

Getting Back to “So What?”

Christopher Cwynar, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Since the collapse of 2008, we've become increasingly aware of the long period of normalized decline that precipitated what has often been called 'the great recession,' but which has been experienced by many Americans as a full-on depression. But if uprisings Occupy Wall Street and Ferguson suggest that conditions are bad 'out there,' policy reforms at our own institutions reveal that matters are also dire where we, as a comparatively privileged group, live and work. The student debt crisis, the use of adjunct labor, and the insidious incorporation of market values threaten to destroy our universities from within. As with so many of our social institutions (i.e. public broadcasters, governmental organizations), the replacement of a coherent, collective sense of public value with the ideology of the marketplace has led us to the point where some sort of cataclysmic change seems all but inevitable.

These issues affect all citizens to varying degrees and they suggest a productive focal point for our increasingly fragmentary field. In 2011, H. Samy Alim published a [piece](#) on the New York Times' Opinionator blog advocating the occupation of language to highlight the ways in which it contributes to various forms of oppression and marginalization. Alim's call suggested a new direction for the Occupy movement, but it also drew attention to an established dimension of media and cultural studies that is too often neglected today. Opinions will vary regarding the extent to which our role as media scholars is to 'occupy' discourse, but I contend that we might focus on meta-criticism in order to expose the ways in which discourses function in relation to social and political-economic dynamics. This has long been a key link between political economy and cultural studies and it is arguably more vital now than ever before. Media scholars are suited to the task of analyzing the discourses pertaining to market fundamentalism, consumerism, the post-racial imaginary and its insidious forms of racism, discursive manifestations of class, and emerging forms of populism that obscure the key issues and unifying problems affecting the vast majority of people in the United States. One overarching interest in this pursuit might be to open up space for the re-articulation of a conception of 'the public' and to consider ways of conceiving of value and activity outside of the logic of the marketplace.

We can undertake this project in relation to traditional objects of study like television and film, but it behooves us to continue to broaden our perspective to consider other forms of mediated communication, from blogs to newspapers to social networking sites. Naturally, I am aware that this is already occurring to a significant degree, but I am advocating a refocusing that would involve moving away from an interest in studying particular media forms and towards an interest in analyzing discursive formations as they emerge and evolve across media forms. In effect, this model would involve the study of mediation and mediatization based on the analysis of various forms of discourse.

This refocusing might also involve a renewed engagement with the local. This entails moving beyond specialized intellectual communities and established venues and towards our local communities. It almost goes without saying that our institutions are themselves key sites of struggle as market-based reforms take hold. Clearly, this is a space where media scholars might identify proximate issues and objectives and marry theory with praxis. But my experiences during the Wisconsin uprising of 2011 convinced me the current paradigm calls upon us to engage more proactively with our communities beyond the university. We could find ways to translate our specialized skillsets and knowledge bases so that they can benefit our local communities. This might involve penning op-ed pieces in the local paper, programming on community radio, or attending local community meetings. If we are to demonstrate the utility of our work to our communities, and ensure that our work has the best chance of making an impact in those communities, we must move out into them and engage with them. This will have the added benefit of lending a new focus to our work.

In essence, I am advocating for a meta-critical approach to the study of discursive formations across various mediated forms of communication. This research should make a specific effort to connect cultural or discursive phenomena to political economic conditions and social relations in a given context. This work should then be brought to bear on the local community beyond the university so that it can have the best chance of making a broader impact. This is certainly not the only way that critical media and cultural studies can get back to 'so what,' but I believe that it is one way that we might recapture a sense of unified impetus in the face of the fragmentation of our field and its objects of study.