology defined on no other basis than the strengths of one’s own approach.

The pragmatic approach I take here evaluates some of the prominent strands of research in cultural sociology according to their own standards and the extent to which they meet their own goals. I view each approach as valuable for answering certain kinds of questions and not others, and for shedding light on some cultural phenomena and not others. Taken together, they comprise a “tool kit” (Swidler 1986) from which scholars may draw in attempting to understand the cultural dimension of life. Such an approach is beneficial in a way that strict adherence to a strong theory is not: an “omnivorous” (Peterson and Simkus 1992) theoretical

approach allows the strengths of one theory to overcome the weaknesses of another theory. We do not need to be content with merely a “thick description” of the cultural realm; rather, a research agenda that employs all the tools that cultural sociology has to offer can move in the direction of what might be called “thick analysis,” in which the full complexity and significance of the cultural dimension of social life can be understood.

I begin from the assumption that “culture” does not constitute a specific area of enquiry or a specific object of study; instead, culture constitutes, first, a dimension of social life and second, a perspective by which the world can be understood. In the first instance, culture is significant for actors in the world; in the second, culture is significant for observers or scholars of the world. In both cases, the noun “culture” actually functions as an adjective (Appadurai 1996). “Culture,” as a noun does not exist; it is merely an analytic construct or a heuristic, shorthand way of referring to all things that are cultural. To clarify what I mean, the sociology of culture, broadly understood to refer to the sociological study of art, literature, music, drama, etc., might actually be better understood as the sociology of cultural objects. Nothing is lost from eliminating the noun, “culture” from our analytic vocabulary; in fact, what we have to gain includes both increased analytic precision and liberation from the recurrent risk of reification of culture both in our thought and our analysis.

It follows from this view of culture (or, the cultural realm) that, in society, everything can be understood culturally. The broad categories of things that sociologists study can all be studied culturally, in addition to being studied materially: structure and agency, macro-level contexts, meso-level organizations and institutions, and micro-level interactions and objects. The fact that such a wide array of objects, ideas, processes, and relations may be studied from the cultural perspective is another reason why the field of cultural sociology appears so fragmented. Naturally, no single theory can account for the cultural dimensions of all of these aspects of social life; hence, the pragmatic approach to cultural sociology I take here.

In this paper, I evaluate one of the most successful attempts to account for the different approaches in cultural sociology, the “cultural diamond” (Griswold 1986; Griswold 2004). After examining the fit between the cultural diamond and the

larger realm of cultural sociology research, I also examine the goodness of fit between the cultural diamond and media studies, a field of interdisciplinary research to which the cultural diamond ought to be particularly applicable. These two examinations show quite clearly that the cultural diamond is in need of being updated. I argue that revising the cultural diamond in light of contemporary research in the sociology of media and cultural sociology can add theoretical and conceptual clarity to the field of cultural sociology, because it provides a way of thinking about how disparate research traditions make sense together. In addition, I argue that bringing media studies squarely under the umbrella of cultural sociology is mutually beneficial for both fields: media studies provides a readily accessible source of empirical data and a thorough test of theories accounted for by the cultural diamond; conversely, cultural sociology can show media studies scholars a way out of a crippling theoretical dilemma: whether to study the media as organizations and technologies or as extrapolations of everyday face-to-face communication.



The Diamond of Cultural Sociology

One of the most fruitful efforts thus far to bring together many of the disparate strands of research in cultural sociology is Wendy Griswold's "cultural diamond" (1986; 2004). Originally published in 1986, the diagram has gone essentially unchanged in two decades. In explaining the diamond, she writes:

The cultural diamond is not a theory. It has nothing to say about how its points might be related, only that they must be related. Nor is it in itself a model, for it implies no causal direction. Any point or linkage may be specified as the dependent variable. Furthermore, each link is an arrow understood to have two heads.... I am contending that cultural analysis demands the investigation of the four points and six connecting lines of this diamond; studies that neglect some points or connections are incomplete. (Griswold 1986, p. 7-8)

The cultural diamond as she presents it in her 2004 textbook is below (see figure 1). It contains four points (social world, creator, receiver, and cultural object) and six linkages, all of which must be accounted for in a thorough explanation of some cultural phenomenon. Using this visual schematic, not only can particular cultural phenomena be described, but also can the relationships among different research traditions in cultural sociology be understood.

The image shows the letters 'CW' in a large, stylized, serif font. The letter 'C' is a light pink color, and the letter 'W' is a light yellow color. The letters are positioned in the center of the page.

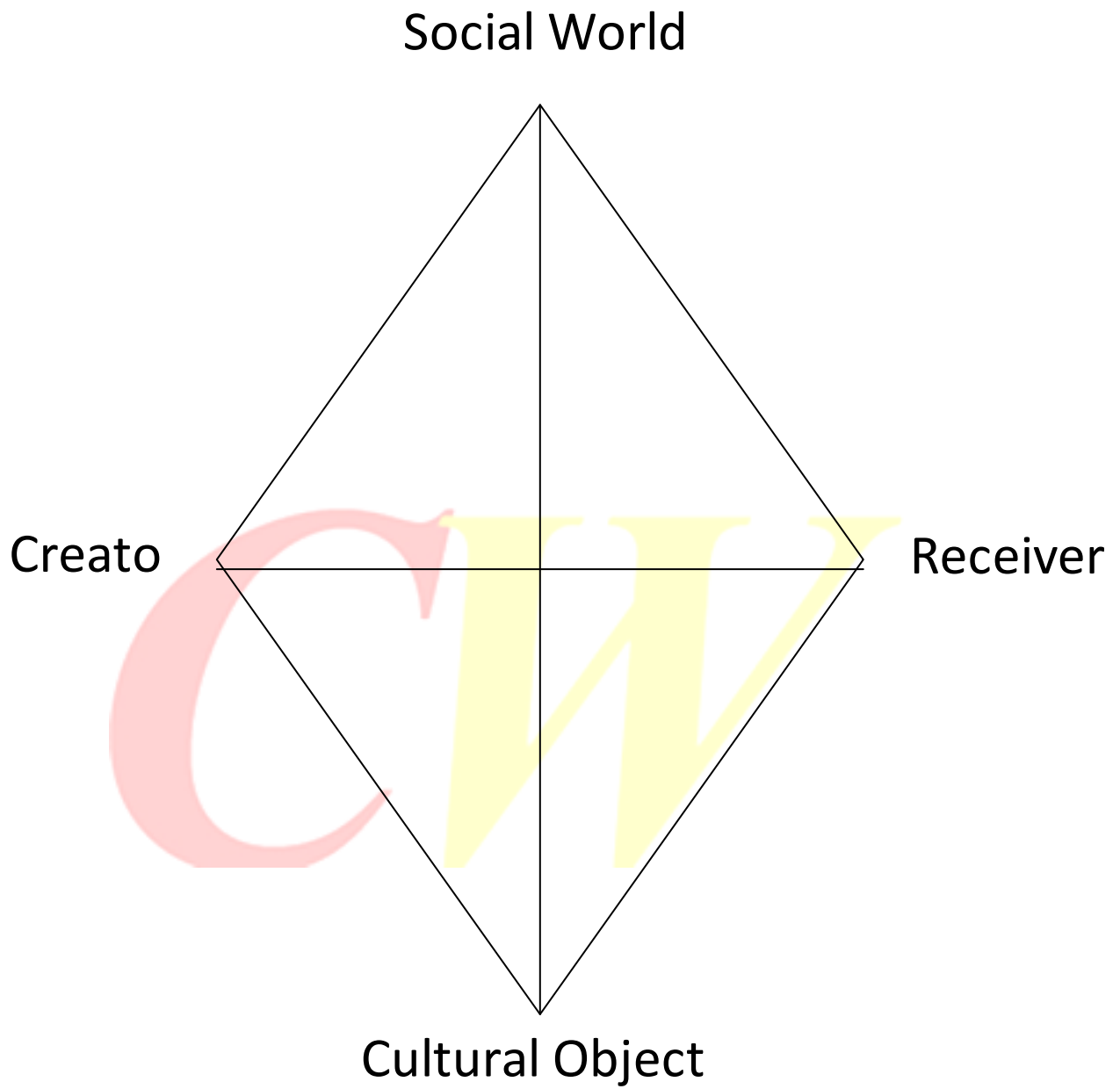


Figure 1: Griswold's Cultural Diamond

In Griswold's original formulation of the cultural diamond (Griswold 1986), she uses the four points on the diamond (which at that time she labeled "world, artist, audience, and cultural object") to account for why certain genres of renaissance plays (other than Shakespeare's) witnessed revivals in popularity at different times since the 17th Century. One genre, city comedies, experienced a revival in London in the 18th Century, and another genre, revenge tragedies, experienced a revival in London in the 20th Century. Griswold uses the factors to which the cultural diamond calls attention in order to explain why this particular pattern of revivals emerged, why plays produced in a previous time for a different group of people somehow resonated with audiences living in a very different world. She convincingly demonstrates that the stories told by the plays were meaningful for audiences because of the way that the underlying messages helped Londoners understand their particular social context at each point in time—how city comedies helped Londoners come to grips with the social and economic mobility people were experiencing in 18th Century London, and how revenge tragedies helped Londoners come to grips with the failing promise of England's welfare state and England's declining colonial status. Additionally, however, changes in the amount of funding available to theaters and the ways that theaters were operated helped to explain why revivals were easier to produce in some times and why there was a virtual absence of revivals during the 19th Century. Thus, the interaction of multiple factors related to the social context, the theatre, the audience, and the play itself combined to produce cultural meaning by way of "an elegant metaphor of their experience" for the revival audience (p. 187). Griswold, in short, makes a convincing argument for taking the cultural diamond seriously in her study.

As the reader may have noticed thus far, the points of the cultural diamond lack analytic specificity and refer in only a general way to relevant sociological factors that might explain cultural phenomena. Thus, it is unsurprising that each point on the cultural diamond has become the arena for whole research traditions in cultural sociology. On the "Social World" point of the diamond, sociologists have attempted to understand how the taken-for-granted values of a society and macro-

level characteristics of a society shape how people understand the world. One of the dominant understandings of culture—as shared “webs of significance” (Geertz 1973) and as “constitutive of social order” (Sewell 1985)—shows how important the concept of the “social world” has been in the ways cultural sociologists think and talk. Some of the foundational contributions to cultural sociology have been to illuminate the dialectical relationship between macro-level structures like religion, politics, and the economy and individual-level beliefs and values (Marx 2000; Weber 1998). More recent theorizing has concerned how nation-states are culturally constructed (Anderson 1991) and how culture is changing in an era of globalization (Appadurai 1996). But even in the cultural activities of everyday life, one’s social context matters. Readers of a novel in one country may understand it differently than readers in another country, based on the country’s history and relative position in the world (Griswold 1987).

On the “Creator” point of the diamond, the production perspective of culture has exemplified research into how cultural meaning is shaped by the organizations, institutions, and processes that create cultural objects (Peterson and Anand 2004). In short, what the production perspective demonstrates is that cultural objects do not simply embody the “collective conscious” of a people or the values and morals of a society; the process of producing cultural objects independently affects the characteristics of the resulting objects. Exemplary works in this perspective have shown that the production of cultural objects is shaped by the demands of capitalism (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002), copyright laws and market competition (Griswold 1981), complex relationships among organizations (Hirsch 1972), efforts by culture producers to understand what its audience wants (Gitlin 1983), class- and race-based political conflict (DiMaggio 1982b; Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie 1997), and even entire “art worlds” (Becker 1982).

On the “Receiver” point of the diamond, much scholarly effort has been devoted to understanding the processes by which people receive and interpret cultural messages. As the hermeneutic tradition tells us, all cultural objects, from literature and art to clothing, food, and consumer goods, can be read as texts. This means not only that these objects have symbolic significance other than their perceptible form, but also that it is up to the “reader” to read what that symbolic significance is. People in different “interpretive communities” are likely to read texts differently

(Fish 1980). The body of research in this area has shown that people are not “cultural dopes,” who mindlessly and uncritically accept every cultural message they receive; rather, the receiver of a cultural message has some degree of autonomy to make their own meaning, which may be entirely different from what the creator intended. Thus, working-class youth interpret a school’s authority differently than middle-class youth (Willis 1981); members of a subculture may appropriate a cultural object and redefine it to suit their own ends (Hebdige 1988); and readers of novels actively select which novels they read and how they evaluate them according to their own social position and values (Radway 1984).

Finally, on the “Cultural Object” point of the diamond, it would be beyond the scope of this paper to even begin to discuss this area of inquiry. Griswold (1986, p. 5) defines cultural objects simply as “shared significance embodied in form.” Such a definition includes all varieties of the arts, consumer goods, language, religion, ideology, and so on; it should go without saying that endless volumes of sociological theorizing and research have been concerned with the characteristics of cultural objects and why they matter. To put it simply, content matters. The characteristics of the cultural object itself have important effects in the generation of cultural meaning that are not reducible to processes of production, reception, or the social world. To give one example of how this perspective is applied in cultural research, the concepts of binary codes, narratives, myths, and genres have been used to make claims about the meaning inherent in objects. Drawing on Levi-Strauss’ (1966) argument that binary codes structure our systems of classification, which help us reduce infinite empirical complexity into manageable conceptual dichotomies, sociologists argue that the narrative structures of films (Wright 1975), the concepts of genre and character in the news (Jacobs 1996), and the “democratic and counter-democratic codes” that are present in American political discourse (Alexander and Smith 1993) shape the meanings that people infer from cultural objects.

The cultural diamond, therefore, incorporates a wide array of causal factors and research traditions into its framework. However, the cultural diamond lacks specificity in all of its points, except for the “Cultural Object.” Both for Griswold’s own study and for the overall field of cultural sociology, the cultural diamond

hides as much as it reveals. In Griswold's study of renaissance play revivals, for example, it is unclear to whom the "Creator" and "Receiver" applies. While Griswold emphasizes the characteristics of London theatre companies in her discussion of the "Creator," one should also consider the plays' authors and the intentions of the directors when trying to discover why the plays were meaningful. The relationships among these diverse sets of actors can hardly be assumed to be unproblematic. Similarly, Griswold only speaks of the audience in aggregate, an understandable approach given her historical study. Nevertheless, I would argue that, theoretically, it is the individual receiver who controls the reception process, not reducible to their relevant demographic category. Thus, in both of those points, the individual creator and receiver should be disaggregated from the groups to which they belong. Finally, the "Social World" point in Griswold's study might refer to anything from England's position in the global hierarchy of nations to the social interactions in people's London neighborhoods—an extraordinarily wide range of variation. Here again, the "Social World" might be usefully disaggregated into more specific elements.

These deficiencies can also be seen in the various research traditions in cultural sociology that are excluded by the cultural diamond as currently constructed. For example, a sizable literature in cultural sociology focuses on how social and economic inequalities both create cultural differences and are recreated by those differences. Most research in cultural sociology and stratification proceeds from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, whose concepts of cultural capital and the habitus have been the starting points for cultural sociology ever since (Bourdieu 1977; 1984). In Bourdieu's ethnography of social classes in contemporary France (Bourdieu 1984), he shows that people with higher amounts of cultural capital reap symbolic profits, which can be translated into higher amounts of economic capital. For example, the forms of artistic appreciation and manners of speaking that are acquired through high levels of education become markers of high status, and it is precisely these competences and dispositions that are rewarded by the educational system. Subsequent empirical research has confirmed that cultural capital is linked to success in school, educational attainment, and family outcomes (DiMaggio 1982a; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985). But the benefits of cultural capital may vary dramatically from country to country. In the United States, cultural

“omnivorousness” may be more highly valued than in France, where elite cultural competence can allow people to reap material rewards (Erickson 1996; Lamont 1992; Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson and Simkus 1992). A new variant of research on cultural capital has explored the way that cultural capital creates and reinforces boundaries among groups. The concept of exclusion based on cultural markers of status has been an increasingly important insight in cultural sociology (Bryson 1996; Lamont 1992; Lamont and Lareau 1988).

Bourdieu’s other key concept, the habitus, allows us to make sense of how people are active participants in this process of social reproduction. In the impenetrable language of Bourdieu (1977, p. 72), the habitus is composed of

Systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor.

What Bourdieu means by this is that individuals adopt a set of dispositions, attitudes, and beliefs that structure the actions that they take, at the same time that those dispositions, attitudes, and beliefs are determined by one’s position in the socioeconomic hierarchy. People in different status groups and classes will exhibit patterned differences in their actions and dispositions as though they were intentional or imposed by some external rule; but instead, the patterns are a result of the unconscious assessment of one’s position in society and the corresponding appropriateness of particular actions. The habitus, therefore, is the mechanism by which people carry markers of their social status in their body and communicate that status through their actions. As Bourdieu has famously illustrated, social status is carried and displayed in body types, one’s choice of sports, and what one chooses to eat; in a word, in lifestyle (Bourdieu 1984). The difference that “the habitus” makes in individuals’ educational attainment and chances for social mobility have been amply demonstrated (Lareau 2002; McLeod 1995).

Thus, group-level variables like race, class, and religious affiliation do not fit easily into Griswold's cultural diamond. Neither does the cultural diamond reflect the sociological insight that a person's informal social interactions and group memberships exert a powerful influence on an individual's cultural practices and beliefs. Fine's symbolic interactionist approach to the creation of culture (Fine 1979; Fine and Kleinman 1979) and the civic engagement research of Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) show that cultural practices and beliefs are created through informal social interaction, a view consistent with the notion that culture is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1980). None of these important meso-level predictors of culture fit easily into Griswold's cultural diamond, where micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis are blurred.

The Cultural Diamond in 3D

It might be objected at this point that this critique of Griswold's cultural diamond—however accurate it may be—is irrelevant, since the cultural diamond is not a theory or a model. As a visual, schematic checklist, the cultural diamond is not intended to explain anything, and some degree of oversimplification and omission is inevitable. I agree with all of these points. Nevertheless, I would insist that the critique is indeed relevant, not because Griswold was wrong for creating it, but because she was right to do it. Developing a relatively coherent schematic of how all elements of cultural sociology fit together is a worthwhile endeavor, both for pedagogical purposes and for the sake of clarifying our own research endeavors. What are we analyzing? What are we missing? What approach is best for what we seek to explain? What actors and relationships must we pay attention to? How might our research fit with others' research projects in cultural sociology? Visual schematics can provide a sort of mental checklist that can help us answer these questions. The cultural diamond remains a valuable tool for students and researchers interested in the problem of cultural meaning. Further, Griswold's effort to bring disparate strands of cultural research into a single conceptual framework helps illuminate the connections among independent scholarly ventures

and brings an element of clarity to an otherwise muddled conceptualization of “culture” (which, as I pointed out at the beginning of this paper, has no widely agreed upon definition or referent). The goal of this critique, therefore, is to contribute to the elucidation of what a *cultural* sociology entails.

I propose, therefore, to expand the cultural diamond to incorporate some of those elements of cultural sociology that the original leaves out. Of course, expanding the schematic to be *as precise as possible* would be a worthless exercise; a “cultural dodecahedron” rather than a cultural diamond would probably prove quite unhelpful. Nevertheless, I believe that the cultural diamond can be usefully expanded in a way that retains its simplicity while also allowing us a more accurate rendering of the field of cultural sociology. I propose that the cultural diamond should be made three-dimensional (see Figure 2). The four original points remain the same, except that we can now specify that the creator and the receiver to be individuals, micro-level actors engaging in the sending and receiving of a cultural message (via a cultural object). The social world remains a broad, macro-level context, but its realm is delimited by the addition of two new points: the organization/institution and the informal group. The organization or institution would include such things as the state, the market, the medium of television, the art museum, the theatre, the corporation, and so on; essentially any identifiable organization of people, relations, and activities would be located here. The informal group refers not only to the people that an individual interacts with on an everyday level, but also demographic and cultural groups of which people are members: gender, race, occupational status, age, political group, subculture, and so on.

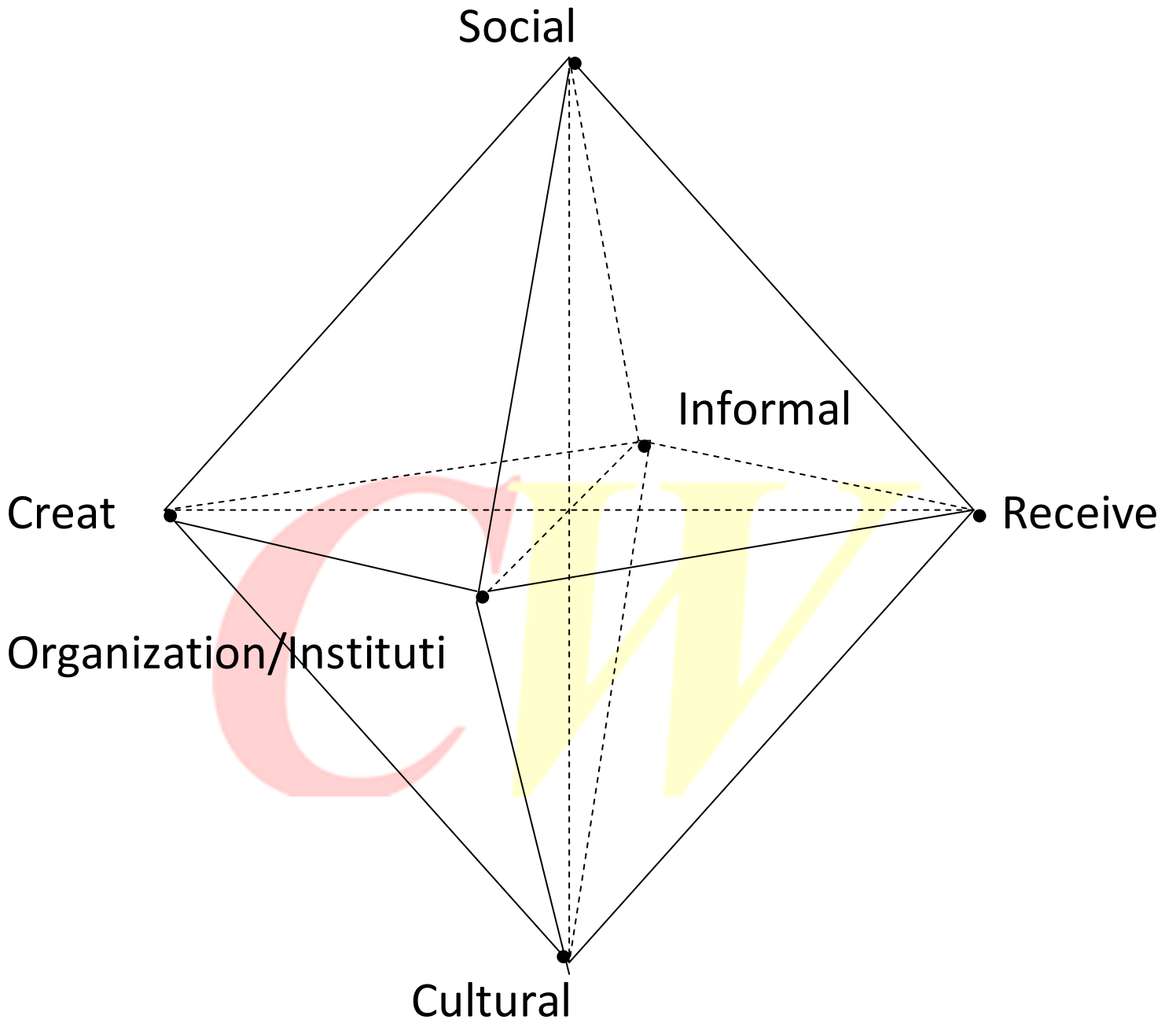


Figure 2: The New Cultural Diamond

By making the cultural diamond three-dimensional, we bring additional analytic precision to the schematic by disaggregating the macro-“social world” from its meso-level structures and clarifying the micro-level status of “creator” and “receiver.” But why three dimensions? To answer that, I could simply say, “why not?” Diamonds are actually three-dimensional, after all, and our repeated use of two-dimensional figures and diagrams (Bourdieu notwithstanding) seems to be the bizarre product of the fact that most of our scholarly work is done on paper. We have a harder time portraying three dimensions in texts other than pop-up books. Additionally, the third dimension is of the same kind as the first two dimensions: length, width, and height are all measures of physical distance. True, I could have simply made the diamond into a hexagon, but to do so would be stylistically distasteful.

There is, however, a more serious reason why I am proposing that the cultural diamond be three-dimensional. That is that adding a dimension to our schematic understanding of cultural sociology begs the question: “well, what about a fourth dimension?” A reconsideration of the three-dimensional cultural diamond shows that the sociological concern with action—not to mention Swidler’s (1986; 2001) well-founded concern with what people actually *do* with cultural meaning—is not entirely represented in the schematic. We see clearly in the diagram that culture shapes action, but we do not see clearly how action in turn shapes culture, how action remakes the world. Through the actions of the receiver, new cultural meanings might be created, informal groups might be altered, production processes might be changed, and so on. The question of whether society experiences continuity or change cannot be clearly represented in the cultural diamond. It is precisely this question that the fourth dimension addresses; the fourth dimension is, after all, time. Given a cultural action in which a particular cultural meaning is created, what difference does it make in society at time $t = 1$ compared to $t = 0$? Considering the cultural diamond in its fourth dimension shows that the cultural diamond (which is, after all, a *structure* in both the physical and sociological senses of the word) is continuously changing shape over time due to continuing social action. Theoretically, sociological analysis can specify how actions change the structure over time. A four-dimensional cultural diamond can give us a way of thinking about how that happens: the degree of change or continuity due to the

action resulting from some cultural process can be specified in relation to each of the six points and 15 linkages in the diamond.

In the remainder of this paper, I apply the three-dimensional cultural diamond to the interdisciplinary field of media studies in order to illustrate the utility of the cultural diamond in accounting for cultural processes. I show that each of the six points of the cultural diamond calls our attention to important and unique problematics faced by media studies researchers, and I show that a full analysis of any single communication attempt via the mass media must take into account all elements of the cultural diamond. After conducting this exercise, I argue that both cultural sociology and media studies stand to benefit by bringing media studies squarely into the realm of cultural sociology.

The Diamond Applied to Media Studies

The cultural diamond illustrates the connections among many different research traditions in cultural sociology and in media studies, but more importantly, for an empirically-minded researcher, the cultural diamond can be useful for the analysis of a single cultural action at a single point in time. This limitation of the utility of the cultural diamond is crucial: it cannot address long-term changes, the formation of habits, the construction of ideologies and value systems, the accumulated effects of cultural processes. The cultural diamond is strictly synchronic in scope. What the cultural diamond allows an empirically-minded researcher to do is to analyze a single communication attempt according to 1) the relevant social actors and institutions (the six points), 2) the structural relationships among them (15 linkages), and 3) the meanings ultimately given to the communication attempt and the action that is ultimately taken because of it (the fourth dimension). The unit of analysis, therefore, is a single communication attempt, be it vocal, written, gestured, or embodied in some material form. In Habermas' (1979) terms, the cultural diamond shows how a single "speech act" can be analyzed according to the structural and cultural dynamics of relevant actors and institutions. In the review of the literature that follows, I ask that the reader imagine a single news story, and I argue that the cultural diamond can account for the factors that shape

the ultimate meaning of the news story and can suggest what actions an audience member might take as a result.

Point 1: The Social World. Integral to any study of the media is a careful specification of the historical time and place that is the setting for the study, since much can be learned about communication attempts by the media simply by situating the communication in its macro-level social context. Such a perspective includes what might be considered the *zeitgeist* and the set of taken-for-granted assumptions about the way the world works as relevant factors in sociological analysis. From the perspectives of ordinary people, those things which are more or less inconceivable of being changed are problematized by researchers. For example, if a study is done about media in the United States around the end of the 20th Century, one would want to consider the position of the U.S. in the global economy, the nature of capitalism in the U.S. at the time, the dominance of classical liberalism as a political philosophy, the overall development and wealth of the society, and the tradition of press freedom and minimal government intervention that has characterized the mass media in the United States. To illustrate this approach, Gitlin (1978; 2001) has argued that the most important problem for sociologists of media to address is the way that mass media has pervaded every aspect of people's everyday lives in the U.S. today. Because people are subject to hundreds, if not thousands, of mass mediated communication attempts every day, Gitlin (2001) argues that people adopt various "navigational strategies" in relation to media: some people are "fans" who consume mass media avidly, others are "critics," and still others are "abolitionists." The famous Lippmann-Dewey debate (Dewey 1988; Lippmann 1965) also illustrates this perspective: both authors address the particular problem of how a democratic public can be a reality in an age when the decisions we make transcend the direct experience and knowledge that any person is capable of having. Both authors argue that the mass media play an indispensable role in helping people formulate the pictures in our heads that we have of the world. Finally, Appadurai (1996) has updated these insights by suggesting that the mass media are increasingly important in our current era of globalization, characterized by increasingly ubiquitous flows of people, ideas, money, and culture around the world. In short, the macro-level context is crucial for understanding the meaning of mass mediated communications, however difficult to operationalize it may be.

Point 2: Organization/Institution. The above discussion of the social world must be distinguished from the political economy approach to mass media. Both are concerned with the ways that economic and political systems shape media content, but the political economy approach tends to be much more specific, highlighting specific organizational forms and institutional characteristics of the mass media industries. Political economy approaches have been broadly defined to include “the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption” of media messages (Mosco 1996, p. 25). But in practice, most studies refer to the influences of the economic system, the state, and the communications industry on the production and distribution of media messages. The work of Robert McChesney exemplifies the political economy approach. McChesney’s (1993) historical study of the political battle between commercial broadcasters and “reformers” over government regulation of the radio industry illustrates that the subsequent operations of a media industry is powerfully shaped by the set of government regulations that is applied to it and by the motive of capitalist accumulation. His later work (McChesney 1999) has extended this insight to the mass media as a whole, and he argues that current deregulation of media industries and consolidation of media ownership by large multinational corporations is limit on freedom of speech and a threat to democracy in the U.S. and abroad. Though this is a broad claim, analyses of the 1996 Telecommunications Act that dramatically loosened restrictions on radio station ownership shows that a wave of mergers of acquisitions have had far reaching effects: the consolidation of power by a handful of corporations, streamlining and automation of production techniques, declines in local jobs and content, declines in minority ownership, and further definition of “the public interest” in free market, corporatist terms (Aufderheide 1997; Drushel 1998; Fairchild 1999; Huntemann 1999). Similarly, the view that the profit motive and need for advertisers drives has caused many corporate media outlets to alter their news content in favor of capitalist interests has been supported by both anecdotal (Bagdikian 2000) and more “scientific” evidence (Gilens and Hertzman 2000). Other political economy approaches have focused on the power of the state to influence the news content of mass media. Most notably, Herman and Chomsky (1988) have shown that foreign policy coverage in the New York Times have been dramatically skewed in favor of the interests of the U.S. government, and they argue that a “propaganda model” of the mass media explains the biased coverage that is the result. Recent research has focused on the differences between public and private media and the special problems faced by government-funded media outlets (Alhassan 2005; Aufderheide 1991; Aufderheide 1996; Calabrese and Burgelman 1999; Hoynes 2003; McNair 1999; Syvertsen 1991). Finally, the increasing speed and scope of globalization has stimulated interest in what happens to media systems when governments undergo

dramatic transitions, like in East Germany and Bosnia (Merritt 1994; Taylor and Kent 2000), or more gradual transitions to a market economy, like China (Akhavan-Majid 2004; Chan 2002; Curtin 2005). Much research on media globalization has shown that, contrary to the expectations of some commentators that the U.S. is exercising an unchallenged cultural hegemony over the rest of the world, national, regional, and local media outlets remain both autonomous from U.S. interests and popular among audiences (Banerjee 2002; Curtin 2005; Fernandes 2000); although to be sure, Western capitalist interests remain dominant (McChesney 2001; Raboy 1999; Volkmer 1999).

In addition to the political economy approach, there are two other approaches to studying organizational and institutional influences on media content. The technological determinist approach calls our attention to the way that technology structures human relations and cultural meaning. While the notion of technological determinism is often characterized as reductionist and devoid of agency, some of the earliest and most profound work in media studies has shown how media technologies transform culture and interaction by transforming how we experience time and space (Innis 1951; Innis and Innis 1972; Thompson 1995). McLuhan's (1964) well-worn phrase "the medium is the message" captures this idea quite well. Scholars who have followed the insights of these communications theorists have argued, quite correctly, that in some ways it matters less what is said than how it is said. One recent notable example of this has been the work of Altheide and Snow (1991). They have argued that the most significant "media effects" come not from the content but from the "media logic," which "consists of a form of communication, the process through which media present and transmit information" (p. 9). Part of media logic is its format: "how material is organized, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on particular characteristics of behavior, and the grammar of media communication" (p. 9). Together, media logic and format have become pervasive influences in our contemporary society about how we understand all other realms of life, such as politics, religion, and sports. Because of this, they argue that our lives are increasingly mediated, and that the media are the most powerful institutions in society today. It is this type of theorizing that has generated so much academic interest around the rise of the internet. However, despite both the utopian and dystopian predictions, early evidence indicates that the internet has simply facilitated people's existing communication needs and wants rather than revolutionizing the ways we interact (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson 2001).

The third and final major approach to the study of how organizational and institutional factors affect media content is the newsroom study, an analysis of how the organizational constraints of news production affect what finally becomes news. Typically, journalists do not have enough time or resources to thoroughly and accurately research every story they are charged with producing; what finally becomes news has less to do with the abilities of an individual journalist than with their working conditions. The classical sociological studies of newsrooms (Gans 1979; Tuchman 1978) identified a vast range of organizational constraints on the activities of journalists: the limited amounts of time available to produce the news encourages journalists to use “typifications” to write the news, the way that a story is fit into a standard mold (Tuchman 1978); geographical location plays a factor in which stories are covered and how journalists are allocated; journalists are encouraged to rely on a standard group of official sources for information, people who are credible, reliable, and can speak for an important group of people; many journalists work “beats” because of steady flows of potentially newsworthy information; the division of labor in the newsroom affects story content and selection; negotiations among people in the newsroom about photography and layout affect which stories are given prominence; competition with other news organizations and among journalists themselves affects story selection; commercial considerations encourage selection of content that will not disagree with advertisers; audience considerations encourage selection of stories that are seen as good for ratings; and the values and dispositions of journalists themselves (to be discussed below) affect the production of news. Since the classical studies, Kaniss (1991) has shown how newsroom constraints operate in the production of local news, and Klinenberg (2005) has updated these findings by showing how journalists are increasingly being asked to produce more stories and have a more flexible skill set (publish in print, online, on television, operate cameras). The fact that journalists are increasingly pressed for time and resources have to do with business pressures to make the news companies more profitable by cutting labor and by owning multiple forms of media. Additionally, social movements scholars have shown how the probability of an event becoming news is also affected by what day of the week it is, the size of the “news hole,” whether events were dramatic or violent, the size of the event, who sponsors the event, where the event occurs, and the media strategies employed by the movement, among other factors (McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996; Mueller 1997; Oliver and Maney 2000; Oliver and Myers 1999; Rohlinger 2002). Recently, Benson (1999; 2004) has argued that the “journalistic field” must also be considered as an autonomous

influence on media content, an argument that will be addressed in more detail below. Finally, it is noteworthy that Eliasoph (1988) has challenged this tradition of newsroom studies by showing that the same routines and constraints can produce oppositional news as well; she argues that what is important is the way that news routines interact with the media outlet's ideological view and its relative position in the world. Unfortunately, this challenge has yet to be taken up.

Point 3: Creator. For most communication attempts by the news media, the role of the creator is played by the journalist. As is evidenced by the preceding discussion, the journalist as creator is substantially influenced by her organizational and institutional environment, perhaps moreso than in many other kinds of communicative acts. Indeed, unlike ordinary face-to-face communication, the journalist receives her legitimacy to speak precisely because of her position within the news organization. Thus, this discussion of the creator will be significantly shorter than it might otherwise be, when in the case of ordinary face-to-face communication, one would have to consider the individual characteristics of the creator, their normative intent, and their subjective reasons for attempting to communicate. For the journalist, much of this is defined by their membership in the news organization. However, it would be a mistake to deny that journalists have their own values, beliefs, and intentions that influence their work; they are humans in addition to being journalists. In this discussion of the individual journalist, two broad sets of factors must be considered: the values of journalists and their professionalism.

Gans (1979) identified eight “enduring values” in the national news that he studied, which are distinguished from “topical values” expressed as editorial comments for a particular story. These enduring values resemble taken-for-granted cultural beliefs held by most Americans, including the journalists themselves: ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderatism, social order, and national leadership. Journalists regularly write news stories that defend these values and (in the case of ethnocentrism) judge foreign events according to American standards. This is not necessarily done consciously; they are part of the background knowledge, the set of taken-for-granted assumptions, that are required in order for people to communicate with and understand each other. Gans showed that journalists adopted a number of strategies that would keep conscious values and ideologies from influencing their work: through self-censorship, following norms of

professionalism and objectivity, disregarding implications of news stories, and rejecting specific political ideologies. Despite these conscious strategies to keep their personal beliefs out of the news, journalists are accused by both liberals of conservatives of partisan bias. However, all popular literature and academic studies that claim to find some evidence of partisan bias in mainstream U.S. media either rely on anecdotal evidence or suffer from significant methodological flaws (e.g. Kuypers 2002; Patterson and Donsbach 1996). Almost all systematic studies of partisan political bias in the news media fail to find any evidence of bias (D'Alessio and Allen 2000; Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998; Hofstetter 1976; Niven 1999; Niven 2003). Perceptions of bias are actually best explained by the “hostile media effect,” in which people with partisan political beliefs perceive the same text to be biased in opposite directions, always against their own views (Vallone, Ross, and Lepper 1985). These findings have been replicated numerous times and in a number of different contexts (D'Alessio 2003; Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, and Chia 2001; Niven 1999).

Professional norms and the norm of objectivity also influence the behavior of journalists. Keeping personal values out of the news is only one reflection of how this is true. The notion of objectivity is inextricably bound up with the development of journalism as a profession. Schudson's (1978) account of the rise of objectivity after World War I clarifies that the norm of objectivity was created as a journalistic technique to ensure that news could be trusted, that it would be different from government propaganda and corporate public relations campaigns. In a sense, the norm of objectivity is a bedrock feature of professional American journalism (although there are also what Schudson calls “submerged traditions,” such as muckraking and literary journalism). There is, however, a “paradox of objectivity”: reality itself is oftentimes biased against one side. For example, when one party becomes more influential or powerful than another, the news media will reflect it, given the norms and routines of newsgathering (Kuklinski and Sigelman 1992). Here, we can see one set of professional norms seemingly contradicting another; how each individual journalist resolves the dilemma in each situation likely varies. Another example of such a scenario is the journalistic dilemma of whether to report only the voices of dominant groups or whether to go out of their way to call attention to more marginal views. Althaus (2003) finds that reporters do act as autonomous individuals seeking out oppositional viewpoints for the news, rather than merely parroting views they find from traditional sources. These considerations show that, even though journalists' activities are highly structured

by their organizational and institutional environments, the journalist's individual decisions and values still exercise an independent influence over the content of the news.

Point 4: Cultural Object. From the point of view of cultural sociology, every meaning is conveyed from the creator to the receiver in by some object, form, or sign. Even in the simplest case of face-to-face communication, it is not just a creator interacting with a receiver; the interaction occurs through the cultural object of language. In the case of the news, there are several characteristics of the news content itself that must be considered. In mentioning these here, I do so only for the sake of convenience; for a cultural object contains nothing that was not put there by the creator or the news organization (whether consciously or unconsciously), and ultimately means nothing if it is not received by an audience. For example, media bias, as well as the ideas of grammar, format, and style (Altheide and Snow 1991) discussed earlier as part of the production process are all characteristics of the cultural object, too. The cultural object is, by definition, the carrier of those meanings that are the result of production processes and the object that the receiver must interpret in the processes of reception that I will discuss below.

One important component of the cultural object is identified by typical content analyses of the media: how minorities, women, the poor, the disabled, and other groups outside of the mainstream are portrayed in the mass media. There is a large literature analyzing the (mis)representations of these groups in different media and their political consequences (e.g. Danielian and Page 1994; Gilens 1996; Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie 1997; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; Wilson and Gutierrez 1995). It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this literature here, but I affirm that content analysis is a valuable methodological tool for sociologists of the media. Additionally, media messages may all be identified according to particular narrative structures, with varying genre, plot, and character elements. Media messages also use metaphors, similies, and other tropes to convey information. The particular narrative and literary characteristics of a media message make a difference in the ultimate meaning of the message (Jacobs 1996).

Finally, in recent years, the concept of “frame” has emerged as both a useful way to describe media content and a powerful to specify how production processes are

linked to reception processes. “Media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (Gitlin 2003, p. 7). The metaphor of a media frame is useful, both in reference to a picture frame and to the frame of a building or structure, for a frame both defines how a media message is intended to be understood, and it helps to organize and support the information that accompanies it (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, and Rucht 2002). The concept was taken up quickly by social movement scholars, who understood that framing a message in a particular way had definite effects on people’s actions: what the public thought about a movement, whether a person might decide to join a movement, or how people would understand the movement’s views on an issue (Babb 1996; Gamson 1992; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986). Similarly, political communications scholars have focused on how framing shapes the ways that audiences interpret the news. Experimental manipulation of the same news story using two different frames shows that how people understand and evaluate a complex issue is dependent upon whether the issue is presented as a moral issue, a civil liberties issue, a civil rights issue, an economic issue, etc. (Domke, McCoy, and Torres 1999; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997). Related to the idea of framing are the ideas of agenda-setting and priming. Agenda-setting refers to the idea that the news media exercise influence because they determine what issues people think about. Results of agenda-setting studies show that news media’s power to shape what issues people think about is significant, but limited (Dalton, Beck, Huckfeldt, and Koetzle 1998; Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller 1980; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Mutz and Soss 1997). The idea of priming refers to the ability of a text to affect how people evaluate something. By making certain facts or issues more salient than others, a text can “prime” people’s minds to offer a particular opinion or response. For example, a person’s stated opinion of the President of the United States is shaped by what issues the President is associated with in the news media (Krosnick and Kinder 1990). Thus, the content of the news media, whatever form the cultural object takes, can have a significant influence on the way that the cultural object is received, interpreted, and evaluated.

Point 5: Receiver. The process of audience reception is influenced by the processes of framing, agenda-setting, and priming, which are embodied in the content of the news. The mechanism by which these processes influence people has to do with the way that people’s minds work. As was suggested in the previous section, people process news and information in a particular way that is only beginning to be understood. Lakoff (2002), for example, has argued that people understand

unfamiliar and complex issues like politics through metaphors about the family. Entman (1989) has argued that people process news and information by using pre-existing mental structures, called “schemas,” which help people organize, filter, and understand new information according to the existing store of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, and preferences. Zaller (1992) has examined the mental process that people use in the formulation of opinions in response to survey questions. He shows that most people do not have a single opinion about a given issue; instead, people’s stated opinions are drawn from those considerations that are most immediately accessible and salient in their minds at the time. He puts forth the RAS model of opinion statements: people *receive* new information, then decide whether or not to *accept* it, and then *sample* from their knowledge at the moment when they are asked to answer a question. Zaller’s RAS model calls our attention to the fact that there are three related but distinct components of how an audience reacts to a media message: reception, interpretation, and evaluation.

First, people must actually read, hear, or see the intended message. In the case of mass media, what this means is that an audience has to *choose* to receive a message. They have to “tune in” for a communication attempt to be successful. While a tremendous amount of marketing data is collected on audiences, to my knowledge, sociologists have paid relatively scant attention to this data, and they have not adequately theorized the significance of people’s media consumption choices. One notable exception is a recent study of cable television use, which showed that the more channels people had to choose from, the less likely people were to watch news (aside from people who prefer to watch news) (Prior 2005). Only *after* someone is exposed to a communication attempt can they interpret and evaluate it. The literature examined above on framing and priming indicate that content producers have a tremendous amount of power to ensure that an audience member interprets the message as they intended; however, this is not necessarily the case. People’s exposure to cross-cutting opinion has been shown to eliminate the effects of elite framing (Druckman and Nelson 2003). Additionally, people’s prior attitude dispositions and knowledge of politics increase people’s resistance to media messages (Price and Zaller 1993; Zaller 1992). Finally, the demographic characteristics of the audience will affect how a media message is interpreted and evaluated (Hunt 1997). Thus, receivers of cultural messages do not have absolute autonomy to interpret messages as they wish; but neither do media producers have

absolute power to control what an audience thinks. A task of continuing importance in media sociology is to specify how and under what conditions people receive, reject, or reinterpret the intended meanings of cultural messages (Schudson 1989).

Point 6: Informal Group. The receiver of a media message does not exist in isolation from other people; their social networks and group memberships are also the source of cultural messages, which may be congruent with or opposed to the intended media message. There are likely to be significant influences in how media messages are both produced and received based on a person's race, gender, age, religious affiliation, place of residence, and so on. Furthermore, a conscious group identity or subcultural identity is simultaneously a consequence (Anderson 1991), a filter (Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, and Levine 1995; Walsh 2004), and a cause of media use (Armstrong 1981; Atton 2002; Downing 1984). Mutz and Martin (2001) even found that, for all the complaints about the mass media, most people are exposed to more differing viewpoints from the media than from their own personal networks. There is a long tradition in communication research showing that communication attempts by the mass media may be less influential than the communication that occurs in everyday life in people's social networks (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Mutz and Soss 1997; Weimann 1994). The rise of the internet may prove to be fertile grounds for research into how media communication and people's interactions in social networks are related (Friedland 1996).

The meaning and impact of a media communication attempt is highly contingent upon what Friedland (2001, p. 381) calls the "comprehensive community communication ecology." Audience members are continuously exposed to other communication attempts from other media and from people in their social network; the significance of any one message for an audience member will vary dramatically. It is a simple word of caution to media scholars that the measurable effects of a single media message is likely to be close to zero. The sheer number of cultural messages that a person is exposed to on a daily basis warns against our placing too much significance on a single communication attempt. Indeed, even when framing and agenda-setting effects are their most successful and most powerful, the effects are easily altered by other communications, one's real-life experiences, and the passage of time (Druckman and Nelson 2003; Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller 1980; Mutz and Reeves 2005). These insights suggest that there are fundamental similarities between mediated communication and face-to-face communication. At a basic level, the communicative processes are the same; only the form is different. The mass media cannot be considered apart from

the broader dynamics of culture: the communication of ideas in symbolic form; how people come to understand and make sense of the world by sending, receiving, and interpreting messages; how culture is socially constructed through communication and interaction; and how cultures vary by temporal location, spatial location, and formal and informal institutional contexts. Media are not an institution that is controlled by dominant societal elites and removed from people's everyday experience of the world; the media are a poly-vocal, multi-faceted set of differentiated organizations and technologies that are potentially open and responsive to all people and cultures (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson 1992; Thompson 1995).

The Fourth Dimension: Continuity and Change. The relationships among the points of the cultural diamond just discussed have shown how the meaning of a single mediated communication attempt is shaped by the larger social world, the organizations and institutions that shape the processes of production, the characteristics of the creator and the receiver, the informal social groups and networks in which creators and receivers are embedded, and the form of the cultural object itself. Together, these points and relationships constitute a structure that determines the meaning that is ultimately assigned by the receiver to the media message. But just as these structures shape meaning, so too does the meaning that is created have effects on society. The meaning that is created and the actions people take because of the communication have consequences for themselves, for other people and institutions, and for the culture and society as a whole. Put as simply as possible, meaning and action can reshape the cultural diamond. The effects may be large or small; or they may have no effect. But there is a contingent outcome from this communication process.

Many political communications scholars and social movements scholars establish clear criteria for evaluating action: they study the effects of communication on preference formation, voting, civic engagement, deliberation, and social movement activity (Baum 2005; Diani 2000; Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004; Friedland 1996; Gamson 1992; Gitlin 2003; Katz and Rice 2002; Kim, Wyatt, and Katz 1999; McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy 1999; Mondak 1995a; Mondak 1995b; Norris 2000; Postmes and Brunsting 2002; Putnam 2000; Roscigno and Danaher 2001; Shah 1998). Despite all of the research on these forms of action, further study of the relationship between media and political action can still prove useful to media scholars and cultural sociologists. The stakes are high, as concern about the

conditions under which the media can harm democracy has been the subject of vigorous debate in recent decades (Bagdikian 2000; Cook 2005; Gans 2003; Habermas 1989; McChesney 1999; Patterson 1997).

Action does not have to be considered solely from the political point of view, though. Action must be considered broadly, so that any response, no matter how mundane, or even a lack of a response, has significance. Theoretically, action that is taken in response to communication may be oriented towards any point on the cultural diamond, and the actions may affect any of the linkages among these points. It should be analytically possible to specify whether or not communication “makes a difference” by examining whether or not each point on the diamond is a target of action by the receiver of the media message. Thus, for example, “culture jammers” react to media messages by altering the content of the message itself; they attempt to change society by changing the cultural object (Klein 2000). People who write letters to the editor orient their actions to the news organization, hoping to change society by changing the ways that news organizations produce the news. Or people who merely shout at the television or change the channel may not feel as though they can change anyone else, so they change the world by making themselves feel better. Regardless of the way in which people react, specifying the ways in which individual citizens react to media, whether privately or together as a public, has important normative consequences for democracy (Calhoun 1992; Fraser 1992; Habermas 1989).

What Do We Gain?

Through the previous exercise, applying the cultural diamond to the interdisciplinary field of media studies, I have attempted to illustrate the goodness-of-fit between cultural sociology and media studies. Before I proceed, however, I must point out that the cultural diamond has several obvious limitations. To repeat the caveats mentioned earlier, the cultural diamond is not a model or theory; the cultural diamond does not generate parsimonious explanations, only a checklist of the causal processes at work. The relative importance of various processes cannot be determined from a simple heuristic diagram. Additionally, the cultural diamond

is strictly synchronic in scope, limited to single, isolated communication attempts. A related limitation is that the communication attempt must be conceived of as monologic, not dialogic. In many communicative contexts, including the dialogical media of telephone and on-line chatrooms, the roles of creator and receiver are continuously and rapidly being negotiated, reversed, and changed. The cultural diamond cannot incorporate such an important dynamic relationship into its structure. Finally, the simplicity of the cultural diamond may cause us to neglect several important relationships that are all lumped together into a single point in the diamond or that may not even be there at all. The “informal group,” for example, is used in this paper to discuss not only face-to-face networks of communication, but also “imagined communities,” electronic networks, and status group memberships, like gender, race, and religion. The cultural diamond does *not* problematize the relationships among all of these varied “informal groups,” although sociologists undoubtedly *should*.

Despite these limitations, I would argue that cultural sociology has much to gain by taking media studies seriously. From a purely instrumental perspective, the mass media can provide cultural sociologists with endless, easily accessible sources of data—not only on cultural objects and cultural messages, but also on how cultural objects are produced, how they are received by audience, and what difference cultural objects make in the social world. From a theoretical perspective, I argue that the mass media are an exemplar of cultural dynamics in a society, and, as many scholars have argued, the mass media are taking on an increasingly important role in the generation of cultural beliefs, cultural objects, and knowledge about the world in contemporary societies (Altheide and Snow 1991; Gitlin 2001). Cultural sociologists, therefore, should study the mass media as a way to test theories about cultural processes and as a way to extend our understanding of the ways that particular cultural objects and beliefs are created or modified and what their effects are on the larger social world. Sociological research in the mass media has garnered relatively little institutional footing, despite seminal works in sociology and social theory oriented towards the field of communication (Dewey 1988; Gamson 1992; Gans 1979; Gitlin 2003; Habermas 1989; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Mead 1962; Park 1922). I contend that we continue to ignore the larger field of media studies to our own detriment, as the mass media offer one of the most promising venues for advancing our understanding of cultural processes.

Just as media studies has the potential to help cultural sociologists by providing greater empirical and theoretical leverage on the problems studied by cultural sociologists, so too can cultural sociology contribute to media studies by putting it on more solid theoretical grounds. Like cultural sociology, media studies draws from a wide array of disciplines for its theoretical and empirical insights, and to this day, it remains an area that lacks a disciplinary home. I would argue that this can be an advantage for scholars working in this area, but it also has negative consequences, chief among them that the field suffers from a debilitating theoretical dilemma about how to best conceptualize and study the mass media. On the one hand, the mass media are merely an institutionalized form of everyday communication, sharing many of the same properties as a conversation between friends or family around the dinner table (McLuhan 1964; Thompson 1995). On the other hand, the mass media consist of highly rationalized (in the Weberian sense), hierarchical organizations with structural and behavioral properties and motivations that share little or nothing in common with ordinary people in the realm of everyday life. From either perspective, the mass media appear to be two entirely different sociological creatures, with very few shared characteristics. On one hand, the media are merely part of the larger cultural sociology; on the other, the media should be studied as formal organizations.

In this paper, I have conceptualized the mass media as an institutionalized locus of culture, and the fact that the cultural diamond is so readily applicable to the interdisciplinary field of media studies testifies to the importance of considering the mass media in the context of broader cultural processes (see also Schudson 1989). Paradoxically, seen from the perspective of cultural sociology, this dilemma about how to conceptualize the mass media ceases to be a dilemma at all! The mass media cannot be adequately understood unless both the cultural and organizational perspectives are employed. As illustrated in the literature review above, the characteristics and properties of media organizations and technologies have highly consequential effects on the cultural meaning that is created, and so do the processes of everyday, face-to-face communication and interaction in which an audience member exists.

Media scholars who are mindful of cultural sociology can see clearly that the mass media and whatever effects they have must be considered in light of the larger social context of symbolic communication, not only from the point of view of receivers but also of producers. It is crucial to understand the mass media as part of

the larger realm of cultural communication in general. Friedland's (2001, p. 381) phrase "comprehensive community communication ecology" encapsulates this idea quite well: that each mass media outlet is only one of many information flows that exist in people's everyday lives. At one level, mediated interaction and non-mediated interaction are the same in that they all involve the encoding of a message in a symbolic form, which is intended for a receiver to decode (Hall 1980). Of course it is true that the peculiar characteristics of the organizations and institutions of mass media, specific "media logics" (Altheide and Snow 1991), and the effects of various media on the dimensions of time and space differentiate mediated communication from face-to-face communication (Innis 1951; McLuhan 1964). But it would be a mistake to conceive of media as therefore having nothing in common with our daily communication with friends, family, coworkers, and strangers. Such a recognition should guide media scholars' formulation of theories and hypotheses so as to avoid fetishizing the media. What might be called "media realism" would take Raymond Williams' (1976) insight to heart, that the word "media" is merely the plural form of "medium," "any social or technological procedure or device that is used for the selection, transmission, and reception of information" (Altheide and Snow 1991, p. 10). In our case, they are cultural messages embodied in a particular format and conveyed in a particular way; the nature of that particular format is, viewed in the context of human communication as a whole, only a secondary question.

Finally, media studies would benefit from this larger cultural sociological perspective because it provides some context for the persistent theoretical and methodological problem of specifying "media effects." Whereas the paradigm of limited effects was dominant in communication research, much of the research reviewed above has called that view into question. Bartels (1993) has argued that from both a methodological and theoretical point of view, media scholars have constructed studies in such a way as to minimize the measurable media effects. Criticizing scholars who focus on measuring opinion change due to media content, he points out that "Attempting to study media impact in settings with very stable prior opinions is a social scientist's equivalent of attempting to count galaxies through the wrong end of a telescope" (p. 275). This point, broadened to the field of media studies as a whole, is well taken: social scientists may not have the methodological capability to "prove" the real social impact of mass media. Understood from the vantage point of cultural sociology, media scholars inherit a theoretical and methodological appreciation of the problem from the beginning. A view of media as one area of study in the broader realm of culture should open up new avenues for scholars to move beyond the issue of "media effects," towards a

richer, more dynamic set of theoretical questions and the methodological tools that can be used to answer them.

Ultimately, the mass media are simultaneously voices of the everyday life of civil society; political discourse in the public sphere; an avenue for the production, reception, and interpretation of cultural artifacts; complex bureaucratic organizations embedded in capitalist society; workplaces; instruments of hegemony and protest. The mass media are an important nexus of culture and structure, of agency and powerlessness, of public and private, of state and civil society, of system and lifeworld (Habermas 1987; Habermas 1996). As such, the mass media are integral to all cultural, political, economic, and social processes and relations in a society, at macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. Using the insights of the sociology of culture as a starting point, I hope I have shown that the mass media are institutions of central importance in society and that sociologists should take their study seriously.

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