**Media practices**

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**Introduction**

Once a marginal topic in academic research, citizen media is now a burgeoning interdisciplinary field of study, the latest manifestation of which is this encyclopedia. Recent years have seen a growing interest in citizen media within a variety of fields, including journalism, social movement studies, drama and performance, translation studies and political communication. Much of this surge of interest in citizen media has been prompted by the rise of ‘mass self-communication’ (Castells 2009) in the form of blogs, social media and other digital technologies that enable unaffiliated individuals and groups to produce and disseminate their own media within global communication networks. For example, research on citizen journalism has examined how web 2.0 technologies have enabled ordinary people to participate in news production (Allan 2013; Allan and Thorsen 2014; Wall 2012), social movement scholars have critically examined the use of social media platforms for protest mobilization (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Gerbaudo 2012; Juris 2012), and research on digital storytelling has emphasised the potential of digital technologies to ‘give voice’ to marginalized groups (Lundby 2008; Hartley and McWilliam 2009).

Much commentary on citizen media has focused on the possibilities and limitations of digital technologies as means for citizens to disseminate media *content* that makes visible hidden realities or challenges dominant discourses. However, there is also a growing interest in material and embodied aspects of citizen media and the social processes that surround their production and consumption. As defined in this encyclopedia, the concept of citizen media encompasses not only digital contents and technologies but also physical artefacts, performative interventions, and social practices and relationships. This entry introduces the concept of ‘media practices’ as a tool for exploring the socially situated, embodied practices that relate to citizen media. Inspired by the so-called ‘practice turn’ within the social sciences, an understanding of ‘media as practice’ has been adopted by media researchers to develop a more socially grounded analysis of the media’s significance in contemporary societies. In what follows, we first situate the concept of media practices in a broader theoretical context by providing a brief introduction to practice theory and an overview of how the practice approach has been taken up within media and communication studies. We then offer a more detailed discussion of the relevance of the media practice approach for the study of citizen media, drawing on empirical examples. By way of conclusion, we reflect on some of the limitations of the media practice approach and highlight some avenues for further research.

**The ‘practice turn’ in the social sciences**

The last few decades have seen the resurgence of practice theory as a challenger to prevalent ways of thinking about human life and sociality, as an attempt to transcend the “dualisms of structure and agency, determinism and voluntarism” (Shove, Pantzar and Watson 2012: 3). Stretching back as far as Wittgenstein and Heidegger, theories of practice have long roots in social theory, and comprise a variety of approaches, including ‘first generation’ practice theories such as Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory and Bourdieu’s (1977, 1990) theory of ‘habitus’, as well as a more recent ‘second generation’ which has sought to systematize, elaborate and extend practice theory (notably Schatzki 1996, 2001; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina and von Savigny 2001; Reckwitz 2002) (for an overview see Postill 2010; Shove, Pantzar and Watson 2012).

There is no single, agreed-upon understanding of ‘practices’, but one widely used definition sees them as “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (Schatzki 2001: 11). Put slightly differently, practices are organized constellations of material activities performed by multiple agents (Schatzki 2012: 14). Reckwitz (2002: 253) defines practices as routinized bodily performances that also involve mental activities (interpretations, knowledge, emotions and motivations) and material and cultural objects. Practices can thus be situated along three key interrelated dimensions: (1) meanings and representations; (2) objects, technologies and material culture; and (3) embodied competences, activities and ‘doing’ (Shove and Pantzar 2005; Shove et al 2007; Magaudda 2011). Hence, a practice forms a ‘block’ which depends on the existence and specific interconnectedness of these elements (Reckwitz 2002, 249-250).

Practice-based approaches place materiality, process and knowledgeability at the centre of social analysis, allowing us to explore materiality as one of the many elements interacting with wider processes of emergence, transformation and decline of socially embedded practices. The aim of practice theory is not to provide general laws or explain causal or associative relationships between constructs, but rather to generate a set of discursive resources able to produce accounts and analyses of social phenomena that enrich our understanding of them (Nicolini 2017).

**The practice approach in media and communication studies**

Prompted by this turn to practice in the social sciences, an understanding of *media as practice* has gained prominence in media and communication studies over the last decade. Though this interest in practice had antecedents in various areas of media research (see below), explicit engagement with practice theory was sparked by Couldry’s (2004) article ‘Theorising media as practice’, which proposed an approach to media research that understands media as practice rather than as texts or structures of production. For Couldry (2004), this implied a change of paradigm in media studies, as it changes the focus from textual analysis or political economy to what people are “doing in relation to media across a wide range of situations and contexts” (Couldry 2012: 37). Couldry defined media practices as the “open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media” (2004: 117), further distinguishing between “acts aimed specifically at media, acts performed through media, and acts whose preconditions are media” (2012: 57). Practice theory thus offers a holistic approach to understanding the media’s social significance, and allows us to grasp the distinctive types of social processes that are enacted through media-related practices. The focus on media practices allows us to see media at work in a number of contexts and situations, and to understand how media practices arrange, combine, and more generally intersect with other social practices (Couldry, 2004, 2012).

This ‘turn’ to practice has antecedents within two broad strands of media research: audience studies and media anthropology. The question of what people do with media was the starting point for the Uses and Gratifications approach (Couldry 2012), and the cultural turn in the social sciences of the 1980s and 1990s prompted the rise of qualitative research on ‘active audiences’. However, while Uses and Gratifications focused on “individual usage of bounded objects called media” (Cammaerts and Couldry 2016: 327), practice theory differs in its social emphasis and focus on relations beyond the use of specific technologies (Cammaerts and Couldry 2016). The turn to practice theory can thus be understood as a response to a ‘crisis’ in audience studies (Couldry 2012, citing Ang 1996), deriving from the growing ubiquity and embeddedness of media in everyday life. In a media-saturated world, practice theory, due to its openness, is seen to offer a more adequate framework for capturing the diversity of everyday practices involving media (Couldry 2012).

A concern with practices has also been central within media anthropology, which takes people and their social relations (rather than texts or technology) as a starting point for analysing media as a social form (Ginsburg 1994: 13). Within both fields, scholarship on media audiences has moved away from a focus on direct engagement with texts toward “a consideration of multiple articulations with media in everyday life” (Bird, 2010: 85; see also Bird 2003). However, until recently, although the notion of practices had been used widely by media anthropologists, it had rarely been defined or problematized, and there had been little explicit engagement with practice theory (Postill 2010). The edited collection *Theorising Media and Practice* (Bräuchler & Postill 2010) sought to remedy this by bringing media anthropology into explicit conversation with practice theory, as a response to Couldry’s (2004) intervention. Contributors to this volume explored the value of practice theory for understanding different ways of engaging with media, from practices of newspaper readers (Peterson 2010) and news journalists (Rao 2010) in India; uses of information and communication technologies by Norwegian (Helle-Valle 2010) and Danish (Christensen and Røpke 2010) families; amateur audiovisual production (Ardévol et al 2010); and free software activism (Kelty 2010). The practice approach has also been adopted by digital ethnographers as a methodological framework for multi-sited, multi-platform studies of interrelated digital practices (Gómez Cruz and Ardévol 2013a, 2013b, Ardévol and Gómez Cruz 2013).

**Understanding citizen media as practice**

This understanding of media as practice has important implications for the study of citizen media. The media practice approach enables us to move beyond with the tendency in citizen media studies to focus on *content* to explore a much broader range of socially situated practices that *relate to* citizen media. More specifically, as Stephansen (2016: 29-30) has argued, an understanding of citizen media as practice enables researchers to ask three broader questions:

1) What do people do, say and think in relation to citizen media? [...]

2) What *kinds* of practices do people engage in that are oriented towards citizen media? [...]

3) What might the role of citizen media practices be in structuring other practices?

In drawing attention to social relationships and processes, the media practice approach resonates with a longer tradition of scholarship on alternative media that predates the current preoccupation with digital technologies. Although scholars in this field have not drawn explicitly on practice theory, social relations and organizational processes have been central to their conceptualizations of alternative media. Atton (2002) highlighted how alternative media producers engage in a range of practices aimed at transforming the social and economic relations involved in media production, distribution and consumption - such as non-hierarchical, collective forms of organization and anti-copyright publishing. Downing (2001), similarly, emphasized the *prefigurative* character of radical media, showing how media activists attempt to ‘practice what they preach’ by implementing radical democratic principles in their modes of organization. Rodríguez (2001) coined the term ‘citizens’ media’ to refer to media through which citizenship is performed or enacted. Countering the then-dominant framing of alternative and community media in terms of counter-information, Rodríguez showed how communication practices can empower communities and individuals, strengthen social bonds, and thus act as a catalyst for social change.

In this sense, the media practice approach can be said to provide a new theoretical framework for addressing longstanding concerns in the literature on alternative, radical and citizens’ media. In recent years, the concept of media practices has proved particularly popular among scholars studying social movements and media. In this specific field of citizen media research, which has grown exponentially in response to the rise of web 2.0 technologies and their adoption by protest movements, the media practice approach has been used to develop non-media-centric analyses of the role of media in movements for social and political change. Highlighting the wide range of media practices that activists engage in, this strand of literature has sought to challenge technological determinism and the tendency to focus on a single media platform (Treré 2012; Mattoni and Treré 2014), in order to develop more nuanced analyses of the intersections between protest and media (see, for example, Barassi 2015, Kaun 2016, Kubitschko 2015, Martinez 2017, McCurdy 2011).

*Activist media practices*

One of the first and most comprehensive studies in the social movements literature to adopt the media practice approach was Mattoni’s (2012) research on the media practices of the precarious workers’ movement in Italy. Mattoni (2012: 159) defined ‘activist media practices’ as

(1) both routinised and creative social practices that; (2) include interactions with media objects (such as mobile phones, laptops, pieces of paper) and media subjects (such as journalists, public relations managers, other activists); (3) draw on how media objects and media subjects are perceived and how the media environment is understood and known.

Blending social movement studies, media studies and the sociology of practice, Mattoni contrasts a media-centric approach that select *a priori* the types of media that will be investigated (for instance, citizen or mainstream), with a media-practice approach whose strength relies instead in exploring how activists map, understand and then actively navigate the media environment with which they interact during their protest activities. In this way, Mattoni’s approach is able to transcend the limitations of most social movement studies that either focused on how mainstream media cover protests neglecting the role of citizen media produced by protesters, or isolated the diverse media produced by activists from their multiple interactions with the press and mainstream media. Her focus on the practices of activists and social movement groups revealed instead that Italian citizen media like *Indymedia* or *Global Project* are part of a wider *repertoire of communication*, understood as the entire set of media practices that social movement actors may conceive as possible and use to reach social actors within and beyond the social movement milieu (2013: 50). In a given social and political context, activists’ perception of the opportunities and constraints of the media environment informs their media choices: while sometimes citizen media can be better suited to communicate critical content to specific publics or organize collective mobilizations, other times negotiations with the mainstream media is chosen in order to reach a wider constituency.

*Citizen media practices*

Another study to analyse citizen media through the lens of ‘media practice’ is Stephansen’s (2016; see also 2013a, 2013b, 2017) research on media activism in the World Social Forum (WSF). Drawing on Couldry (2004, 2012) and Rodríguez (2001), Stephansen (2016) argues that the media practice framework brings into view a broad range of citizen media practices, beyond those directly related to the production and circulation of content, thus enabling researchers to explore the social fabric that such practices can help generate and the forms of agency they make possible. Stephansen describes the emergence within the WSF of what activists refer to as ‘shared communication’ - an approach to media activism that emphasizes sharing of content but also collaborative production processes and exchange of knowledge and experience.

Stephansen (2016: 33) identifies four distinct types of media practices among media activists in the WSF: *Organizational practices* aimed at enabling collaborative production process that stimulate exchange of skills, experiences and ideas; *capacity-building practices* such as training grassroots activists to produce their own media; *networking practices* such as setting up dedicated spaces for alternative and citizen media at social forums that bring communicators from different parts of the world together; and *movement-building practices* that help develop a sense of shared purpose and collective identity, such as seminars to share knowledge and debate strategies for media democratization. Stephansen shows how such practices create the preconditions for distinct forms of agency to emerge: they offer lived experience of ‘another communication’, build solidarity that can provide a source of strength for activists operating in difficult contexts, and generate a sense of individual and collective identity.

*Media practices and...*

Scholars have also sought to combine media practices with other theoretical concepts and approaches. Usually, this emerges from the necessity to complement perceived deficiencies in a media practices perspective. For instance, Mattoni and Treré (2014) argue that the media practice approach is particularly insightful for studying social movements at the micro-level, but less so for grasping meso- and macro-level processes (cf. Postill 2010). They therefore propose a conceptual framework that integrates media practices with the concepts of *mediation* – “a social process in which media supports the flow of discourses, meanings, and interpretations in societies” (Mattoni & Treré 2014: 260, citing Couldry 2008 and Silverstone 2002) – for studying the meso-level; and *mediatization* – “a concept used to analyze critically the interrelation between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other” (Couldry and Hepp 2013: 197) – for investigating macro-level dynamics.

Treré (2011, 2012) and Mattoni (2017) have also sought to combine media practice with media ecology approaches that pay attention to the complex, hybrid and multi-faceted nature of the media systems within which social movement actors operate. Treré (2011, 2012) points out that these two conceptual lenses implicate - and reinforce - each other: on one side, an analytical approach anchored in practice theory puts us in a position to ask holistic questions regarding the whole spectrum of media used by activists; on the other, a media ecology perspective sheds light on the complex interrelations among multiple types of media (old and new, corporate and alternative, online and offline, etc.). Mattoni contends that, together, media practice and media ecology approaches are powerful because they recognize the wider range of technologies, actors and contents that activists interact with, historicize social movements’ use of technologies, and emphasize activists’ agency vis-a-vis media technologies (Mattoni 2017: 2).

**Conclusions**

Practice theory has emerged as a productive framework for research on citizen media, allowing scholars to develop holistic analyses of activists’ uses and understandings of media technologies, as well as the broader social contexts within which these are situated. However, although significant conceptual advances have been made, there is a need for deeper debate about the theoretical underpinnings of ‘media practice’. One key question concerns whether the practice approach can be considered a new paradigm (Couldry 2004), or if it is more appropriately understood as a new conceptual or methodological lens, to be used pragmatically alongside other perspectives. A common criticism of practice theory is that while it is useful for studying the micro-level of social interaction, it cannot adequately account for large-scale political processes, and therefore cannot by itself provide an overarching theoretical framework (Postill 2010, Mattoni and Treré 2014) – but this criticism has been challenged recently (Hui, Schatzki and Shove 2017).

Another important question relates to the ordering of practices and the extent to which media practices might ‘anchor’ other practices by enacting new patterns of action that in turn prompt changes in other practices (Couldry 2004; Swidler 2001). In order to understand the role of citizen media in processes of social change, more focused empirical research is needed on the specificities of citizen media practices and their relationship to other social practices. This includes research on the ‘audiences’ of citizen and social movement media - thus far a neglected area (Downing 2003). Scholars have long highlighted how such media blur the boundaries between audiences and producers, and, as discussed above, the very concept of ‘audiences’ is challenged by the ubiquity and embeddedness of media in everyday life. Practice theory seems particularly suited to grasping the complex array of practices situated at the intersections of ‘production’ and ‘use’, but more empirical research is needed in this area.

An ongoing preoccupation in research on citizen media and media activism concerns the dynamic between media practices and the technological affordances of media platforms. Given the current intensification of processes of datafication, this line of enquiry will only become more relevant and urgent. A key question is how (and to what extent) the media practice approach can help theorize agency and social change in this context. One promising approach involves expanding the notion of ‘media practices’ to include ‘acting on media’ - practices explicitly concerned with politicizing media technologies and infrastructures (Kubitschko 2017), and this could be further strengthened by articulating the media practice framework with scholarship on media democracy movements (Hackett & Carroll 2006; Milan 2013; Kidd, Rodríguez & Stein 2009) and data activism (Milan and van der Velden 2016). In an age increasingly dominated by corporate, algorithmically driven social media platforms, more work is also needed to integrate research on media practices with critical analyses of political economy.

**Further reading**

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