"The Media": A Crisis of Appearances

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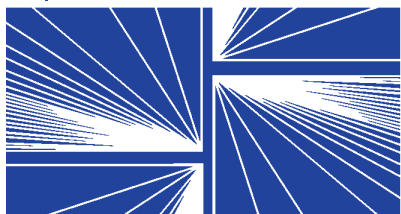
"The Media": A Crisis of Appearances[1]

NICK COULDRY

'Inaugural' – as often, a word's origins remind us of something we forget.[2] The word denotes a beginning of course, but also the taking of 'auguries' at the start of an uncertain journey. The classical Mediterranean had various ways of taking omens or auguries (not all cruel) including the ancient method of reading the movement of birds of prey in the sky:[3] in both Greek and Latin the words for omen and bird of prey are the same. I claim no special knowledge of the future, but the image of auguries remains apt because it registers the great uncertainty that these days attends *any* talk of media, both in the media industries and in media research. The signs of 'media culture' are increasingly difficult to read. It's those difficulties on which I want to reflect tonight.

If there's one question that has interested me as long as I've been thinking about media, it's this: what are the roots of media institutions' social authority and power? Yes, media are in a sense 'just there'. But the particular media we have, the particular authority they have, is always the result of a historical process. Radio and TV in the UK, as Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff showed,[4] took a long time to find an appropriate voice for 'speaking to and for' the nation, but a broader process of embedding media outputs in everyday life here and in other countries was already under way: in the 1920s the sociologist Gabriel Tarde saw the reinforcements between media stories and everyday contexts as an unstoppable force of social connection.[5] Over time, media institutions became what Michel Callon and Bruno Latour call 'obligatory passing-points' in daily life.[6] But the banality, now, of our everyday relationship to media allows us to forget both its historical contingency and its basis in a distinctive form of power.

Gilles Deleuze in a conversation with Michel Foucault once spoke of the 'indignity of speaking for others'.[7] 'Indignity' no doubt goes too far but there is undeniably a *power* in speaking for others, a symbolic power. Media institutions have that power, speaking not just for us but for everything around us, sometimes speaking in place of the alternative accounts each of us might give of the world. Media invest a lot of energy in reinforcing the *legitimacy* of that symbolic power, or at least its naturalness - when they tell us that we must watch because everyone is watching (final night of *Big Brother* each year), when they tell us they know what the nation thinks (*Daily Mail*, every morning). In English such claims are even condensed in language. As Todd Gitlin notes,[8] in English we often

[3] W.R.Halliday, *Greek Divination: A Study of Its Methods and Principles*, especially 269-270.

[4] P. Scannell and D. Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting* (Oxford: Blackwell 1991).

[5] G.Tarde, *On Communication and Social Influence* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1969), 312.

[6] M. Callon and B. Latour 'Unscrewing the Big Leviathan' in K. Knorr-Cetina and A. Cicourel (eds) *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 277-303.

[7] G. Deleuze and M. Foucault 'Intellectuals and Power' in M. Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 277-292, at 201.

[8] T. Gitlin, *Media Unlimited* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 6.

slip the definite article in front of the word "media" – *the* media. But what object do we refer to? If 'the media' stands in for something, what is it?

In picking out this term 'the media', I realize of course that there are many media, and important contrasts between them. But my point lies elsewhere. I've tried in my work to get a critical distance from this installation of media institutions over time as authoritative representers of social life; I've tried to see 'the media' as an ongoing social construction, the result of a history that could be otherwise. This approach involves, in web theorist Richard Rogers' phrase,[9] an 'information politics' – an information politics that keeps in mind the very particular way in which the information flows on which we rely are organized, while still imagining how things could be otherwise. I wrote in my book *Media Rituals* about 'the myth of the mediated centre'.[10] By this I mean the claim that 'the media' are our privileged access-point to society's centre or core, the claim that what's 'going on' in the wider world is accessible first through a door marked 'media'. The myth of the mediated centre enfolds another myth, 'the myth of the centre', the idea that 'societies', nations, have not just a physical or organizational centre – a place that allocates resources, takes decisions – but a centre in a different sense, a *generative centre* that explains the social world's functioning and its values. Both myths obscure other realities and sources of value, other scales on which communications might connect us.

This 'myth' of the mediated centre is not of course an ideology imposed from above. We enact it every day in our talk, action and thoughts. This is the cultural supplement to political economy explanations of media power. A great achievement of Roger Silverstone, still very much missed, was to keep us in touch with this side of media.[11]

The mythical object - 'the media' – is not a trivial construction. It almost sounds like a condensed answer to Hegel's 200 year old question: under what conditions can the norms we live by (*Sittlichkeit*) fit with the spaces where we are governed? And an answer also to Durkheim's 100 year old question about what bonds sustain a society as a society. Durkheim's account of how social bonds are built through ritual has remarkable overlaps with how we now talk about 'the media' – as what everyone is watching, as the place where we all gather together. It's all too easy here to lapse into old-style functionalist readings of society and media – another reason for keeping 'the media' in scare quotes - but 'the media', *if* it addresses any long-term problem, does so on the basis of specific historical conditions. And those conditions may now be changing.

What if the idea of 'the media' is imploding, as the interfaces we call 'media' are transformed? To what tensions – technological, social and political - is the myth of the mediated centre now subject? What is at stake for government and other institutions in sustaining that myth against new pressures? Would a crisis in the notion of 'the media' mean a 'crisis of appearances' (in the words of my title) - dislocating populations' possibilities of appearing to each other and to government, dislocating government's possibilities of appearing to its people, dislocating media's apparently indispensable role in these processes? The advantage of considering 'the media' as a historical *construction* is that it gives us the space to ask those questions, to unpack the many processes which sustain that apparently innocent term, 'the media'.

CHALLENGES TO "THE MEDIA"

Let me start with some tensions that seem now to be undermining our sense of 'the media' as a stable site for accessing a common world. Starting with technology, many, at least within the UK and

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[9] R.Rogers, *Information Politics on the Web* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).
[10] N. Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (London: Routledge, 2003).
[11] See especially *The Message of Television* (London: Heinemann, 1981).

US media industries, believe that traditional media forms are on the brink of calamitous change: no newspapers within 10 years, the end of the BBC, a new generation that doesn't even remember what it was like to watch a TV news bulletin. If we can project a time when news consumption is just a cursory flick past the headlines on our online homepage, and TV just one of many remote sources for our downloaded entertainment archive, then how can we also project a time when 'the media' still stand in for something coherent, let alone for our main access-point to the social world?

But there's a danger of parochialism here. Remember that digital convergence is coming to other countries outside the UK and US, including countries in the middle of unprecedented expansions of their media markets (India and China to name two): the social and political dynamics of those market expansions cannot be lightly dismissed. Indeed if we stop thinking about single media, then, as the Internet, at least in richer nations, becomes more deeply embedded in everyday life, the Internet's distinctive ability to link up previously separate contexts – think of the new BBC news homepage - this makes it in principle easier, not more difficult, to sustain 'the media' as a reference-point.

The 'technological' challenge to the idea of 'the media' is more plausibly related to *use*, an increasing diversity of use. Wasn't our older notion of 'the media' sustained by the *practical* convergence of habits of media consumption, the way people could assume others were doing pretty much the same as them, when they switched on the TV or radio news? But what if, through the technological convergence of once separate media, people's trajectories through mediaspace become so varied that we can't recognize a pattern any more? Certainly, the internet encourages what Leah Lievrouw called a 'pluralization of lifeworlds',[12] but here too there's a danger of exaggerating the changes under way. According to the latest Ofcom figures, only 6% use the Internet as their main news source compared with 65% for TV;[13] while hours watching terrestrial TV news (though falling) still – at nearly 2 hours per week dwarf those spent on Internet news sites (average: just over an hour a month).[14] Overall TV viewing was unchanged between 2002-2007 with slight falls among the under 24s.[15]

Admittedly there's a special issue about young people's reduced watching of terrestrial TV news which has fallen by a third since 2001, many times the fall for older age-groups.[16] But changing media opportunities, *themselves* age-differentiated, cut across news-watching, so it's difficult as yet to distinguish a fundamental shift between historical generations or matters of life-stage. No one yet is suggesting that the age-related factors which shape long-term media habits – do you own or rent your living space? do you have a stable partner and/or children? do you have regular work? – are becoming irrelevant. But continuing habits will never make news!

However, there's a second quite different reason for thinking that the familiar construction 'the media' may be being destabilized. The word 'liveness' captures our sense that we *must* switch on centrally transmitted media to check 'what's going on', that sense of 'community consumption' as Mark Lawson recently put it.[17] But what if new forms of 'liveness' today are now emerging through mobile media that are primarily *interpersonal* and potentially more continuous than mass media have ever been? Is there emerging a sense of social 'liveness' – mediated, yes, but *not* by central media institutions? This is what much hype about social networking sites tells us and Manuel Castells and colleagues' recently scholarly account seems to agree that a new 'mobile youth culture' is emerging that helps young people 'set up their own connections, `the mass media'.[18] So will interpersonal media

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[12] L. Lievrouw, 'New Media and the "Pluralisation of Lifeworlds": a Role for Information in Social Differentiation', *New Media and Society* 3(1): 7-28.

[13] Ofcom, *New News, Future News* (June 2007), fig 3.1. www.ofcom.org.uk

[14] Ofcom, *New News, Future News*, Fig 3.4 and Table A2.26.

[15] Ofcom, *Public Service Broadcasting Annual Reports 2007 and 2008*. www.ofcom.org.uk

[16] Ofcom, *New News, Future News*, Figure A2.5.

[17] *Guardian* 11 April 2008.

[18] M. Castells et al. *Mobile Communication and Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 1.

become people's primary mode of connection, with what we once called 'the media' routed through our checks on what our friends are up to?

But again it's more complex: there is not only the lifestage or generational shift issue, but huge commercial pressures. Media institutions from the BBC to music majors are already building profiles in social networking sites. Instead of interpersonal media becoming divorced from centrally produced media flows, more likely is a sort of double helix, in which social media and external media are closely linked. So it's not so much that our notion of 'the media' will wither away, but that its components may change, with uneven consequences no doubt for different actors. What if interpersonal media become a major means for governments to appear to their populations? Imagine it: 'you don't know me, and you don't know we're friends, but we share the same taste in music, and by the way I'm also your MP!'

This links to a third dynamic of change: politics. 'The media' in Britain, with its early public broadcasting, have always stood in for a link to the state as the legitimate focus of social and political struggle. In Tony Parker's remarkable interviews with miners after the 1980s Miners Strike, one miner remembered his reaction to Margaret Thatcher going on TV to condemn those on strike: 'and then the day came when she said me and my mates were the enemy within. Within our own society, that it was our work that had created . . . In all my lifetime, those words made more impression on me than anything anyone else's ever said'.[19] 'The media' as the site where governments appear to the people. But we know, in Britain at least, that interest in electoral politics is at historically low levels – around 50%.[20] There are many reasons for this. In the Public Connection project which Sonia Livingstone, Tim Markham and I conducted at LSE between 2003 and 2006,[21] even those engaged through media with national and local politics had few places to take action and little, if any, sense that government recognized their engagement. Against this background, governments cannot afford to be relaxed about how 'the media', as social reference-point, is being transformed.

The point so far then is not that 'the media' will disappear but that the subtle play of interdependencies for which this term stands is already shifting, with different implications for different actors - an open-ended 'crisis of appearances' which, perhaps for institutions such as the BBC, has been under way for some time, for particular reasons. So the issue for media research becomes: what forms is the media's social authority taking now under these pressures? I want shortly to turn to reality TV as a good place from which to explore these questions. But first let's think for a moment about the changing 'social' world for which 'the media' still claim to be our privileged guide.

The sociologist Karin Knorr-Cetina once asked a tantalizing question: what 'fills in' the 'texture' of the social world, if older belief and value systems are withdrawing from the scene?[22] Her answer was interesting: not a positive set of values but 'unfolding structures of absences',[23] structures sustained by media. 'Unfolding structures of absences' – this poetic phrase makes me think of a *Times Educational Supplement* report from November 2006: 'Most pre-school children want to be a celebrity when they are older, according to a survey out today . . . almost a third (31%) [of parents] said their sons and daughters wanted to be a famous performer.' Can our lack of (desire for) celebrity fill in our sense of a meaningful social world?

If for 'celebrity' we substitute prestige (or in Pierre Bourdieu's term 'symbolic capital') this becomes more plausible - maybe two other French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot

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[19] T. Parker, *Red Hill* (London: Heinemann, 1986), 23.

[20] Hansard Society, *5th Audit of Political Engagement* (2008). www.hansardsociety.org.uk

[21] N. Couldry, S.Livingstone and T. Markham, *Media Consumption and Public Engagement: Beyond the Presumption of Attention* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

[22] K. Knorr-Cetina, 'Postsocial Relations: Theorising Sociality in a Postsocial Environment' in G. Ritzer and B. Smart (eds) *The Handbook of Social Theory* (London: Sage, 2001), 527.

[23] Knorr-Cetina, ibid., 527-529.

were right to include the 'world of fame' as one of their six 'languages of justification' in contemporary life.[24] Indeed I've argued in a theoretical piece a few years back that the role of 'media capital' in everyday social competition is increasing across many fields at once.[25] Remember the controversial raid in January by Slough police on supposed Roma child traffickers. Media were invited along to the raid and next day tabloid reports of 'Fagin's heirs' followed, the only problem being that no charges of child trafficking were ever brought. The Police Commander's defence, quoted in the Guardian,[26] was that 'I didn't know exactly who and what we were going to find' (so why invite the media then?). Such cases where the search for media coverage penetrates into everyday professional judgement need more research, but they go farther, I suspect, than mere self-promotion. They are linked to how governments now, as Thomas Meyer argues,[27] are largely dependent on a media cycle for the very definition of what counts <u>as</u> a policy intervention, <u>as</u> a problem requiring intervention.

At the same time, individuals, if we follow Axel Honneth's recent analysis,[28] operate in a social world with fewer clear signals about values, more incitements to mark themselves off from others through consumption, and increasingly abstract measures of their "performance" – a conflict that Honneth claims is 'making [individual] lives into <u>fiction</u>'.[29] He means, I think, that there's now a gap between people's lives and the narratives that are available, indeed required, for making sense of them. Does 'reality television' rework 'the media's' social authority to convert that fiction, that gap in our narrative resources, back into 'reality'? That's too neat, no doubt, but it's worth looking at the sorts of authority on which reality TV relies and the curious claims to social knowledge that it enacts. I'll focus here on contemporary Britain, but of course 'reality TV' is an international phenomenon, and some underlying social dynamics I'll discuss connect with transnational shifts - in marketisation, labour conditions, and so on.

THE AUTHORITY CLAIMS OF REALITY TV

If you doubt that reality TV in Britain has anything to do with a claim to authority or social knowledge, here are some descriptions of such programmes:

> Castaway 2000 is a unique experiment to discover what happens when a group representative of British society today is stranded away from modern life.[30]

> For the first time these children will be forging relationships that are no longer about what music they like or what trainers they wear. They will change so much during these few weeks that going home to their old friends could be quite difficult for them.[31]

In 2004 Daisy Goodwin, editorial director of the UK *Apprentice*'s production company, Talkback, said '[the *Apprentice* is] the first entertainment show to have a real point – to show what it

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[24] L. Boltanski and L. Thevenot *On Justification* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), especially 98-107 and 178-185.

[25] N. Couldry, 'Media Meta-capital: Extending the Range of Bourdieu's Field Theory', *Theory and Society* (2003) 32(5-6): 653-677.

[26] *Guardian* , 2 February 2008.

[27] T. Meyer, *Media Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

[28] A. Honneth (2004) 'Organised Self-Realization: Some Paradoxes of Individualization', *European Journal of Social Theory* 7(4): 463-478.

[29] Honneth, ibid., 474.

[30] BBC Voiceover 25 January 2000.

[31] Alex Patterson on *Serious Jungle* quoted *Observer*, 31 March 2002.

really takes to get ahead in business'.[32] And, trailing a forthcoming Channel 5 reality programme called *Banged Up* featuring ex-Home Secretary David Blunkett as the head of an imagined prison parole board - a program which aims to teach potential criminals about the harsh 'reality' of prison - Jim Dawkins, ex-prison officer and key participant, said last week: 'I was amazed . . . at how well everyone came together to give the kids as real an experience as possible'.[33]

As I mentioned earlier, the myth of the mediated centre which at first seemed so abstract operates in a decentered way – so why not find it, as here, in the marketing of programs, both by production companies selling them to channels and channels selling them to audiences? And why not find it across the whole textual universe in which programs are discussed, their stars portrayed, clips posted on YouTube, and so on?

It's common to say, however, that the word 'reality' in Reality TV is just a dead metaphor, a claim that audiences have long since deconstructed. Of course audiences discount such claims. Indeed the whole phenomenon of reality TV – or at least celebrity culture - splits audiences, as we found in the Public Connection project.[34] But that doesn't mean audiences (any more than TV marketers) treat these claims to 'reality' as trivial.[35] On the contrary, as recent research at Goldsmiths by Bev Skeggs, Helen Woods and Nancy Thumim brings out,[36] whether or not people say they discount such 'reality' claims does not affect whether they act on these claims, by treating reality shows as sources of knowledge or as presenting real moral choices. And authenticity in performance is something people look for in reality TV, as Annette Hill's extensive audience research has brought out.[37] Indeed the genre roots of reality TV go back to an earlier documentary tradition;[38] they are entirely consistent with the claims from the early 20th century onwards that 'the media' provide a privileged access-point onto our central 'realities'. So once again the question is: what's distinctive about the forms which this claim to authority is taking now in the intensely competitive, increasingly convergent world of reality TV?

Many processes and people help make up the 'culture' of reality TV, but the result is not 'cultural chaos' (in Brian McNair's term) because of a number of simplifying pressures linked to markets. Because the point of reality TV is to attract regular audience attention without the support of a formal plot, it needs a *temporal structure*, targeted at events which 'cannot' be missed. It's not accidental that reality programmes which a few years ago tried to impose narrative structure onto what was basically observation (observing staff at an airport, a hotel, and so on) have largely been replaced by programmes that, as John Corner puts it,[39] 'build their own social' - within event-structures constructed for the purpose (*Big Brother*, *Survivor*). Those event-structures require a way of generating critical moments – how better than through *judging* behaviour between characters, who thus become 'contestants'.

Those practices of judgement in turn require recognizable *criteria* of judgement (otherwise why take part?) - and recognizable *forms of authority* through which decisions are ratified. In reality TV,

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[32] BBC, 'Sir Alan Sugar Confirmed for BBC Two's The Apprentice', 18 May 2004, www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/ pressreleases

[33] Quoted *Guardian* 28 April 2008.

[34] N. Couldry and T. Markham, 'Celebrity Culture and Public Connection: Bridge or Chasm?', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* (2007) 10(4):403-422.

[35] On this point (but not others) I disagree with the interesting recent argument of Colin Sparks: 'Reality TV: the Big Brother phenomenon', *International Socialism* 114 (2007),: available online from www.isj.org.uk

[36] B.Skeggs, N. Thumim and H. Wood '"Oh Goodness, I *am* Watching Reality TV" How Methods Make Class in Audience Research', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2008) 11(1): 5-24.

[37] A. Hill, *Reality TV* (London: Routledge, 2004) and *Restyling Factual TV* (London: Routledge, 2007).

[38] J. Corner 'Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions', *Television and New Media* 3(3): 255-269; A. McCarthy, '"Stanley Milgram, Allen Funt, and Me": Postwar Social Science and the "First Wave" of Reality TV' in S. Murray and L. Ouellette (eds) *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 19-39.

[39] J. Corner, ibid. at 257.

'the media' draw on various external forms of authority: the psychologist as judge of the 'facts' of general human nature, the industry expert. Media authority (to present the social) and technical or scientific authority (to judge performance) neatly reinforce each other, whether in shows based on individualised instruction (such as *Masterchef*) or collective spectacles (such as *Pop Idol*). Technical authority is sometimes wielded offstage (the *Big Brother* psychologists) but often in direct interaction with contestants on camera. When this happens, there can be considerable aggression. So nutritionist Dr. Fi Ramsden on *Fast Food Junkies Go Native* announced to contestants: 'you can go onto an early grave or turn your life around'.[40] Or take this dialogue with a contestant on *Ben Fogle's Extreme Adventures* who's just explained that, after bringing up a family, she now had more free time:

> [psychologist Cynthia] have you ever done <u>anything</u> for yourself in your life?
>
> [contestant] no
>
> [psychologist, smiling] So you've devoted yourself to others?[41]

But aggression is strongest in the service of charismatic authority, when the full weight of personal celebrity and the "rules of the game" fall behind it. I'll come back to Sir Alan Sugar of *The Apprentice* fame in a moment.

Before that, we need to focus on the fact that these are all games. This has a peculiar force: it shields the media's underlying claim to social knowledge from direct criticism (it's only a game!); and it guarantees a structure with rules that are difficult to challenge, if that is you're playing the game. Those who challenge the rules of reality TV get treated harshly. In the UK *Big Brother*'s third series Sandy reacted to the tedium of the house, quite rationally you might have thought, by reading a book in the bedroom – he got voted off and heavily criticised in public by presenter Davina McColl.[42]

The unchallengeable, naturalizing force of reality game rules matters even more, when we look at what some of the rules are. One deep unstated rule of reality TV is: *willing submission to surveillance* (without that, there would be no programmes). But this is not a trivial rule in societies where surveillance is ever more deeply entrenched as a management principle for the economy and for public space.

Other reality rules refract the social world in specific ways, as with the UK version of *The Apprentice*. Here, as Jo Littler and I argue in a forthcoming article,[43] the most important rule is that Sir Alan Sugar's personal authority overrides everything else; indeed contestants show character by submitting to that authority in all its arbitrariness. A clear illustration came towards the end of Series 2 when Sir Alan confronted Paul (who had been on the winning team in every previous task and so hadn't yet appeared before Sir Alan in 'the Boardroom'). Here's Sir Alan:

> the fact that you've won all the tasks doesn't mean jack shit to me because <u>I</u> haven't talked with you yet. So you speak to me now, you speak to me now, because, I'm telling you, it's getting close to that door.[44]

So the message is clear – playing by the rules, doing all the approved tasks, counts for nothing, unless you have proven yourself in front of Sir Alan. A rule that fits rather well with actual working conditions in neoliberal democracies where, as Richard Sennett remarks in *The Culture of the New*

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[40] Channel 4, 16 January 2008.

[41] BBC2 15 January 2008 (my transcript).

[42] This and related examples are discussed in N. Couldry, 'Teaching Us to Fake It: The Ritualized Norms of Televisions' "Reality" Games' in S. Murray and L. Ouellette (eds) *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, (New York: New York University Press 2004), 57-74.

[43] N. Couldry and J. Littler 'Work, Power and Performance: Analysing the "Reality" Game of *The Apprentice*', *Cultural Sociology* (forthcoming 2008).

[44] BBC2, *The Apprentice* Series 2 episode 11, 2006.

Capitalism,[45] corporate authority is increasingly personalised and charismatic, and where, as a respondent in Michael Pusey's eloquent study of workers' experience in 1990s Australia put it, 'you give it all you've got and they still want more',[46] the implication being, as Pusey notes, that 'your motivation is inadequate until proven otherwise'.

The Apprentice is not the only show where the rules of the game bear more than a passing resemblance to wider social and economic regulation – for the USA, Laurie Ouellette and James Hay have great fun in their recent book *Better Living through Reality TV*[47] in matching reality show formats to all those areas of life where federal governments have withdrawn from intervention, telling citizens to rely on their own self-discipline. But sometimes the relationship between reality shows and everyday rules is more indirect, or displaced. Shows such as *Big Brother* are more like what I have called a 'secret theatre',[48] where the often arbitrary authority and compulsory emotional labour of today's workplaces is translated, in disguised form, into the rules of harmless play.

So: in reality TV the authority of 'the media' – its distinctive claim to give us, however playfully, a privileged access to the social world – is doing work, in alliance with other types of authority, to present that world in a consistent way: as a place where the complexity of people's experiences and motives is easily reducible to 'rules', including one key rule, that submission to continuous surveillance and the judgement of arbitrary external authority is necessary for 'self-improvement'. Much more could be said – for example about reality TV programmes such as *Trinny and Susannah* and *Changing Rooms* which (as Angela McRobbie and Deborah Philips both point out) [49] offer barely disguised judgements of <u>class</u> as if this was entirely unproblematic – remember this is also the era when a new language of class abuse has been invented (the word 'chav').

So let's return to the social world in which this highly judgemental version of 'the media's' authority has developed. To mention just two of its features:

- *increasing socio-economic inequality*, whether we look at statistics on income or wealth: if we exclude housing, the top 10%'s share of wealth increased (by more than 20%) to 71% of national wealth between 1986 and 2003,[50] while in terms of income in the UK the top 10%'s purchasing power is nearly 14 times more than that of the bottom 10% - according to UNDP's comparative figures, this is twice the level of inequality in Germany and Sweden, three times that in Japan.[51]

- *poor conditions for young people*: in the much cited 2007 UNICEF report on child well-being, which placed the UK bottom out of 21 rich countries, Britain was one of only 2 countries where less than 50% of children found their peers 'kind and helpful',[52] while a Nuffield Foundation report found a nearly 40% rise between 1986 and 2006 in 16 year olds

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[45] New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, especially chapter 2.

[46] M.Pusey, *The Experience of Middle Australia: The Dark Side of Economic Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 63.

[47] Malden: Blackwell, 2008.

[48] N. Couldry 'Reality TV, or the Secret Theatre of Neoliberalism', *The Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies* 2008, 30: 3-13.

[49] A. McRobbie, *The Uses of Cultural Studies* (London: Sage, 2005), 144-150; D. Philips, 'Transformation Scenes: the Television Interior Makeover', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2005 8(2): 213-229.

[50] Office of National Statistics, www.statistics.gov.uk, search under 'household income', last accessed 29 April 2008.

[51] UNDP Human Development Report 2007/8, www.undp.org . See also the collation of these statistics on the excellent Worldmapper site: www.sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/149worldmapper/data_data.xls , last searched 12 January 2007. For the rise in income inequality in the UK, see Office of National Statistics, www.statistics.gov.uk, search under 'income inequality', last accessed 29 April 2008.

[52] UNICEF, 'Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries' (Florence, 2007), www.unicef.org/irc

who said they had no best friend;[53] and (according to the Office of National Statistics) mental illness among young people is not only rising, but three times as likely among 'unskilled' families as among 'professional' families.[54]

Dark though these signs are, we should resist seeing too simple a relationship between the UK's less equal, less supportive society and prevalent formats of reality TV. Reality TV after all is the outcome of complex market forces operating on more than one level, refracted by the tensions around the continuing construction of a mediated 'centre' that I mentioned earlier. Instead, I suggest that reality TV is best seen as what the great German sociologist Norbert Elias called a 'figuration'.[55] A figuration for Elias is like a dance whose origins are neither exactly individual nor social, but which in highly condensed form enacts, through the bodies and judgements of individuals, the outcome of many types of mutual dependency and pressure.

So reality TV is the figuration that has stabilized in Britain (and elsewhere) out of: declining subsidies for news and documentary making; small TV producers' dependence on producing cheap packages for attracting audience attention, media institutions' dependence on maintaining their social authority under increasing challenge, governments' reliance on media spaces for making their populations appear to them, individuals' need for behavioural clues in an increasingly opaque yet regulated social and economic world. But let me emphasise: in the dance of 'reality' programming, the framing is not accidental, it is integral; the claim to 'the real', the claim of 'the media' to speak for a social centre, this is the language that holds in place the stage whose rituals populations can, for the time being, still 'watch together'.

CONCLUSION

I have been trying to show - both through a general argument and through considering the specific social processes at work a particular media format, reality TV – how we might begin to build a richer understanding of particular media cultures, which can be the basis of a genuinely *comparative* understanding on a global scale. If, as I have argued, it makes sense to see reality TV as just one 'figuration' (in Elias's term) that emerges from pressures across many dimensions and multiple social networks - played out within a wider and continuing contest over the construction of media as a mythical social centre - then of course the terms of that struggle and the meaning of that figuration will vary across the different countries where reality TV formats of reality TV are available. In some countries, the construction of 'the media' is likely to be challenged by alternative constructions of a social centre, whether religious or political; everywhere the range of forces competing over the use of 'the media' will vary, depending on local conditions. And the very idea of appearing in media to display personal characteristics (essential to reality TV) is more or less available to particular people, depending on cultural social and religious regimes. So reality TV, like any other domain of media culture, will always be highly particular in its outcomes, even if it reproduces a broader logic. And indeed my very broad notion of 'the myth of the mediated centre' was presented here in the hole that it might help us draw such comparisons within a wider debate about the development of 'media cultures'[56] within globalization.

At the same time, we need to be suspicious of one-dimensional (or even two-dimensional) accounts) of where digital media culture is heading. That is why I introduced Norbert Elias, who

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[53] Nuffield Foundation, 'Youth Trends', quoted *Guardian* 5 June 2007.
[54] Office of National Statistics, *The Health of Children and Young People* March 2004, fig 12.5.
[55] N. Elias, *The Civilising Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994 [o.p. 1939]), 214.
[56] See A. Hepp and N. Couldry (forthcoming 2009) 'What Should Comparative Research be Comparing? Towards a Transcultural Approach to "Media Cultures"' in D. K. Thussu (ed.) *Globalising Media Studies* . London: Routledge.

continually emphasised the need for multidimensional explanation, to guide us away from such simple accounts. And that is why I made no reference until now to Henry Jenkins' much-quoted book *Convergence Culture*[57] where he tells us in great detail how web-enabled fan communities in the US are playing an increasing role in the marketing and plot development of popular entertainment, for example *Survivor*. Jenkins sees here a battle between [quote] 'broadcast commercial media culture and . . . narrowcast grassroots' media culture',[58] and in this the hope of a politics to come. Not surprisingly this argument has since been endorsed by elements in the media industry.

But Jenkins' uplifting story has three major faults which illustrate why we will always need more complex accounts of media culture. *First*, it bases its general claims on the evidence of what small groups of highly specialized entertainment fans are doing, claiming that their advanced appropriation of digital media's potential as spaces of cooperation shows us how things will develop (with no serious argument about how those fans they are likely to be of general audiences). *Second*, it reduces the power issues raised by so-called 'convergence culture' to the relations between fan consumers and media industries - this ignores the wider issues of power raised by other aspects of convergence culture: for example, the implications of new possibilities for improvised surveillance, not necessarily as something to which people willingly submit, but as a process that many feel entitled to impose on *others*, whether uploading celebrity spottings to scoopt.com, or posting on YouTube more (or less) amusing images taken of others without their consent. And *third*, Jenkins' account of media culture says nothing about the social forms embodied in for example the reality texts whose fans he discusses: so he ignores a whole domain of commentary by Laurie Ouellette, James Hay, Mark Andrejevic and others, on what reality TV means as a social form. Because Jenkins only reaches the territory of social explanation from the narrow starting-point of media understood as narrative, he misses the sociological richness of the phenomenon. Instead we need to start out from an idea of media texts as the embodiment of much larger social, political, economic and cultural forces – my starting-point today – if, that is, we want to think effectively about what 'cultures' are growing around media.

The digitalization of media – and the convergence between once separate interpersonal and broadcast media (for example, voting by text message in a reality TV contest) – is changing not just the scope of the media process, but also its participants. As a result, the *geometry* of mediaspace[59] is changing: we don't yet know all, or even many, of the rules of that new geometry. Acts once thought separate – reading a newspaper, watching a game show, going to a party, telling friends about ourselves, presenting ourselves to future employers – all are now connected in the online flow of images and words. So the issues of social power raised by the whole media process have not disappeared, they have *expanded* until they encompass many maybe most of the spaces in which we act.

Meanwhile that familiar construction - 'the media' - will not disappear any time soon; indeed the stakes involved in that construction are getting higher; and, as the media process involves more and more actors on various scales, we can expect the conflicts over how the media are constructed, and to what end, to intensify. And that, for me, to conclude, is what makes the 'information politics' from which I started all the more important. For I suspect we will not see clearly the political stakes in analyzing media culture – the cultures of media as they have been, and of media as they will be - unless we keep in mind the distinctive claim on power that the very idea of 'the media' expresses.

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[57] H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

[58] Jenkins, ibid., 211.

[59] For the term 'mediaspace', see N. Couldry and A. McCarthy (eds) *Mediaspace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2004).

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Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition

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- a centre for dialogue between the university and the community on globalization issues
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