Introduction

'Theorising' is used in this book to indicate the activity of trying to reach adequate conceptual terms for understanding media structures and processes. It is therefore rather different from, if necessarily related to, the idea of 'media theory', the body of published explanations and propositions about the media that has developed from different fields of study. Both have their place in what follows, but primacy is given to the former. Later in this introduction, I discuss definitional matters concerning the 'theoretical' a little further.

Part I of this book explores three aspects or dimensions of media structure and process that are central to any understanding of how the media work. Part II consists of a number of more focused analytic commentaries and case studies which both draw upon and contribute to conceptual discussion and development regarding these aspects. Each of the aspects is broad and rather loose in definition, but the identifying terms themselves – power, form and subjectivity – are essential categories for enquiry, whatever the internal differentiations that are then made within them and the linkages and overlaps identified both between the three and across other categories and terms.

'Power' is of course the long-standing principal theme of media research, sometimes employed directly, sometimes through ideas of 'influence' and of 'effect' and also of 'policy'. Attempting to understand, and perhaps to contest, the way in which the media are placed within flows of political, social and cultural power, acting both to relay power and as distinctive sources of power themselves, has been an aim of most media research internationally and the main aim of a great variety of enquiries. Changes both in political systems and media systems, including changes in economics, technology and conventions of practice, have shifted the terms on which power questions need to be asked, even though there are also important continuities with an older agenda.

The notion of 'power' covers extensive territory as a way of framing theoretic and analytic concerns. 'Form' has an expansive ring to it too, although by pointing to questions about the communicative organisation of media artefacts and performances it suggests distinctive points of focus. 'Form' can be studied with exclusive, ground-level attention to specific media products, or it can be explored with an interest in making connections with other aspects of media organisation and process. The recent tendency has been towards the latter, particularly towards the tracing of the formal aspect of the linkage between aspects of media production and consumption, attempting to explore the 'vocabularies of value' which feed into perception and judgement here. Study of media form has drawn heavily on the Arts and Humanities strands of media enquiry, including those strands that fed into the development of Cultural Studies as an academic field. In work on media from Social Science perspectives, the relative neglect of formal questions (including questions of aesthetic organisation) is acknowledged to have constituted something of a regular 'blind spot', and the possibilities for greater cross-disciplinary awareness and contribution here are strong.

'Subjectivity' is a term that has only more recently gained general usage in media research, although it has been employed as a significant category in cognate areas, including literary, film and feminist studies, for some time. This growth follows recognition of the complexity and importance of questions about identity and the 'self' in any attempt to engage with how the media operate within contemporary society. It is not as if the term highlights an area which was previously in darkness. A concern with how individuals, and the organisation of individual perceptions, relate to media activities is traceable from the very start of systematic research into media. However, the term 'subjectivity' collects together an agenda of issues about the formation of selfhood, the construction of identity and the dynamics of consciousness that places new emphases and poses new questions. This immediately extends to questions about power and about form, including ones to do with the generic character of our experience of the media, the way in which this experience is organised in relation to quite specific and different kinds of product rather than being essentially a matter of general orientation.

To select these three categories for discussion might justly raise the question of 'why these?' and perhaps also 'why not others?' My answer here, effectively restating the claim of my opening sentence, is that power, form and subjectivity, although they are by no means the only major terms we need, provide us with a very productive route for reflection and audit at the present moment. Together, they run through some

broad, varied and also changing terrain, both empirically and conceptually. All three indicate areas in which engaging new work has been produced, sometimes at the most general level but also within more tightly localised settings. They are headings under which we can confidently expect much activity in the future. In my first three chapters I hope to have shown, not just by assertion but by example, how deeply interconnected they are, matters of power essentially turning on issues of form and subjectivity; the study of form intimately connected with subjectivity and, frequently, to power; the whole area of subjectivity raising questions about formal factors and about power relations.

Before describing in a little more detail the structure of the book and the organisation of the accounts within it, I want to touch on two other points which deserve mention as part of these preliminaries. First of all, I want to make a few remarks about the nature of 'theory' in media and cultural research, and the changing theoretical profile which the area has displayed, particularly since the 1970s.

Theory is essential to most academic enquiry because it indicates a level at which evidence, analysis and concepts are connected together to form a generalised explanatory account, however provisional and partial, which can be applied to a given range of phenomena and conditions. Theory can be highly formalised, as for instance in the hypothesis systems often used in the natural sciences as well as elsewhere, or it may take on a rather more casual character, as it does in some theorising about art, including literature. It may have a strong interest in causal relations and in the making of predictive claims (climatology might quickly, and problematically, come to mind here) or it may be causally restrained, and hold back from strong predictive statements. Across most areas of academic activity there has been a strengthening recognition of the difficulties in the way of talking about causality and of making claims about predictability. This recognition has gone along with increased caution about the ways in which data are collected and about the application of schemes of analysis in relation to the framing ideas which guide enquiry. In the humanities, a much broader and stronger scepticism about the stability and integrity of established forms of academic knowledge and modes of knowing has followed the influence of postmodernist commentary, causing continuing debate (see Sim, 2004 for perspectives across diverse fields of study).

Media research has a spectrum of theoretical ambition which runs from the attempt to offer a tight account of causal relations with optimum predictability, right through to more gestural, suggestive notions about the character of artefacts, circumstances, processes, relationships

and interconnections. Research that is funded by public and corporate bodies in order to find out things about the consequences of particular media policies or media content, for example, may often, and quite understandably, be required to arrive at firmer propositions than research which is entirely academically oriented and intent on exploring a particular area of media operations against a number of conflicting ideas.

I have discussed elsewhere (e.g. Corner, 1999) the way in which media research is one of those areas in which 'theory' is sometimes used interchangeably with 'ideas' in a way that is not always helpful, although perhaps hard to avoid. To have an idea about something, say for instance new tendencies in reality television, is certainly to work at a level of abstraction above the particular instances and analyses that have informed the idea. We may justly describe it as 'theorising'. However, whether this idea could justly be called a 'theory' about the new tendencies would, I think, depend very much on its intellectual character. If it involved suppositional linkages and relationships between the different aspects identified that could be stated in the form of a proposition (as it certainly might do), then it would be useful to call it a theory. If it was just one speculative notion about a single aspect, for instance that observational sequences were being edited at an increasingly rapid pace, the notion of theory might seem misleading and pretentious. The widespread use of 'theory' outside of specialised academic contexts to indicate all that which is not 'practice' (for instance, as part of the UK driving test!), has helped to loosen usage within academic circles and, here, each discipline area has developed its own internal pattern of conventions, formal and casual.

Media research does not have much disciplinary tightness as a field of enquiry. The category of 'media studies' provides what is now an international core of work dedicated to the study of media systems, but a whole range of disciplines, including sociology, psychology, political studies, history, linguistics and literature, either continue to pursue their long-standing interest in aspects of media processes, or have recently developed such an interest. This means that, both theoretically and methodologically, the area is much more various (or messier) than many other fields of enquiry which have developed more coherently as relatively unified projects within a given disciplinary frame. We have to accept this as being in the nature of the focus of study. Attempts at 'tidying up' would be futile and often intellectually reductive, although the regularly heard call for more engagement across the different subspecialist and discipline-oriented lines of approach is still worthy of further heeding.

Theory can be developed simply by critically examining other theories, perhaps in terms of their logical coherence and consistency, but a central route for its generation in many disciplines has been through evidence and analysis. Without subscribing to naïve ideas about the readiness with which 'confirmation' and 'proof' can be obtained, it can be seen that in most cases it is through testing theories against kinds of data that the most productive line of development lies. When the usage of 'theory' slips close to becoming a posh synonym for 'hunch' or 'viewpoint', this approach is, clearly, not so relevant. Hunches and viewpoints can be usefully exchanged and debated, but they usually lack the necessary degree of firmness and clarity to be tested until they have been formulated more fully. Viewpoints are also explicitly subjective, perhaps as the basis for further conceptual development, so exchange regarding them (valuable in itself) is often one around normative criteria and parameters for judgement, rather than about evidence. Here, we touch on a quite central difference between theories as working propositions (or more formally, hypotheses) made prior to analysis and theory as 'built' from a phase of enquiry. Theory prior to enquiry may be confirmed, questioned or usefully modified by theoretical exchange and debate. However, in most cases, it is a mistake to confuse it with theory that has emerged from enquiry. This is to blur together two distinctive relations of conceptualisation to reality. It makes no sense at all to lose the distinction between that which is hypothetical and that which is offered as the product of enquiry since, despite the necessary interconnections and interaction between them, the attitude we take towards each needs to recognise its specific status in order to allow relevant modes of critical response and use.

For some time now, media research internationally has been a lively, one might say hectic, area for theoretical activity. In addition to lower-level theorising, a whole sequence of high-altitude '-isms' have passed through the area, rearranging the intellectual landscape in often significant and sometimes confusing ways. Within this context, a number of thinkers have been found widely suggestive. Of these, perhaps Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu can be seen as exerting the strongest influence across the broadest swathe of study, although most specialist and sub-specialist areas have their own key theorists, sometimes offering perspectives showing not only variation but also conflict.

Given this conceptual landscape, it is not surprising that the business of 'theoretical orientation' has taken on a distinctive character within research and debate. 'Beaming down' from high-level theories in ways that are productive for middle-level conceptualisations and for analytic

frameworks has posed challenges, some of which are familiar from other fields and some of which follow from the distinctive constitution of the media and cultural studies area. Making extrapolations from higher-level propositional claims that actually work for lower-level enquiry is often more difficult than it might appear. Similarly, taking the findings of enquiry 'back up' so as to modify previous theory in ways that are coherent and productive for overall research goals can be difficult, too. The danger of placing grand theoretical pronouncements alongside analysed instances in a relationship of suggestive correlation is evident. Research may simply be used to 'illustrate' selected aspects of theory in ways which preclude both serious critique and cogent confirmation and which lack the evidential/argumentative force to develop knowledge further, whatever the 'progress' suggested by its manner of presentation. Attempts to produce composite theoretical perspectives by selective borrowing across the range may ignore the real obstacles to coherence which would exist were the theories to be engaged with fully in their own terms. In going beyond the provocative assembly of selective quotation from several sources, the amount of original work needed to produce new and useful theoretical propositions from the elements of different bodies of previous thinking can be easily underestimated.

Although 'high theoretical' ambition rightly continues to be one marker of international work in media and cultural research, it is now clear from the monograph and journal literature that a stronger strand of empirical investigation and of lower-level development in relation, for instance, to the refinement of analytic vocabulary and of problem-framing has established itself. The continuation of the more stratospheric levels of conceptualisation attracts debate, but with less sustained intensity and often with more concern to connect across to work in adjacent areas and 'down' to the results of specific enquiry and to arguments around particular instances, including comparative instances. This has produced what can be seen as a fresher climate for theoretical development, reducing tendencies towards the dogmatic and the repetitive and making theoretical matters more exciting and exploratory again.

My second preliminary point can be handled more briefly. It concerns my use of the term 'the media' and, at points, the idea of 'mediation'. Just what is included and what not in any use of 'the media' varies considerably. As the term has increasingly taken over from the usage of 'mass media', and before that of 'mass communication', largely perhaps because of the negative political, social and cultural assumptions seen to be bundled into these terms (see Corner, 1979 on this issue), it has retained the focus on central media structures, institutions and

processes while extending beyond these to connect selectively with a variety of other practices and representational modes. So, for instance, the study of cinema is certainly study of a medium, but cinema will often not be included within the category of 'the media' as this term is currently employed in academia, a fact largely due to the legacy of 'mass media' as indicating, primarily if not exclusively, the activities of press and broadcasting. Some parts of popular literature can be subsumed under the dominant idea of 'the media', and so can some parts of popular music, but again, within academia, the earlier association of 'mass media research' with largely sociological kinds of enquiry into the major institutional systems of public communication is likely to inhibit this. The arrival of what is still called 'new media' over the last two decades has, it is clear, quite radically changed the agenda of 'media studies', with the newer technologies, applications and contexts taking their place, sometimes slowly and awkwardly, alongside 'old media' within the core definition. Nick Couldry has recently noted (Couldry, 2009) some of the conceptual and analytic implications that have followed from this expanded sense of what is now an extremely varied and rapidly changing field of cultural practices, with the very idea of '*the* media' (often rendered as a singular noun) providing an often highly imprecise focus for investigation and debate, one open to confusion and to suspect generalisations.

Given my themes and interests, I have chosen to focus principally on press, broadcasting and 'new media', with only occasional references to cinema, music and literature. However, questions concerning the varying boundary-lines which the category 'media' now displays, the criteria for boundary-drawing and the pattern of usage of the term across different areas of enquiry and argument (including those outside of academic settings) deserve continuing attention.

Related to this is the notion of 'mediation'. I have used it at points in what follows to indicate that which is produced through media practice and which is both an artefact or a communicative event of one kind or another. Following the discussion above, I realise that this could apply to a painting, a song, a novel or a film as well as a television programme, a newspaper photograph or a webpage. My usage here is meant to be essentially descriptive rather than analytical, although I am aware that the term 'mediation' (like the idea of 'representation') can carry with it certain assumptions about communicative practice, its referents and its functions, that are very much open to question. I hope that the more detailed contexts in which I use the word encourage the reader to pursue such questions.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Part I of the book is organised as three large chapters that audit the themes that I have chosen to discuss. Each chapter is in part a review of relevant ideas in circulation and debate, often working across both the arts and the social studies perspectives which have been applied, but I also want it to be a fresh, clarifying and provocative engagement with the primary term itself and also some of the conditions and practices it has been used to identify and to investigate. Citation is necessarily highly selective and used primarily to indicate points that I judge to be of principal interest, rather than to document what is sometimes the extensive literature that has developed around them. I have moved around quite freely, both laterally, across the chosen areas, and vertically, in engaging issues at different levels of generality and in discussing examples. A number of my examples could have been used as illustrations in more than one chapter, since they span the principal categories. Some are familiar from the research literature, others less so. My approach assumes a reader who has some familiarity and engagement with media research as an academic area but it does not assume the specialist knowledge that might be expected, for instance, by the reader of a journal article. This means, I hope, that without having the formal organisation and style of 'textbook' writing, the accounts will be found useful by different kinds of student reader, particularly those on more advanced programmes. The field of media research is one that draws on an extensive multi-disciplinary literature where levels of mutual awareness are often low. There are some issues and themes around which a degree of field-wide agreement can be agreed as to terminology, criteria of significance and the agenda for further enquiry. However sub-specialism when combined with different disciplinary orientations inevitably means that many topics show a literature extensively fragmented in perspectives and approaches and often disinclined to take seriously, or even to notice, work on a related topic coming from an academic location perceived as 'other'.[1] For a writer attempting a general survey, this brings with it heightened risks of navigation, as references that another writer would emphasise may simply be mentioned in passing and attention given to ideas that would, in another book, hardly merit a mention. What I have wanted to do will always show its origins in my own view of media research, shaped by a specific, sometimes strongly directed but often quite accidental, sequence of academic events, encounters and teaching and research commitments making up my career over 35 years. However, I would like to think that it also displays some sensitivity to the

wider profile of publication and debate as this has shaped the steady institutional growth of the area as a recognised site of international scholarship.

Part II of the book is made up of selected material from essays and articles that I have published in the last decade and which variously pursue issues related to the three main themes. Each is accompanied by a short note of commentary which, among other things, connects them within the wider thematic setting that I have established. They all address a general readership interested in media research, despite some of them having origins in specialist papers. Their thematic relevance is a consequence either of their conceptual focus (for instance, the recurring issues of 'ideology', of 'propaganda' and of the 'public') or an application to selected instances in which the primary emphasis is not so much on the substantive critical assessment of the specific items as on broader questions concerning dimensions of power, formal structures, the diversity of communicative processes and the challenges of analysis. More on the character of Part II is given in a short note that precedes it.

NOTE

1   The precise pattern of mutual recognition and mutual interest across the different types of inquiry gathered around specific themes concerning media is worthy of closer attention. Although there is undoubtedly an inclination towards greater interdisciplinary engagement, it is not surprising that the economics and organisation of academic research have helped preserve and even strengthen a degree of 'balkanisation' and subsequent blinkering in areas which would benefit from a more open and regular dialogue. An example here would be research from within political studies and from within cultural studies on the mediation of politics and on popular perceptions of political power (discussed at points throughout what follows, particularly in Chapters 1 and 3).