Audience Studies as Social Intervention
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In working on an essay recently, I revisited some material that took me back to my personal introduction to the field of media and cultural studies—the 1992 *Cultural Studies* reader and a debate between political economists and cultural studies scholars published in *Critical Studies and Mass Communication* in 1996. Reading that material was an uncanny experience—simultaneously familiar and strange. Marked by an intense belief in the socio-political possibilities of cultural studies scholarship, the readings reminded me of the excitement I experienced as a graduate student coming to the field from the study of literature. Study media as part of the cultural studies project, it seemed then, wasn't just interested in understanding culture but intervening in it. Reading that material today, however, also felt strange. I realized that the field that I find myself in today doesn't have the same desire to operate outside of, across, or against established disciplines in order to intervene in social life.   It and I seem to have settled into a comfortable relation with a quiet scholasticism.

Ok, I will acknowledge that my experience is likely fueled by a nostalgia for the 90s and that the difference I sense may be as much about the gap between the passion of a grad student and the middle-aged professor as it is about a significant change in the field. Nevertheless, I do think there has been a shift. Perhaps it was inevitable; the kind of political project cultural studies hoped to be, may have been destined to morph into more stable, academic enterprises; even by the early 90s, there was evidence of that happening—and of course my own work has been part of the shift.   My golden-age narrative also opens up the question of whether cultural studies ever was the interventionist project some claimed it to be, or, on the flip side, why the kind of scholarship being done in TV studies today isn't interventionist. I don't want to go down the rabbit hole of that debate here, though I think its interesting that those questions don't seem to be discussed much in the field these days—at least in terms of the conferences I go to and the things I read. (Do they even happen in grad seminars?)

I bring these questions up not to have a debate about the past, but rather to ask: can we find new ways to connect the study of media to interventionist projects in ways it isn't right now? I think yes, and I think the analysis of audiences is one great option. At the last flow conference, I suggested that the political significance of textual analysis (one of the major modes of critical and cultural studies work) has waned in the age of audience fragmentation (http://blog.commarts.wisc.edu/2012/12/03/cultural-studies-tv-studies-empathy/). As a result, I think the moment is right for a reinvigorated attention to audiences as a site of interventionist scholarship. Fortunately, there is a lot of great work to build on, both from TV and cultural studies early years and more recently.

However, following the lessons of 70s/80s cultural studies, I think we could radically re-consider the methods we use. The first wave of cultural studies was aggressively interdisciplinary. I wonder what we could gain today if we were equally open to breaking outside of our traditional methods. Of course our work is constrained and our imaginations and skills are channeled by our training (an issue that might call for changes in hiring strategies at PhD programs). But there are other options—most

obviously collaboration. I wonder what we could accomplish if we worked with a team of researchers in psychology, ethnography, communication studies, neuroscience, political science? How might engaging with people from different disciplines help us imagine new research questions and new outcomes for our scholarship?

I will end with a brief example from a project I have (shamefully) not yet completed. A few years ago a colleague (a social science scholar in health communication) and I did a small audience study of straight-identified male college students' reception of the bromance film *I Love You, Man* in the context of bromance culture. I keep wondering: how could I push myself to make our findings more relevant to them and to the communities they live in? What if I sought out collaborators in the school of education who work on student development to create freshman orientation workshops? Or a public service announcement that could go viral on youtube? Or something else I can't imagine because of the nature of my training as a media scholar?

Do you know those network news segments where they report the findings of a study delivered at some medical conference? I always thought it would be hilarious to produce a *SNL* style parody segment reporting on findings delivered at an SCMS panel—the joke, of course being that any paper delivered at SCMS would sound ludicrous in that context. I don't want to imply that we need to buy into the valuation economy of the *ABC Night News* and really don't want to suggest that the kind of work we currently do isn't valuable on many grounds. But I do wonder what the field might gain if we asked ourselves: what kind of research project could we design and contribute to that actually could get reported on the news.