

New Paradigm or Sensitizing Concept: Finding the Proper Place of Practice Theory in Media Studies

MARIA BAKARDJIEVA
University of Calgary, Canada

Numerous studies of media and communication processes employ the notion of practice under various working definitions. Recently, there has been growing interest and recurrent reference to a formal philosophical system developed by Theodore Schatzki and labeled “practice theory.” Some scholars have stated an alignment with Schatzki’s practice theory and suggested that its application in media studies marks a new “practice turn.” This article argues that before we decide whether to accept practice theory as the foundation of a new paradigm, we need to take a critical look at its powers and limitations and the ways in which its conceptual instruments need to be adjusted to effectively address the key questions asked in media studies. The article offers a critical assessment of some of the main premises of practice theory. It focuses specifically on what role this theory assigns to material entities and human agency in the constitution of social life. On that basis, it proposes ways in which practice theory could be put in a productive dialogue with other approaches in media studies.

Keywords: practice, agency, structure, media studies, materiality, practice theory

A Paradigm Rising

The recent popularity of the concept of practice and the growing fascination with practice theory in media studies has run into a problem articulated by Hui, Schatzki, and Shove (2017) in the introduction to their book *The Nexus of Practices: Connections, Constellations, Practitioners*: “This rapid appropriation [of practice theory] has not been matched by corresponding refinement in the theoretical ideas” (p. 2). Although practice theory undoubtedly presents media scholars with exciting opportunities, this article will argue that much conceptual work needs to be done to find the proper place of its theoretical apparatus in our field.

Numerous studies of media and communication processes employ the word “practice.” I am deliberately saying the word and not the term. The point I would like to make is that in the prevailing number of these works, there is no explicit recognition or even awareness of the teachings of practice theory. This is only natural. “Practice” is a legitimate word in ordinary language, and no theory has a trademark of it. At the same time, since the publication of Couldry’s (2004) seminal article “Theorising Media as Practice,” there has been growing excitement around the idea that construing media as practice should form the core of a new

Maria Bakardjieva: bakardji@ucalgary.ca

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paradigm of media research. The "growth of practice theory in sociology" (Couldry, 2010, p. 35) is supposed to serve as the frame of reference for this new paradigm. The collection *Theorising Media and Practice*, edited by Bräuchler and Postill (2010), further propelled this trend. References to the key exponents of the practice theory school (Reckwitz, 2002b; Schatzki, 1996) started populating the citation lists of researchers publishing in media and communication journals. To study "media as practice" or "media practices" became an explicit aim and conceptual orientation for many.¹ The proposed new paradigm seemed to be gaining momentum as it was attracting "an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity," as per one of Kuhn's (1962/1970, p. 10) criteria defining what a paradigm is. Kuhn's (1962/1970) main criterion, however, is that paradigms are based on "universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners" (p. viii).

Accepting that to seek universal agreement in a scholarly area such as media studies is unrealistic and unfair, it is still a good idea to take a close look at the achievements of practice theory that would provide the adherents of the "media as practice" paradigm with "model problems and solutions"; those key principles that will direct their answers to questions such as "What are the fundamental entities of which the universe is composed? How do these interact with each other and with the senses? What questions may legitimately be asked about such entities and what techniques employed in seeking solutions?" (Kuhn, 1962/1970, pp. 4–5). Depending on the results of an examination of the central claims and intellectual achievements of practice theory, then, we would be in a better position to determine whether the new paradigm is worth instigating a "scientific revolution" (Kuhn, 1962/1970, p. 92), or should some conciliatory steps of scholarly diplomacy be undertaken in settling its disputes with its predecessors.

Thus, my objective in this article is to start a process of deciphering and sorting out the foundational concepts and premises of practice theory and critically assessing their potential to inform and enrich media research. I am fully aware that "there is no such thing as a unified practice theory" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 8), but rather a broad family or collection of what some have termed "praxeological approaches" (Nicolini, 2012; Reckwitz, 2002b). The roots of praxeological thinking run deep, and its proponents have brought up precedents from as far back as Plato and Aristotle (Nicolini, 2012, pp. 24–25). They have also pointed out the growing "practice orientation" (Ortner, 1984, p. 147; Postill, 2010) that swept across social theory and anthropology in the 1980s. Since the late 1990s, however, concerted attempts to consolidate the common principles of such approaches into an "ideal type of practice theory" (Reckwitz, 2002b, pp. 244, 260) have been made. It is this ideal type that has been picked up by media and communication scholars of late as testified by the names and sources appearing in their citations. Therefore, my discussion here will focus on the work of some of the most prominent flag bearers of the latest turn in the "practice turn": philosophers Theodore Schatzki and Andreas Reckwitz, and organizational sociologist Davide Nicolini. To distinguish this particular "ideal type" of theorizing, the label I use for it hereafter is capitalized "Practice Theory."

In what follows, I will argue that the notion of practice is a new name for a long-standing object of interest shared by generations of researchers in the field of media studies. I will trace some of the history of

¹ Couldry's (2004) programmatic article "Theorising Media as Practice" advocating the new paradigm has been cited close to 800 times. Brauchler and Postill's (2010) collection *Theorising Media and Practice* has also enjoyed significant following (Google Scholar, September, 2019).

how it has manifested itself in several well-known traditions. I will look for the similarities and differences between these traditions and the framework proposed by Practice Theory. Then, I will turn to Practice Theory itself and focus specifically on the role it assigns to material entities (things, objects, technologies) and human agency in the constitution of social life. These are issues of particular significance for Media Studies, and I will attempt to sift through the possibilities and difficulties that an adoption of Practice Theory lens would pose to our efforts to deal with them. On that basis, I will propose ways in which we could use "practice" not as a battle cry for a paradigm shift but as a "sensitizing concept." According to Blumer (1954), "a sensitizing concept gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances" (p. 6). Unlike "definitive concepts," it does not "provide prescriptions of what to see," but "merely suggests directions along which to look" (p. 6). The insights of Practice Theory, I argue, could enter a productive dialogue with other approaches in Media Studies in the form of precisely this kind of sensitizing concepts.

Trail of Crumbs: Practice in Media Studies

The notion of practice is a new name for a long-standing interest shared by generations of researchers in the field of media studies. "What, quite simply, are people doing in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?"—the question that according to Couldry (2004, p. 119) would demarcate the new "media as practice" paradigm—is an old question with a long history in the field. Here, I will offer a short selection of the best-known approaches that have raised and addressed this question.

The preoccupation with media effects that characterized the early years of the fledging discipline was relatively early counterbalanced by an inquiry going in the opposite direction: from "what do media do to people?" to "what do people do with the media?" Already, in the late 1940s, researchers started articulating the idea that the media get drawn into a spectrum of diverse "uses" that produce important gratifications (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). The uses and gratifications approach, very much alive and well to this day (see McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2017), relied on the assumption that universal psychological and social needs were at play in the choices made by audience members in their dealings with media. The studies informed by this tradition formulated typologies of uses that could be read as a list of common practices understood in the general sense of the word: [practices of] information seeking, coordination, socialization/affection seeking, status seeking, escape, and entertainment (see McQuail, 2010). Although it stemmed from a rationalist and positivist epistemological universe diametrically opposite to Practice Theory, this work represented an effort to break up "audiencing" (Couldry, 2004, p. 121) into a set of user-driven recurrent activities associated with different kinds of media.

What people do with the media, more specifically with the texts circulated by the media, was further explored by the British Cultural Studies tradition that recognized the ability of audiences to give different interpretations to media messages depending on preexisting cultural beliefs and situated life experiences. People were seen as doing something in relation to media messages at a cognitive level: They were accepting, negotiating, or resisting preferred readings and ideological frameworks. They were using media content in their interactions with others to articulate certain positions and relations (Morley, 1980; Morley & Brundson, 1999).

In 1984, Radway famously observed that a common feature of her interviews with women, regular readers of the romance, was that they "focused so resolutely on the significance of *the act of romance reading*

rather than on the meaning of the romance" (p. 86, emphasis in original). What women did in relation to the romance was what mattered, Radway argued, very much in the spirit of Couldry's (2004) more recent appeal. Also, in the 1980s, *Family Television* (Morley, 1986) offered detailed descriptions of activities and interactions surrounding the television set and the remote control in the home and showed how they were intertwined with the reinforcement of gender boundaries and roles. Practices, we could say, of "flicking" between channels, family television viewing, cooking, and passing time meshed with "media practices" such as viewing.

In the early 1990s, Silverstone, Hirsh, and Morley (1992), and later Silverstone and Haddon (1996), as well as Silverstone's (1994) important book *Television and Everyday Life*, initiated a new type of inquiry into what people do with the media and, even further, to the media: the domestication approach. That approach was later applied to studying what users were doing as they integrated a range of emerging digital technologies, including computer networks and communication systems, into their everyday lives (Bakardjieva, 2005; Bakardjieva & Smith, 2001; Berker, Hartmann, Punie, & Ward, 2006; Silverstone, 2005). The keywords—"users," "use," and "everyday life"—were not terms drawn from the lexicon of Practice Theory, but the research carried out in that vein did look closely at embodied "doings and sayings" (Schatzki, 1996) in local settings. These continuities are important to recognize when searching for the possible contribution that Practice Theory could make to media studies (Pentzold, 2016). This would strengthen rather than undermine the case for its application because it would help us plug its instruments and insights precisely where they can add value. Synergy among approaches may be less spectacular than a break or clash of paradigms, but in what follows I will argue that it can take us further with fewer sacrifices.

The work I have described above unfolded during approximately the same period when the philosophical foundation of the "ideal type of practice theory" (Reckwitz, 2002b, pp. 244, 260) was articulated by Theodor Schatzki (1996). There were no significant intellectual intersections and interactions between the two schools of thought, although many common interests, inspirations, and intuitions can be spotted. This was due to a large extent to disciplinary divisions; however, there were also some substantive differences in the goals and background assumptions. The studies of media in everyday life tended to focus not on habitual repetitive activities as the main constituents of social life (like Practice Theory), but on newly introduced and sometimes disruptive media technologies. They assumed a social constructivist perspective, which means they saw social actors engaged in signification work and interaction as the main driver of what was going on around these technologies. In opposition to economic and technological structuralisms and determinisms, they opted to highlight the agency of media users. Interestingly, both Schatzki (1996) and Silverstone (1994) cited Bourdieu around the same time, but for different purposes. Schatzki reworked Bourdieu's ideas to place practices outside of human actors as "arrays of understandings, rules and structure" (p. 106) that organize the embodied doings and sayings of the individuals who perform them, whereas Silverstone griped about Bourdieu's "understressing" of the creative capacities of agents:

But nevertheless while Bourdieu uses the analysis of consumption to display the structuring of patterns of everyday life in contemporary society, and does so to convincing effect, he understresses the dynamics: the shifts and turns, the squirming and the resistances which in their significance or lack of significance, do indeed make consumption an active, sometimes creative, process in which individual and social statuses and identities are claimed, reclaimed and constantly being negotiated. (Silverstone, 1994, pp. 116–117)

Indeed, multiple studies of media technologies in everyday life provided evidence of the meaningful and creative user/human agency. Analyses in this vein demonstrated the “expansive potential” (Miller & Slater, 2000) of both media and practices, which meant that new, previously nonexistent practices could be imagined and pursued by human agents drawing on the affordances of the new media technologies. In contrast, Schatzki criticized the “overintellectualizing accounts of human activity” (1997, p. 283) he found in Bourdieu and Giddens and made the decentering of human agency one of the central goals of Practice Theory.

The Ontological Underpinning of Practice Theory

The ambitions of the Practice Theory that Theodore Schatzki and his followers went on to formulate in subsequent publications are comparable with those of actor network theory—no more and no less than “reassembling the social” (Latour, 2005). Practice Theory aims to provide new foundations for understanding the social world differing from those offered by structuralism, phenomenology, and discourse theory among other influential schools of thought:

Although praxeological “new speak” is highly modest in its terminology . . . it implies a considerable shift in our perspective on body, mind, things, knowledge, discourse, structure/process and the agent. . . . Although practice theory is an example of cultural theory, not all cultural theories are practice theories. Rather, one can distinguish between four forms of cultural theories: culturalist mentalism, textualism, intersubjectivism and practice theory. On a very basic level, these schools of thought offer opposing locations of the social and conceptualize the “smallest unit” of social theory differently: in minds, discourses, interactions and “practices.” (Reckwitz, 2002b, pp. 244–245)

Practice Theory, picks its germinal inspirations from philosophical and sociological contributions that search for ways to bridge the proverbial duality between structure and agency. The founding figure of the school, Theodore Schatzki, starts out by tracing the role the concept of practice plays in the works of authors such as Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-François Lyotard, and Charles Taylor, whom he labels as “prominent practice theorists” (Schatzki, 1997, p. 284). Their theories, according to Schatzki, are characterized by a Wittgensteinian perspective on social action that emphasizes practical understanding and a sense of “how to go on” over “representational,” explicitly formulated rules as drivers of human action.

Although the school of Practice Theory initiated by Schatzki acknowledges these pivotal insights, it takes it upon itself to radicalize the conceptualization of practice by folding both agency and structure into it. It makes practice not only the entry point but also the one and only fundamental building block responsible for the constitution of society. As Nicolini (2012) puts it, “It is practice all the way down” (p. 217). And for that matter, it is practice all the way up—nothing stands above or below practice. In no uncertain terms, Schatzki (2016) also advocates a “flat ontology” representing the social as a massive concatenation of practices. Departing sharply from Giddens and Bourdieu, the practice theorists from the Schatzkian school, declare alleged entities of a higher level—such as system, institution, social structure, culture, collective conscience, and fields—to be “metaphysical” and “mysterious” (Nicolini, 2012, p. 235). The efforts to invent them contravene the proper way of conceptualizing the social as a sprawling “plenum”

(Schatzki, 2012, p. 21) of practices interlinked in bundles, configurations, constellations, social phenomena (i.e., larger chunks of patterned doings and sayings).

The observable and palpable performance of human bodies engaged in their regular routines is where, in the view of these theorists, practices can be found, defined, and understood. A practice, Schatzki (2012) states, "is an open-ended, spatially-temporally dispersed nexus of doings and sayings" (p. 14).

Each can be understood to be an open-ended set of actions linked by (a) pools of practical understanding, (b) arrays of explicit rules, and (c) a teleoaffective structure. An action belongs to a practice if it expresses one of the understandings, rules or teleoaffective elements that organise that practice. (Schatzki, 1997, p. 304)

These "open-ended sets of actions" are not intentionally engineered by human actors, but rather have an independent existence (practice as entity) that practitioners enact when they engage in practice as performance.

Despite eschewing the notion of higher-level entities, Practice Theory does make an attempt to describe the ways in which practices interconnect to form larger social phenomena; however, the way it talks about these phenomena is mystifying. Bundles and constellations (see above) are, supposedly, not the same as fields, institutions, and structures, as they all lie in the two-dimensional plane of a flat ontology. Practices simply "swarm" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 178) together to form bundles and constellations. Researchers may want to read this as a recommendation to always work their way from the minutia of practices into the plenum, and not ask whether the plenum itself possesses any structural features that may shape practices.

In sum, Practice Theory invites us to accept that practice is the essential atom of the social world, and subsequently to identify and understand the subcomponents and the internal structure of that elementary unit, as well as to capture the mechanisms of the interactions and interconnections that occur between and among units (practices). Even though these units come together to form a "wider picture," practice theoreticians refuse to attach to them any of the traditional labels pertaining to an agency-structure view of the social world. There is no place for entities acting over the heads and bodies of practitioners in Practice Theory. And yet, these heads and bodies are not the inventors, makers, or advocates of practices in any "intellectualist" agentic sense.

Practices and Material Arrangements

One key characteristic of practice with particular significance for media scholars who often deal with communication devices is Schatzki's (2012) assertion that "the activities that compose practices are inevitably, and often essentially, bound up with material entities" to form "bundles" (p. 16). Practices and things ("material arrangements" in Schatzki's vocabulary) are inseparable and mutually constitute one another. Schatzki claims, that "material arrangements ubiquitously prefigure the perpetuation of practices" (p. 17) as well as changes in them.

Although Schatzki had originally kept practices and material arrangements separate while admitting their pervasive intertwinement, the status of material arrangements (objects, artifacts, technologies, physical infrastructures, natural materials, etc.) has been disputed and continuously revised in his and his followers' works. Andreas Reckwitz, a vocal exponent of Practice Theory insists that a Latoureaan actor network perspective must be integrated with Schatzki's conception of practice because

certain things or artefacts provide more than just objects of knowledge, but necessary, irreplaceable components of certain social practices . . . their social significance does not only consist in their being "interpreted" in certain ways, but also in their being "handled" in certain ways and in being constitutive, effective elements of social practices. (Reckwitz, 2002a, p. 211)

According to Reckwitz (2002a), because human doings are most often "doings with things" (p. 212), "both the human bodies/minds and the artefacts provide 'requirements' or components necessary to a practice" (p. 212). This position has important implications for the understanding of social order and social change, as I will discuss later.

Nicolini (2012), for his part, points out that that practices are inherently heterogeneous (like Latour's heterogeneous networks) and sociomaterial. Objects, materials, and technology, he argues, need to be studied "in practice and with reference to the practices in which they are involved" (p. 171). Neither practices nor objects can be understood without acknowledging the "entanglement between human and non-human performativity" (p. 171). That said, unlike Latour, Nicolini seems to lean toward the position of those who distinguish human and nonhuman elements of practice by virtue of the unique capacity for intentionality possessed by humans.

Nicolini (2012) also makes a gesture toward a broader horizon. He highlights the practice-material entanglement as being responsible for the recursive constitution of large-scale "social orders" (such as an office, or a factory, and we could add, a newsroom). Established by practices, social orders are the "arrangement of people, artefacts, organisms and things in which we conduct our lives, and which make our life possible" (p. 173). Thus, if researchers want to make sense of a social order, they have to sort out the ongoing practices and the material arrangements that compose it.

Sociologist Elizabeth Shove and her coauthors (2012) explicitly distinguish their practice approach by the premise that things should be treated as elements of practice rather than as external entities albeit "meshed" (Schatzki, 2003, p. 195) with it. Thus, Shove et al. (2012) propose a new model of practice where "materials," "encompassing objects, infrastructures, tools, hardware and the body itself" (p. 23), represent one of its three formative components. The other building elements are "competence," standing for practical understanding and knowledge, and "meaning," which includes mental activities, emotions, and motivations (p. 23). Specific practices emerge, Shove and her coauthors argue, when links are established among these three types of elements. Practices disintegrate when these links fall apart and cease to connect the three types of elements into a unitary structure. Shove et al. draw on social studies of technology (Kline & Pinch, 1996; Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003) and historical studies of various technologies to show how the consolidation of particular practices has involved a dynamic of connection and interaction among the three types of

elements. They go further to apply their model to the interactions among different practices that share common elements or are performed in close spatial and temporal proximity. Such practices form "bundles" and "complexes" when they come together in a "collaborative" relation. Or, they could compete over materials, meanings, and practitioners and weaken or displace one another.

Shove's model demonstrates how ideas stemming from Practice Theory could offer media studies a productive way of approaching communication technologies and devices in their capacity as "material things" without succumbing to technological determinism. Communication technologies and devices, one could propose, leaning on this application of Practice Theory, do affect social action, and potentially social order; however, they do it only to the extent that they become absorbed into the structures and ongoing dynamics of social practices. Sharing materials and things, colocation and cotemporality, overlapping meanings and competencies could consolidate distinct practices into stronger complexes and subtly, or fundamentally, reshape any one of them.

Agency in Practice Theory and Why It Matters

In contrast to some of the established traditions in media studies that see agents as the creative driving force behind the generation of meanings and hence the restructuring and regrouping of practices around media, Practice Theory sees agency differently: Human bodies are the carriers of the "doings and sayings" that constitute practice, but human intent, calculation, reflection and volition are held at bay: "By mobilizing its capacity to act intimately with the world, the body supports a view of intentional action that does not require the mediation of language, representations or decisions" (Rouse 2006, p. 513, as quoted in Nicolini, 2012, p. 168).

Meanings, teleoaffective structures, and background understanding as elements of practice are properties of the practice itself, not of the human practitioners who perform it. "An activity befalls the person whose performance it is," writes Schatzki (2012, p. 18). This is to say that people do not rationally conceptualize the motives and ends of their activities at a point located outside practice, but are always already thrown into a constellation of practices and get recruited by them. Meaning and identity, Nicolini (2012) argues,

necessarily emerge in practices and through practices, . . . what something means depends very much on the practice at hand and the intelligibility space constituted by it. Identity follows the same fate. Identity, understood as being intelligible as someone, is very much linked to the positions we occupy within the flow of activities we are involved in. (p. 177)

Thus, the dual nature of practice as entity and as performance draws humans into actions, the script of which they do not determine, but can only tweak. They remain knowledgeable actors and not dopes in the sense of being able to explain what they do (meaning), to show how it is done (practical know-how and competence), and to have a sense as to why they do it (teleoaffective structures). However, it is not up to them to reflect, critique, deconstruct, and intentionally change the blueprint of a practice. Avoiding "mentalism," intersubjectivism, and textualism (see Reckwitz, 2002b) is a central principle for Practice Theory:

Practice theory revises the hyperrational and intellectualized picture of human agency and the social offered by classical and highmodern social theories. Practice theory “decentres” mind, texts and conversation. Simultaneously, it shifts bodily movements, things, practical knowledge and routine to the centre of its vocabulary. . . . It invites us to regard agents as carriers of routinized, oversubjective complexes of bodily movements, of forms of interpreting, knowing how and wanting and of the usage of things. (Reckwitz, 2002b, p. 259)

Thus, in Practice Theory the role of agents is modest. They are “body/minds who ‘carry’ and ‘carry out’ social practices.” Agency does not consist of script writing and directing, but lies in the mere performance of practices, which includes, Reckwitz (2002b) notes, “not only bodily, but also mental routines” (p. 256).

Is this decentering of mind, text, and conversation productive for media studies, and if so, in what way? Some approaches within the field, such as the examples of reception and domestication studies given above, have invested much effort in rescuing human agency from the surge of textual structuralism and technological determinism. Even political economy that is mainly preoccupied with economic and regulative structures labors under the premise of informing and enabling human “praxis” understood as an intentional and value-laden transformation of the world. In these approaches, agency has been sought in the generative moments of individual and collective experience, in what Hannah Arendt (1958) has called the “natality” uniquely defining the human condition. Practice Theory, in contrast, directs us to look for agency not in the gestures of resistance to received schemes of thought, the revolt against routine and the transcendence of inherited meaning horizons, but rather in their knowledgeable reproduction. It insists that agency is neither the possession of individuals and collectives, or of the system within which they operate, but is located in between: “Agency is, thus, necessarily the result of the swarming together of an array of entities and other practices that are manifested through doers (both human and non-human)” (Nicolini, 2012, p. 178).

Inarguably, this message of Practice Theory represents a safeguard against romantic views of agentic freedom and creativity. It compels us to recognize the formative workings of received recipes, routines, and material arrangements. It makes us take seriously the multiple agencies that should be accounted for—such as those of things, bodies, oversubjective mental schemes, and competencies. At the same time, it leaves very little space for conceptualizing transformation driven by reflection, critique, and normative aspirations.

The advice to always start from practices as they are enacted in local settings and trace their elements and interconnections offers a viable strategy for empirical research. Researchers could go on to identify and describe a variety of practices, bundles, complexes, and constellations and trace the mechanisms that hold them together. However, one may ask, what would be, the meaning of such a research practice, and what are its teleoffective structures? Would it allow us to explain where the existing routinized meanings, competences, and background understandings came from? Would it give us the hope to discover ways of changing the status quo of existing constellations with a valued end in mind? Or will we be simply reproducing established academic patterns of doings and sayings? Is it not patently obvious that not all practices are the same, and that agency is differently constituted in the structures of different

practices? When it comes to the practices of creating an academic work, a work of art, a television newscast, or a lively conversation, we may want to be open and sensitive not only to bodily doings and routinized sayings, but to mental, textual and interactional processes and outcomes.

We would not be talking about Practice Theory if practice theoreticians had not opted to break the academic routine of following the tracks of accepted knowledge schemes and to conjure up a new set of meanings and horizons of understanding. It may be true that the performances of most people follow well-known and unquestioned routines most of the time, but there certainly should be a way to envision an opening in our theoretical framework for intentional change of ongoing practices and for initiation of new practices by some agents some of the time. Thus, I argue that there is a need to develop conceptions of *practice breaking* and *practice making* that could be informed by the insights of Practice Theory while still recognizing the capacity of human agents to deconstruct and reconstruct social practices through intention, reflexivity, and interactively accomplished agreement.

A Gray Ontology

The conspicuous absence of discrimination and nuance in the conceptual model of practice offered by the best-known representatives of the school demonstrates that Practice Theory is not only a flat ontology. It is also a gray ontology. It has proposed no systematic way to differentiate practices beyond Schatzki's (1997) rather fuzzy distinction between integrative and dispersed practices. At the same time, there are interesting and suggestive propositions to be considered in cognate theoretical systems. Activity Theory (see Engeström, Reijo, & Raija-Leena, 1999), for example, distinguishes among activities, actions, and operations where operations are routinized and unreflexive bodily moves (e.g., shifting gears), actions are goal-directed and meaningful doings (driving), and activities are more complex, socially organized systems combining heterogeneous elements such as specific objects and objectives, rules, tools and communities of actors (commuting to work). In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau (1984) famously sets apart strategies and tactics. Strategies are devised and implemented by subjects with will and power who have the capacity to create "a place that can be delimited as [their] own and serve as a base from which relations with an exteriority . . . can be managed" (pp. 35–36). Tactics, on the other hand, are the practices of those who operate on the terrain governed by the powerful. They can be inexhaustibly subversive, devious, and creative.

These examples suggest that practices can be categorized in various ways based on the centrality of different elements: practices where rules are formally encoded and enforced versus practices open to chance, choice, and variation; practices that are centered on particular artifacts versus practices where the objects involved are interchangeable; practices that require special competencies versus practices drawing on universal human faculties; practices driven by unreflexive routine versus practices where articulated meanings and teleoaffective elements are key. An elaborate typology of practices recognizing the varying degrees of centrality of the body, the mind, the material, and the textual could serve as a productive ground for negotiation and cooperation between the premises and principles of Practice Theory and the other "culturalist" (Reckwitz, 2002b, p. 245) schools of thought that it attempts to surpass and even write off. This could be of particular value to media and communication scholars because it would save them the effort

of forcing the distinctive practices that constitute their object of study—textual, interactional, and cognitive as they are—under an unfitting common denominator.

Another reason to recognize that “not all practices are the same” (Watson, 2017, p. 180) is the endeavor to find a way to make room in Practice Theory for the analysis of power. Watson questions what I have called the gray ontology of Practice Theory worried by its demonstrable inability to engage issues of power. Adopting Foucault’s definition of power as the “conduct of conduct,” he argues that power is achieved “through practices which, while made of the same stuff as other practices, have distinctive characteristics not least resulting from the ways in which they are aligned over time” (p. 180). Echoing de Certeau’s (1984) observations concerning strategies (cited above), Watson reminds us of the fact that some sites, organizations, and people hold “systematically advantageous positions amidst the associations, arrangements and alignments” of the practices comprising social life. Such actors and sites have the “distinctive capacity to act purposively in ways which shape action over distance and across locales of action” (p. 181). Watson explains this state of affairs by highlighting a peculiar type of practices such as “objective setting, managing, disciplining and incentivizing” that result in “aligning and disciplining the performance” of other practices (p. 181). He asks how systematic inequities in capacities to act are reproduced through the arrangements of practices and associations. To answer these quite sensible questions, it turns out, one needs concepts such as organizations, institutions of governing, and codified procedures sedimented and solidified over time (not lastly in texts). This means to recognize the reality of “large phenomena like companies, economies, states and ideologies” (p. 180) and admit that relying on Practice Theory alone to understand their ability to wield power would not do the job. Therefore, Watson proposes combining Practice Theory with actor network theory and Foucauldian governmentality. This advice is reminiscent of Foucault himself, who advocated for an “ascending analysis of power” that would start with an examination of the local “infinitesimal mechanisms” (practices) and climb up to “global processes and systems that find these mechanisms politically useful and economically profitable” (Foucault, 1980, p. 99).

Media and communication studies have a fine tradition of investigating the origins, mechanisms, and effects of power. Ideology, hegemony, discourse, structures of ownership, and monopolies of knowledge, are some of the metaphysical entities that have been invented and employed in these investigations. Instead of flushing these concepts (along with agency and structure) out of their vocabulary and pledging loyalty to a flat and gray ontology, media scholars could employ Practice Theory to ground these entities in the concrete embodied, materially and cognitively organized practices that constitute and perpetuate them.

Media as Practice?

Communication scholarship so far has signaled interest in the practice approach by opening conversations about the “media as practice” (Couldry, 2004) and “media practices” (see Hobart, 2010). Strictly speaking, from a Practice Theory perspective, both these are misnomers. If practices are indeed doings and sayings that are organized by structures of heterogeneous elements such as knowledge, competencies, and materials (to use Shove et al.’s, 2012, simplified model), then the media, obviously, cannot be practices. Talking about media practices is also problematic because although a medium (communication device) could be a material element of a certain practice (or a material arrangement

bundled with it), it is only rarely that it would define the meaning and the teleoaffective structure of that practice. In terms of meaning and telos, the people who are e-mailing or phoning, for example, are always doing something that goes beyond the medium itself. The label "media practices" is only meaningful for us, the researchers, because we have chosen to focus on the material elements of a practice. (This points to the larger and yet to be tackled question of who should be entitled to identify and label concrete practices. The writings of the practice theorists I have reviewed offer no clear instructions.)

That said, the practices that include a communication device as their material element are numerous and growing in number. It is quite revealing to observe the ongoing bundling of multiple practices around the same communication device and how it enhances the collaboration and mutual consolidation among them. Sharing the same device, they get to share some competences and meanings, teleoaffective structures, and background understandings. Reading documents for work and sharing tweets on one's computer are very different practices anchored in the same device. They both involve some degree of computer literacy and dexterity (some kind of competence) and the background understanding of being connected and having immediate access to information. Because a practitioner can step in and out of them seamlessly in the same locality and in temporal proximity, these practices are likely to hang together and reinforce one another. They can also compete for the attention and involvement of the practitioner. Would it be accurate to label them "computer practices"? Possibly, but only in a certain context and for certain purposes. In fact, Practice Theory itself would likely discourage such a label because its objective is to accentuate the embodied doings and sayings, not any individual element of the structure that organizes them.

Apart from being material objects (devices, technologies, infrastructures), the media, as per Raymond Williams' (1974) definition unsurpassed in clarity and perceptiveness, are also institutions/organizations, and cultural forms. While talking about the media in this way may sound out of fashion to those who are eager to construe them as practice, there is no need to worry. A lot of work for Practice Theory can be found in cataloguing and deconstructing the practices that bring the social phenomena known as the media into appearance. Complexes of practices constitute the social orders of the newsroom, the editorial office, the reporters' desks, the managerial boardroom, the development lab, and the server farm. How these complexes hang together, fall apart, or expand into larger networks and constellations has been the stuff of multiple analyses of media organizations, production processes, and journalistic techniques long before the practice turn. Practice Theory could inform such studies and analyses by adding conceptual tools for refining the focus, drawing the links and avoiding overstatement of some elements of practice while neglecting others.

Media as cultural forms encompass the modality, narrative structure, and flow of the content they produce and distribute, but the notion of cultural form refers also to the practices of reception, consumption, and use (Bakardjieva, 2005, p. 72). Television cartoons produced to entertain children represent a cultural form in Williams' terms, but so does the domestic practice of using television for babysitting. Computer games constitute a cultural form anchored in computer technology, and so does the computer-game talk practiced by schoolboys (see Haddon, 1991). Note that not just the communication device, but media content too, whether it is visual, audio, or textual, can be seen as a material element of a practice. In general, tracing the connections among practices containing communication media and content as their

constitutive element and the multifarious practices with which they are interknit in the everyday lives of consumers/users (e.g., listening to music or podcasts while commuting, playing a computer game when taking a break from an Excel document, checking friends' Instagram posts when sitting in class, telling one's friends in the pub about one's favorite vlog) can help assess their stability, their local and global effects, and potential for change.

Examining media as cultural forms and content from a Practice Theory perspective could take yet another interesting twist if we face the fact that the transportation of the cognitive, normative and teleoaffective elements of practices beyond the boundaries of immediate local settings is often performed by none other than the media. As Nicolini (2012) has noted, "practices can travel and be tentatively reproduced elsewhere in time and space without 'direct' contact," but rather with the help of "mediators (objects such as texts, representations, or prototypes)" (p. 232). Investigating how the media play that role would bring us back to paying attention to the textual and the discursive instead of discarding it as a vogue of the past. Communication media, we may find, are among those indispensable "translators" and "mediators" (Nicolini, 2012) that not only allow practices to spread beyond local settings and to recruit practitioners (Shove et al., 2012), but also serve as instruments facilitating the conduct of conduct (i.e., the exercise of power).

These possible routes that media research informed by Practice Theory could take would most likely generate valuable new insights. Thus, my argument is not a denial of the usefulness of Practice Theory for studying the media, but an attempt to determine more realistic and productive terms for the co-operation between the two fields. I believe that we should not be trying to study the "media as practice," which would be reductive, or "media practices" per se, which would be limiting the scope of our endeavor. The promise of productive cross-fertilization rather lies in the idea of studying the media as media in their (at least) three-fold capacity as technologies, institutions, and cultural forms while focusing explicitly on the practices that produce them on the one hand, and on those that they help organize on the other.

Bringing It All Back Home

Practice Theory supplies us with an elaborate conceptualization of what a practice is and with a detailed manual for identifying its elements. It helps moderate our views on rational agency and free will. It reminds us of the inextricable entwinement among material things and human bodies and action, and the inadequacy of any attempts to treat them in isolation. That said, its tendency to dissuade researchers from lifting their eyes above the meso level could reduce research to providing inventories and detailed descriptions of practices occurring in various areas of social life. Useful as that might be, I believe it would thwart our ability to understand those areas against a broader horizon, let alone to envision and advocate change.

What bigger picture of the social can our study of practices add up to? What can be done about it? These are the persisting questions that academic research is bound to address in its ongoing efforts of advancing human praxis. Here is where media studies may want to ignore the advice of practice theoreticians to never climb to a level above the immediately observed doings and sayings. We do not need to invent metaphysical entities to recognize the regularities at work across bundles and constellations of practices. Such entities have already been invented and have proven their utility. Instead of committing to Practice Theory as an exclusivist

new paradigm, one that purges old wisdom from the field, we could add the lens it has painstakingly developed as a sensitizing device to a larger and more sophisticated, even though eclectic, optical apparatus.

Doing that, I believe, would allow us to see that instead of constructing a blurry new lexicon to denote larger social phenomena we could turn back and join the insights gained from Practice Theory with Giddens' concept of institutions as structures of rules, resources, and recurrent practices that are relatively more robust and thus able to produce far-reaching consequences across space and time. Or we could consider pairing the original sensitizing concepts offered by Practice Theory with Bourdieu's concept of the social "field" resembling a hierarchically organized game where explicit and implicit rules, norms, and agents' positions, habitus and capital orchestrate action. How is the organization of a social field, for example the political field, affected, we could ask when new media technologies and devices come to alter the communication practices occurring in it? Another possible route is to follow Foucault's example where the analysis of disciplining micropractices ascends to the level of historical regimes of truth, discourse, and power. Taking cues from Taylor, we could look into the interplay between practices and what he calls "the social imaginary." Social imaginaries are richly layered, Taylor (2002) argues. They comprise the understanding of concrete practices as right or wrong, the ideal serving as a yardstick for this determination, and beyond that ideal, a more general sense of a "moral or metaphysical order" (p. 107). Clearly, social imaginaries can be seen as providing the cognitive and normative elements of practices and as coevolving in conjunction with them.

These are only a few directions among the many possibilities for creative blending that would enhance Practice Theory's capacity for dealing with the perennial questions of social theory and research, all of which have their projections in media and communication studies: questions concerning social order and conflict, power, emancipation, evolution, and revolution (among others). Theorizing and investigating practices differently associated with the media, I believe, should not attempt to trump and try to replace all theory that came before it, but instead should aim to find the proper place of the new perspectives and propositions among the preexisting ones in the name of mutual enhancement. If new social phenomena (which themselves represent smaller or bigger practice-arrangement bundles) arise out of the emergence of some "new combinations of doings and sayings, rules, teleologies, understandings, material arrangements, and relations between practices and arrangements" as Schatzki (2011, p. 7) maintains, the goal of research is not simply to describe these new combinations, but to trace the factors and forces that make their emergence possible and to project their broader social consequences. For that, we need a multilayered understanding of society that saves a place for some degree of human agency and reflexivity. We may agree with Foucault that "people know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does" (quoted in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 187; quoted in Ortner, 1984, p. 157). Yet as scholars, we are destined to never give up the struggle for understanding what people's doings (and sayings) do, and how it could be otherwise.

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