

Chapter 1

Social Theory after the decline of “Theory”

For the question of whether or not a position is right, coherent, or interesting is, in this case, less informative than why it is we come to occupy and defend the territory that we do, what it promises us, from what it promises to protect us.

– Judith Butler (1995 p.127-128)

In this thesis I seek to improve theoretical tools available for studying increasing socio-economic inequality in information-intensive societies. There are two processes that need to be taken into account to achieve this. Firstly, socio-economic inequality is a phenomenon that a number of academic traditions have explored. I have chosen to focus on the tradition of class analysis initiated by Karl Marx (1992 [1868]), for reasons I outline below. In Chapter Two I review some of the main movements in class analysis, assess their applicability to the contemporary context, and outline some of the specific challenges the tradition of class theory must address.

The other process requiring attention is the increasing emphasis on *information* in economic and social life. In Chapter Three, I review the main bodies of work that have discussed the role of information in the economy, across a number of academic fields including economics and economic sociology. I then summarise the implications of this work for our contemporary understanding of the economy and how inequality is generated.

In Chapter Four I link these structural/macroeconomic phenomena to recent discussions on the “digital divide”, which have identified remarkably similar themes in the barriers individuals face in new media use. I identify four types of resources (physical, cultural, social, and economic) that are commonly identified in struggles for socio-economic advancement. While these have been commonly identified elsewhere, I suggest new ways their relationship can be conceptualised, addressing the erosion of the base/superstructure distinction in Marxist theory. Then, drawing upon the work of Lyn Spillman in cultural sociology, I suggest three distinct struggles that can be identified with respect to networks (which, following Castells, I take to include “markets”): access to networks, network culture, and network rules. By analysing the specific ways actors draw upon the four types of resources within these struggles, I suggest that collective interests can be identified that can form the basis of shared political action, while avoiding the exclusions inherent in the terminology traditionally used in class analysis. While the space constraints of this thesis prevent the application of this model to a wide

range of situations, in the final chapter I sketch some of the implications of this work for future research agendas in the interdisciplinary fields of social theory.

Why class?

It probably doesn't need to be said that renovating theoretical class analysis is not the most obvious research project to be undertaking in the 21st century, least of all when my research was initially hatched around a community website in a small rural town in the "classless society" of New Zealand. As an explanatory framework, class analysis has been more or less in a state of decomposition since the 1970s. The more extravagant political predictions of its Marxist variants failed to come to pass, a problematic middle-class grew in size, and other determinants of identity such as race and gender proved to have an extraordinary impact on socio-economic inequality that had been largely untheorised in class frameworks. "But remember class!" became the watchword of a largely white and male cohort of political activists who found their role largely irrelevant to – and in some cases directly the target of – important currents in identity-based political activism. From Ben Agger's perspective, the failure of mainstream sociological class analysis to come to terms with these new social movements led to its retreat into petty squabbles over empirical verifications of this or that class schema, leaving the task of producing new narratives of social transformation to cultural disciplines such as cultural studies, media and communication, or even English (Agger, 2002).

Seidman (1992) describes theory as "narrative with a moral intent." Theory is a way of telling stories about the world, and we use the narratives much as we use fairy tales or other mythology to generalise about real-life experiences. Like any lasting fable, though, theory must seem to accord with experience in order to operate. From Seidman's perspective, we need to get outside disciplinary frames that produce a quasi-scientism with little motivational or narrative value. This is an especially poignant assertion when so much of the work in biological science that provided the initial metaphors for the social sciences have moved into the production of compelling narrative stories (Haraway, 1989; Haraway, 1997). Social theory, if nothing else, should be able to reflect the narratives of life and the social world that drive political and economic activity.

A question emerges about an appropriate way of activating the "moral intent" in social theory after a century that has mostly worked to establish it as a "value-free" science. Goran Therborn makes a convincing argument that there are overdue debates

among the social sciences and the humanities around what constitutes *scholarship*.

Taking sociology as an example:

How does sociology compare as a social science with political science and economics? Has sociology anything specific to contribute to cultural studies? Where is the positive difference between a sociological study and a TV talk show, or ambitious journalism, or a social play/novel? Is there any value added to sociological research in comparison with the investigations of Bureaux of Statistics, of opinion pollsters, market researchers, and consultants? (Therborn, 2000 p.43)

These questions are more than mere idle academic speculation. Researchers have become increasingly aware of the methodological limitations in their academic traditions, leading to an increased focus on interdisciplinary projects which bricolage methods from quite different intellectual communities, in an attempt to find appropriate ways of engaging with the multifaceted nature of contemporary life. If all forms of culture are connected, then the amount of information or potential perspectives on particular phenomena is always more than a single project (such as this thesis) can encompass. In the wake of postmodernism, strategic and ethical questions emerge in the humanities and socio-cultural sciences around attempts to produce generalisable concepts. The dominant contemporary ideal of social theory came from the influential sociologist Talcott Parsons and other structural functionalists, who saw society as diverse parts working together to make up a logically ordered whole. The “whole” they were talking about, of course, was in their heads, not in the minds of those who sought to challenge the conservative values of the time. The challenges came from the margins, from voices excluded from social power, and actively resisted being incorporated in the totalising worldviews of Parsons and his ilk. It was the move to study (and, usually, support) these voices that gave rise to the cultural studies project (Hall & University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1980), and encouraged many disciplines to focus on the specificity of particular political struggles. This bottom-up approach soon became established as a methodological norm of its own in cultural studies, which sought to emphasise agency over structure, ethnography over theory, and the particular over the general.

History of the project

In 1999, when I began this project, these bottom-up methodologies appealed to me strongly, even if I had little awareness of the discussions that led to their hegemony within cultural studies. I knew enough about the feminist and anti-colonial critiques of western theory to feel comfortable situating my work into specific locations, and I'd done enough grass roots political activity to have an understanding of the processes of

local political organising. I also had a long background in the Internet and new media – having worked on a variety of art, community and commercial projects, and I figured this experience would be useful to some kind of local development initiative. Having been involved with the Internet in the early 1990s, I fervently believed in net theorists such as Rheingold (1993) who promoted the power of the Internet to reinvigorate the ‘local’ against the perceived homogenising tendencies of transnational corporations.

I became involved with Raglan.net, a community network in the small town of Raglan (also known as Whaingaroa) on the West Coast of New Zealand where I was living. Kate Bailey-Hellen set up Raglan.net as a personal project in 1998, seeing an opportunity to increase her skills in new media, a field showing high employment growth, and to meet online requests for information about the Raglan area, which has a fast-growing tourist population. After a year of working on the project, her commitment was flagging in the face of a need for paid employment, but I was able to convince Kate of the importance of her infrastructure, and we were able to source some funding for a part time position for Kate to maintain the site and begin solidifying it as a hub for the Raglan community.

Our main activities were similar to many overseas community networks (see e.g. Cohill & Kavanaugh, 1999; Gurstein, 2000) and included developing relationships with community groups for use of Raglan.net as a communications channel; co-ordinating an online information repository for visitors coming to Raglan (tourism plays an increasingly important role in Raglan’s economic development), securing sponsorship agreements for ongoing free infrastructure, and a workshop developing skills in using and publishing material on the Internet, pitched at people without prior experience. The workshop also doubled for my purposes as an opportunity to gauge residents needs in online infrastructure, which could guide my future research activity in the area.

Activities such as the workshop reiterated to me what many technology educators already know: some people are well placed to adapt new media such as the Internet to their own ends, while others face significant barriers which prevent them (and might always prevent them) from making effective use of that new media. While there were distinctive local issues around access, the structuring problems of effective use were not specific to Raglan, and they were being addressed in international discussions around the “digital divide”(Bimber, 2000; Cisler, 2000). The digital divide dialogue has been highly problematic (for reasons I take up in Chapter 4), but it was an important discourse as a corrective to the unbridled optimism that too often accompanied ICT development. But this literature itself yielded more questions: the digital divide sees exclusion from ICT use as a problem, but what outcomes, exactly, are people excluded

from (Livingstone, 2002 p.243)? This question of why people would want to use new media technologies was particularly poignant in light of the Pew Centre's finding that 57% of offline U.S. residents have *no desire* to ever go online (Lenhart, 2000).

My work in e-commerce (Butt, 2000) convinced me that exclusion from ICT use meant exclusion from significant channels for the distribution of wealth and opportunity. This feeling may have been influenced by some rather spectacular economic phenomena occurring before the 'tech-wreck' stock market crash in 2000. Nevertheless, as I outline in Chapter 3, even more sober economic studies indicated that information was playing an increasingly important role in economic reproduction, and that ICTs facilitate that role. But *how* exactly do new media and ICTs affect socio-economic reproduction? This question has not been adequately taken up in the Internet Studies, sociology or the economics literature. The assumption that access to ICTs equals more opportunities or 'life-chances' underpins the digital divide discourse. But what if this assumption is wrong? What if, in Lash's succinct formulation, there is not just a flow of *goods* through new media networks, but also a flow of *bads* (Lash, 2002)? What if promoting ICT use is a *bad idea*? Geographical studies on the impact of communications on small towns give a related example: instituting transportation and communication networks is an investment, but it also allows resources to flow *out* or *through* that location. The net effect may even be the extinguishment of an entire productive sector of the economy (Daniels, 1985).

Other literature provides evidence to suggest this possibility is worth exploring. To begin with, workers within informational economies are more likely to end up in a less powerful position than in other economic regimes. Adamic and Huberman's (1999) research found that consumption in informational environments such as the World Wide Web follows a "universal power law" characteristic of winner take all markets. Even Richard Florida's (2002) rather celebratory research on the informational elites in the "creative classes" acknowledges that the areas where they flourish are areas of high economic inequality.

We can therefore raise questions about the value of proposing economic restructuring around an "information society" without attending to these increased inequalities. Christopher May notes that education and innovation policies often emphasise computer use as a key future skill to enhance employability. If tasks migrate through the increasing international division of labour facilitated by ICTs, these skills may be less valued than is currently surmised. Or as Sarikakis and Terzis (2000, p.116) provocatively ask, "What is the 'opportunity cost' of the Information Society?" What society *could* we be building while we pursue the "knowledge economy"?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, such questions are rarely present in the discussions of the Information Society undertaken by the informational elites. When we construct critical theories of the Network Society, or the Digital Divide, how much do our good intentions ultimately further our own causes at the expense of those on the wrong side of the information tracks, who are supposedly the beneficiaries of this conversation? Or, as Gayatri Spivak (1988) deftly describes it, can we “mark our critique with the danger of appropriating the other by assimilation?”

Bob Connell, one of Australia’s most famous theorists of socio-economic reproduction, highlighted the problematic in a recent discussion:

Australian society has become more sophisticated, *a better place for cultural producers*. It’s got more diverse and more interesting audiences for a whole range of cultural activities. I think that has come at a cost and what worries me very deeply is whether the kinds of gains we’ve just outlined are sustainable in a context where there’s growing social inequality, growing insecurity for the majority of people; growing social alienation and more explicit hatred and antagonism in Australian public life. (Cathcart, Connell, Burgmann, McGregor, & Mayne, 2002) [my emphasis]

How do we, as producers benefiting from particular currents in social organization, theorise the negative effects of these phenomena? It was becoming clear that it would be helpful for my project to construct a critical view of “socio-economic reproduction in informational environments” that didn’t unwittingly foster the exclusions under study.

Class and contemporary social research

Much digital divide research is characterised by a classic symptom of new media studies: a belief that the old rules don’t apply (see e.g. Kelly, 1998). But, just as the laws of economics turned out to be not so redundant after the “dotcom” economic boom unceremoniously crashed, perhaps the digital divide wasn’t totally new after all? Could previous research on socio-economic reproduction have something to offer the contemporary situation? Or more significantly, if we assumed that it didn’t, if we just look at the “current situation” without that history in mind, do we reinvent the wheel, or, worse, fail to reinvent an important wheel that we never knew about?

The history of socio-economic reproduction is, of course, dominated by debates around class. Marx, the most famous theorist of class dynamics, never gave a full definition of class. But Goldthorpe and Marshall provide a useful working definition:

Class analysis, in our sense, has as its central concern the study of relationships among class structures, class mobility, class-based inequalities and class-based action. More specifically, it explores the interconnections between positions defined by employment relations in labour markets and

production units in different sectors of national economies; the processes through which individuals and families are distributed and redistributed among these positions over time; and the consequences thereof for their life-chances and for the social identities that they adopt and the social values and interest that they pursue. (Goldthorpe and Marshall, 1992 p.382)

We can note here the key features of historical class analysis that are the subject of this thesis: i) relations to the means of production; ii) economic status; iii) lifestyle and identity; and iv) how these relations are reproduced. One failing of this definition is its focus on national economies in an age where labour markets are increasingly dominated by transnational capital. While this issue is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is enough to note that the relations of colonisation have produced an inequality between national economies dwarfing that within many economies in the West. This and other contemporary challenges facing class analysis are taken up in detail in Chapter 2, but firstly I should outline why class has become central to my analysis in this project.

In the last half of the 20th century there has been a consistent trend in sociological and popular literature to pronounce the ‘Death of Class’, culminating in Pakulski & Waters (1996) writing a book with that title. A number of factors contribute to this trend.

- In the English-speaking colonies, where mobility is central to the founding myths of settler cultures (McGregor, 2001), “class” carries connotations of the static and highly visible *class system* in the industrial economy of the United Kingdom. The overwhelming associations of class are with factories, mines, and long general strikes – social phenomena that appear to be less frequent or possible than in previous times.
- Class is associated with the socialist project. In the popular imagination of international relations, the collapse of the USSR and East Germany led to the dominance of capitalism. In some scholarly literatures Marxist theory is openly equated with communism’s failed political project. Class conflict in the Marxist tradition, resulting in a revolution of the proletariat, appears highly improbable.
- Class-consciousness is declining, as identity is increasingly drawn from occupation and consumption patterns (Grusky & Weeden, 2001). Survey respondents describe themselves as “middle class” despite their actual location in conditions of production (Connell, 1977). Class simply doesn’t matter to many people.

- Class analysis tends to be prescriptive and emphasises constraints on action. With the decline of the revolutionary project, class is simply not exciting. This is especially true in a contemporary economy characterised by increasing differentiation and “flexible specialisation” (Lash & Urry, 1987)

Even without considering the more scholarly analyses of changing production patterns in contemporary capitalism, these popular rejections of class suggest that class analysis may not be useful in effecting social change, and theoretical and empirical issues pose significant challenges for class analysis. However, many theorists and researchers continue to work in the field, and I argue that class analysis (interpreted broadly) remains a successful theoretical framework for studying social and economic reproduction. Why?

- Firstly, the available evidence shows that class (defined in a variety of different ways) is still empirically shown to be a strong predictor of life-chances, defined by Giddens (1973 p.131) as ‘chances an individual has for sharing in the socially created economic or cultural “goods” that typically exist in any given society’. Reid’s (1998) *Class in Britain* provides a significant compilation of evidence a clear hierarchy among classes with respect to wealth in the UK, and similar studies can be found across other Western countries (Burniaux & Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1998). Scott notes that the difference in wealth and capital ownership between classes is matched by wider aspects of their market situation: for example, unemployment rates are almost five times as high for unskilled manual workers as for members of the service class, and unskilled manual workers are far more likely to experience periods of unemployment longer than 1 year (Reid, 1998 p.149). If class is a significant factor in constraining or enabling life-chances, then it is perhaps unwise to jettison it without developing more accurate explanatory frameworks for the reproduction of socio-economic inequality (see Wright, 1985 and Goldthorpe, Llewellyn, & Payne, 1987 for detailed arguments).
- Further, intergenerational class mobility is shown to be weak in US and UK societies (Goldthorpe et al., 1987). There is no evidence to prove that class is less valid as a structuring factor in human life than at any previous historical moment, even if the debates around it have diminished in visibility. In light of this evidence, and the class location of those promoting the “death of class”, there are good reasons to assume that ideologies of classlessness benefit those in privileged class locations.

- Relational class schemes describe *how* socio-economic positions interact. As John Frow notes, “Class theory is an instrument for pulling together the strands of social being, thinking it in terms of *relationality* (which is not the same as totality) rather than the pure dispersal of social action over a multiplicity of disconnected sites”(Frow, 1995 p.98). Relational class theory provides qualitative narratives of socio-economic reproduction. These narratives then provide a framework for intervention. Compilations of statistics about the wealth of different sectors of the population may tell us *what* is happening, but offer limited guidance for changing these processes.
- Class analysis has a history that includes important debates about the nature of production and consumption, and highlights relationships and links between locations in the productive framework. This seems apposite in a globalising “network society” where the rich are connected, but fragmentation and exclusion are unevenly distributed to lower socio-economic groups. The rich are perhaps well-connected enough to afford theorising a general fragmentation in class.

Whatever form of class analysis we apply, the contemporary economy differs from 19th Century England when Marx was writing. To embark on class analysis today is to probably accept that no particular conceptual framework can provide a full picture of inequality in contemporary society. While empirical validation is important for any explanatory framework, the objective of class analysis is not to provide ever-more accurate models of socio-economic activity. For as Lefebvre (1988, p.77) notes, at the root of Marx’s thinking was a strategic objective: to change the world. Accordingly, in seeking to change inequality today, we should consider the history of class analysis as a rich toolkit to generate new insights and new models for action. Marx’s legacy is primarily useful today not to illuminate 19th Century capitalism, but to ask of it questions about contemporary life.

For these reasons, my approach to class analysis will be focused on these *emerging* trends within class stratification, particularly as they emerge in a new media environment. Following Miller and Slater (2000 p.5) I propose that we need to treat ICTs as ‘continuous with and embedded in [...] mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they cannot escape.’ Looking at the impact of new media will entail looking at broader structural shifts caused by information as well as its technological apparatuses. Some of these shifts have been most clearly analysed in discussions around the emerging “Information Society.”

Class analysis in the emerging information environment

Christopher May (2000, p. 402) notes that the emergence of the global information society represents two dynamics, “the shift from materials to information as the key object of economic activity; and the change from the use of passive information to the use of active knowledge or symbolic/analytical information skills in economic processes. This transformation is linked to the de-industrialisation of the major developed economies, most significantly the United States.” The increasing emphasis on information and knowledge has significantly affected issues of class stratification. Jan Pakulski outlines some of the key factors affecting our ability to define contemporary class relations:

- Flexible specialisation erodes the consistency of occupational tasks and homogeneity of occupational categories. Roles requiring flexibility and adaptability proliferate. Flexible employment grows in scope.
- There is an extending scope and diversity of market transactions due to the tendency to extend commodity status to new aspects of human products and activities (eg. brands, software, genetic materials). Access to information, signs and symbols become an important aspect of life-chances.
- Horizontal networks proliferate within and across the bureaucratic corporate hierarchies. There is declining clarity of hierarchical relations.
- Widening access to new communication and information technologies increases the density of social relations.
- There is increasing consumption, especially of symbols and services, and the proliferation of lifestyles and social identities related to consumption styles and tastes. (Pakulski, p.212)

Under these conditions, the traditional economic base vs. ideological superstructure distinction in Marxist class analysis faces severe difficulties in adequately accounting for the formation of classes. What constitutes ownership and effective control of a particular means of production is highly fragmented. Fluid and highly informational social structures reduce the close link between a particular class location and the lifestyle and attitudes available to a class. Lefebvre (1988), for example, makes the point that information processing covers the whole of society, from the base to the superstructure. A contemporary Marxian theory of information economy would have to at least explore a few very different ways information operates:

1. Information is a commodity, it can be bought and sold, even though “information economics” has features which distinguish it from traditional commodity forms (see for example Varian, 2001; Arrow 1996)
2. Information is an ideological technique; class-consciousness, markets and social relations are themselves constituted within and through ideological processes. (Hall, 1988)
3. Finally, information is a social practice, a means of production and of distribution.

The sociological literature has attempted to account for some of these trends by proposing varieties of non-economic “capital” that structure socio-economic production. Pierre Bourdieu (1984), in particular, proposed the concept of cultural capital that measures a person or group’s implicit ability to participate in taste hierarchies. Other theorists (including Bourdieu) have identified social capital, an explicit set of social relationships that are also correlated to socio-economic advancement (see Portes, 1998 for an overview). I explore the intellectual histories of these “cultural class concepts” in the next chapter.

In Chapter Three I explore the distinctive characteristics of information and its role in socio-economic reproduction. In Chapter Four I link these characteristics with the “social practice” of networks as exemplified in new media research, and develop a framework for analysing market or network situations in ways that allow collective or class interests to be usefully identified.

Theory and methodology in social research

While exploring all the issues above, I continued working toward a project that would provide “data” to inform and validate the production of relevant new concepts. I developed a new empirical research plan, one that would address the key issue of *how* informational classes form. It would be a detailed investigation into how young people are using new media and its social impact. In line with the best new media research, it would be methodologically hybrid and “buzzword-compliant”: combining an ethnographic approach à la Paul Willis (1977) with use-diaries and log analysis as commonly found in the U.S. work associated with the Association of Internet Researchers (aoir.org). I had set up contacts and interviews at four New Zealand high schools which would provide a broad base of data covering significant variables of race, gender, economic class, urban and rural locations, etc. But while approaching all this I was troubled by a question: “Why do qualitative fieldwork?”

On reflection, I realised that the links were far from clear in my planned project between:

- 1) the data I planned to gather from the research subjects, (which carried responsibilities in the data's care and use);
- 2) the theoretical frameworks I was exploring (which were not owned by and would be barely recognised by the research subjects);
- 3) the audience for the research, (which remained far from clear: local policymakers? A general public? An international research community? All of the above?); and
- 4) the real benefits for the subjects of the research (which I suggest could only be proposed through alignment of the three points above).

Such ethical questions are of course not new to research practice – but they are explicitly discussed surprisingly rarely in communications research, although such discussions are more prevalent in anthropology (see e.g. Geertz, 1973, Michaels, 1994). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), in her discussion of the impact of “research” on indigenous peoples, makes the point very forcefully: the “benefits” of research projects to those under study are routinely treated as self-evident by researchers, yet the experience of those being researched is more often a betrayal of trust, loss of control, and unintended consequences. Who benefits from this production of a new data set, a new theorisation?

My own motivations for undertaking this project were – finally! – becoming the most important question to resolve. Qualitative, empirical research has a privileged role in the social sciences, and its emergence at various times has often been attached to a political project to avoid totalising theoreticism and reaffirm the diversity of human existence, sociality and culture. For the researcher such as myself seeking an ethical and “activist” approach, taking responsibility for my effects on the phenomena under examination, qualitative research is attractive for a number of reasons.

Firstly, in hip-hop parlance, empirical research is about “keeping it real”. It provides a reassuring link for the researcher to “real life”, and in the case of participant-observation, a temporary erasure of their difference from another social group who are ‘not researchers’. Case studies also provide interesting narrative material to engage a wider range of readers than more theoretical projects, which always seems like a more “useful” result for research activity. Finally, there is no shortage of ‘how-to’ manuals on undertaking empirical research, particularly compared to other forms of knowledge

production (e.g. generating new theoretical concepts).

New media research: an emerging empirical tradition

Terry Flew (2001) has marshalled significant evidence for a new empirical emphasis in Internet Studies. He highlights the importance of the empirical approach as a corrective to the effusive technological determinism that characterised the first wave of new media theory in the 1990s.

There are strong parallels between what Flew calls the “new empirics” of Internet Studies and the trajectory of communications and media research in the 1970s that led to the establishment of Cultural Studies (as outlined in Chapter Two). In that time, Cultural Studies could be seen in many respects as a reaction against the positivist assumptions of structuralist functionalism, which assumed that society is stable so that its various functions could be carefully and “independently” analysed. By contrast, according to Hall (1980), Cultural Studies assumed that it was more productive to see culture as a living entity, constantly in flux. To understand these currents, researchers should engage with the subjects of these movements, and ethnographic methods became an important part of the Cultural Studies toolkit.

In a similar way, Flew notes that early theories of Computer Mediated Communication were dominated by perspectives that extrapolated from formal characteristics of computer networks to propose utopian or dystopian scenarios (Flew, 2001, p.106). On the one hand it was suggested that networks such as the Internet would have the positive outcome of creating international communities of interest; on the other they would reduce ‘social capital’ and civic participation, leading to a decline in sociality. Empirical studies emerging from what people do using new media can avoid the errors and false uniformity associated with either of these positions. New media networks are used in a wide range of situations with differing effects, and it is important to observe these differing effects before assuming that the technology will facilitate general socio-economic outcomes of a particular type.

I suggest that the balance has now well and truly shifted in new media theory toward a hegemony of the empirical. The Association of Internet Researchers (aoir.org), for example, have a large mailing list for discussions of Internet Research-related topics which is dominated by methodological questions related to online empirical research projects.

Some distinctive features of the new media environment have supported the rapid growth in empirical new media research:

- i) Novelty. As new media are “new”, there are few existing assumptions about their use. A logical question to ask is “what are people doing with the Internet?”
- ii) The Internet’s rapid, market-led growth during the late 1990s created a demand for empirical research from businesses desperate to understand the medium for the purposes of selling goods through it. (Millard, 2002)
- iii) New media growth and associated commentary has been strongest in the United States, where communications research has generally privileged empiricism (also the dominant mode of commercially-funded media research). (Lazarsfeld, 1941)
- iv) As a medium, the Internet generates a massive amount of codified use-data without a researcher necessarily being present (Gelernter, 1991). The sheer amount of information available in server and computer log files, already in an electronic format accessible to data manipulation software, makes it much easier to conduct empirical research in this environment.

While there have undoubtedly been numerous benefits to the spread of empirical research, much of this work could be criticised for inattention to its own conditions of existence. That is, there is always the danger that the medium is taken as a given rather than situated in processes of social organisation that structure both its development and the development of the position of the observer. As Ned Rossiter (2003a p.109) suggests, “as a methodological practice, empiricism is captured by a delirium in which there is an assumption that the essence of the object can be revealed”. He summarises two important issues:

Political economy and functionalist sociology of the media cannot understand the locus of socio-technical transformations that are relational and have sensory effects whose operation is not determined by a positivist empirics of the media as seen, for example, in traditional media impacts/effects analysis, content analysis, and “uses and gratifications” functionalist research. Then there is the political economy of new media empirics. That is, the political, economic, and institutional conditions which shape neo-empirics as the emergent paradigm in the field of new media studies. While new media empirics is useful for cataloguing observable trends and phenomena, this paradigm is not so adept at reflecting upon the dominant interests and questions of power that condition its own legitimacy. (Rossiter, 2003a p.106)

The emergent ethnographic mode in new media research shows the potential to retain the key innovation of cultural studies: the ability to articulate theory in terms of recognisable human motivations and lived experience. But particularly in “new”

disciplines, empirical work often proceeds without consideration of the structuring effects of forces that have been thoroughly documented in disciplines such as political economics, cultural studies, and anthropology. To further exemplify the difficulties in the empirical research hegemony, it is worth revisiting Miller and Slater's *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (Miller & Slater, 2000). This work is a useful study as it displays the strengths and limitations of the empirical tradition. On the one hand their journalistic account of the diverse ways the Internet was being used in Trinidad at that time makes for interesting reading. On the other, because they are so inexplicit about their conceptual framework and approach, they make numerous assumptions that have not aged well in the four years since it was written. These tensions are instructive for the process of undertaking empirical research on new media generally. It is the recognition of these tensions that accounts for the transformation of this thesis from an empirical study to a theoretical intervention, so I will go into some detail.

The ethnographic approach and its limitations: a case study

Miller and Slater self-consciously took an “ethnographic approach” in their landmark study of Internet use in Trinidad, an approach they claim avoids the pitfalls of “virtuality” and “cyberspace theorising”. While the authors claim to defend the “traditional canons of ethnographic enquiry” (Miller & Slater, 2000 p.21) there is little critical analysis of why this canon is important or the specific impact these ideas have had on their approach. The authors cite few other theorists for methodological leads, and only mention Baudrillard / Jameson, and Haraway / Butler, in order to associate them with discourses of “virtuality” and “cyberspace” respectively, concepts they assert “are not a good point of departure for studying Trinidadians and many other people.” They suggest such discourses “simply do not apply” to most of their volume. That blanket statement is surprising given Haraway and Butler's ongoing dialogue with postcolonial theory from non-Western countries (see e.g. Haraway, 1990). If we accepted this dismissal, we might expect a privileging of Trinidadian social theory to make sense of their findings. However, their primary Trinidadian informant on Trini cultural politics is V.S. Naipaul, renowned for moving to the U.K to pursue Anglophilia from a young age and expressing his antipathy to third world cultural development (Mishra, 1996). Why Naipaul and not Trini author Sam Selvon, who might have somewhat different interpretations of the phenomena Miller and Slater strike? Such a decision is not discussed, so the only explanation is that Naipaul is much more accessible to Miller and Slater's cognitive frame. While this may seem like a small issue it does illustrate the way that ethnographic work brings with it certain theoretical perspectives that construct the perception of “reality” under observation.

With that in mind, it's unsurprising that Miller and Slater's cheerful summaries of Trinidad's national culture reflect the dotcom hype operating in the West at the time they were writing. Viewed from now, it seems nostalgic to think about the social conditions that allowed their findings to consistently support a view that the Internet has "massive potential" for the country. When they admit later on that outside of the e-commerce and political economy chapters "it is we as academics who have to supply the [analytical] models", then it becomes harder to accept their lack of attention to conceptual development, their relative inattention to colonial histories, their sanguine acceptance of the impact of the IMF's structural adjustments, and their repeated amazement at how wrong they were about certain presuppositions – such as their incredulity that in the instance of Trinidad the impact of a global medium like the Internet *increased* nationalist discourse and sentiment. A brief check of the globalisation literature indicates that it is precisely globalisation that fosters a sense of national identity (e.g. Castells 1997 p.66, Anderson 1983).

The primary problem that this suppressed theoretical positioning creates in Miller and Slater's study is that it lacks direct attention to the relationship between various informant groups and those outside those groups. Rossiter sees the methodological problem as identified by Althusser: "In order to extract the real essence from the object, empiricism undertakes an operation [of abstraction] that eliminates the object's constitutive outside." (Rossiter, 2003a, p.108) This could be addressed with an analytical model of the type I am putting forward in this thesis, and mitigate their positivistic stance of taking what they have seen as reality. An explicit theoretical model directs attention toward the *relationships* that allow this reality to be observed. Two examples will help:

In their study, almost every statement of Miller and Slater that mentions Internet access levels is quickly followed by a qualification – e.g. "Internet access is not remote even from those living in the most deprived areas" (Miller & Slater, 2000 p.202) "Although only 1 in 5 households in Newtown had computers almost every household claimed that it intended to purchase one; many of them were waiting until after the Y2k problems had been resolved." (Miller & Slater, 2000 p.203). The overall picture is one that increasing access is inevitable and desirable. However, data from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and World Information Technology and Services Alliance (WITSA) from 2001 show 9 % use for Trinidad and Tobago (World Bank Data Development Group, 2003). That is, over 90% of the country did *not* use the Internet, so the processes of getting access to the online world may not be straightforward. Outside of the statistical discrepancy, because Miller and Slater's

approach emphasises access as a “possibility” rather than a site of conflict, the perceptions of those not online are not factored into their analysis – and we don’t hear the illuminating quotes from those for whom the Internet is out of reach for reasons of cost, literacy, or motivation. Factoring these perspectives into the struggle for access might provide a different qualitative picture of the inequalities arising from Internet use.

On another level, several of the established patterns of online interactions are de-emphasised in Miller and Slater’s analysis, which takes a *tabula rasa* approach to the medium. One significant issue is the difference between expectations for cultural and knowledge labour in developed and developing countries. Miller and Slater’s analysis of e-commerce is dominated by a Trinidadian production of the Miss Universe website, which in their view “achieved in the most public way the ideal of Trinidadian businesses... a Trinidadian firm providing cutting-edge high-value-added information services to Northern multinationals on a cut price basis, using skill-based competitive advantages (high education, technical proficiency) as a lure for both technology transfer and revenue.” (Miller & Slater, 2000 p.147). What is mentioned, but not elaborated upon, is that the entire project was done for no fee. While Miller and Slater no doubt accurately reflect the excitement of their informants at becoming an outsourcing destination, the real ability of Trinidadians to occupy an economically sustainable position in these outsourcing relationships is complete conjecture. Since the dotcom crash, the strategy of “make it free to attract customers” has been revealed to be highly questionable (see Lovink, 2002 for an overview of this literature).

Complicating the “ethnographic present”

So in Miller and Slater we begin to see some of the limitations of the “ethnographic approach”. Paul Willis (1980) has described in detail the political implications of methodological choices in qualitative research. He notes that the classic “social scientific” modus operandi involves:

- i) Identifying subjects and variables to correlate;
- ii) Testing and developing data collection systems;
- iii) Hypothesising the impact of a variable on the subject; and
- iv) Noting if the data supports the hypothesis or not.

As Willis (1980 p.88) observes, this positivist approach has been questioned for its *objectification* of subjects under inquiry. Questions emerge as to whether the methodology can escape the assumptions embedded in the attempt to fix phenomena in time. What does it mean to identify a human’s perceptions, or a state of sociality in a

particular moment, when our own experience of these phenomena is never fixed in time, but is always processual?

To address this issue, the social sciences permitted the incursion of ethnographic participant-observation methods from anthropology, in the model Miller and Slater undertake above. In this formulation:

- i) The researchers postpones a theoretical framework to receive “raw”, “untheorised” data;
- ii) Taxonomies and organising principles are formed inductively from the data;
- iii) Conclusions are reached on the “way things are.”

While this research mode constitutes a better fit for the richness and authenticity of social activity, it is also beset by a number of issues. Most significantly, theoretical constructs are tools that bring data into being. The data structuring and collection process is always integrated. Although participant observation allows more “surprises” in data collection that can influence the results, an anti-theoretical strand of this work, of which Miller and Slater’s book is an example, *pretends* that received data could overthrow researchers’ basic assumptions (Willis, 1980). But as Lash puts it, attention is always needed to the “constitutive rules without which the regulative rules are inoperative” (Lash, 2002 p.198). There are always assumptions, because without assumptions there is no narrative. The goal is not to avoid assumptions (an impossible aim) but to be explicit about how they are embedded into methodology, so they can be assessed by others (Harding, 1987). Without an explicitly reflexive methodology questions arise about the usefulness of the research: how generalisable or valid is it? How does it relate to other research in the field? What will the conclusions look like in four years time?

Following this are the ethical issues in the researchers’ relation to their subjects that come from hidden values embedded in research design. It may not be possible for the research subjects to effectively assess the validity of the research they are participating in due to gaps in knowledge or socio-cultural relations of authority. We can’t always rely on research subjects (Trinidadian new media users) to be able to point out the researchers’ false suppositions, but who else can? In my view, it’s the relationship between the researcher and their communities of practice, through an explicit conversation about theory and methodology, that provides the basis for ethical practice.

Note that I am not questioning the value of qualitative or empirical research *per se*. However, as Haraway (1997 p. 190) suggests, ethnography should be seen not as a “method” to be applied but as a way of being radically open to the forces structuring a

situation. In some cases, where researchers and research subjects share agreement about what those forces are, a useful conversation can emerge around how the subjects' data will affect those structuring forces. But what if the forces structuring the situation are inside the researchers' mind? Many research situations are much more strongly structured by international academic conversations (e.g. "the digital divide", "class analysis", "media effects") than by self-identified issues in the communities being researched. In such instances, of which my project has become an example, I think caution needs to be applied in the trafficking between local phenomena and a conversation that is structured elsewhere. We become at risk of engaging in what Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989, p.67-70) calls gossip: a conversation of "us" with "us" about "them" where "they" are not present. There are ethical, and perhaps more importantly, pragmatic issues in intellectual gossip that reduce the ability of research to foster productive dialogue between researchers and a wider community. In Miller and Slater's case, the dialogue about their book happened primarily in a context of Western new media studies, which had no way of accessing the self-identified conditions of the Trinidad context. How did the Trini new media workers feel after the dotcom collapse? How many other ICT for development experts used Miller and Slater's work to propose similarly unstable development models? We never find out this information, so questions emerge around the positive effects of their intervention.

The critiques of imperialist knowledge production and the tensions around representation, for all their necessity, have contributed to a hegemony of ethically questionable research practices among first world researchers. In the name of a fetishised sense of "situated politics", we are encouraged to focus on "the local" and the specific rather than the imperial intellectual traditions that have a larger impact on our way of being in the world, and have shaped our values, institutions, and research practices. Yet they are already "here" specifically in our being researchers. To deny those forces is, I think, to run the risk of bringing them in as stowaways. A way through this ethical conundrum has been best addressed through the philosophical project of deconstruction. As Spivak (1993 p.46) puts it, the deconstructive impulse drives one to 'critique what one cannot not want'. But then, Antonio Gramsci, writing in Italy in the early 1930s, had already identified the problem:

The most widespread error of method seems to me that of having looked for this criterion [to characterise intellectuals as a group]... in the intrinsic nature of intellectual activities, rather than in the ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities (and therefore the intellectual groups who personify them) have their place within the general complex of social relations. (Gramsci, 1971 p.8)

When I began this project, the last thing I wanted to produce was abstract socio-economic theory. The reason I didn't want to produce it was precisely because I knew its limitations and imperial histories too well, and I knew my location in ethnic, gender, class, and institutional struggles provides me with all the tools to produce more of it. Through this distancing, however, I've realised that I cannot move myself from that location to somewhere more politically "authentic", any more than I can shed my skin. I 'cannot not want' to reform the system that has, for better and worse, created my *habitus*, my way of being in the world. The international system of academic theory provides me a means of access into many social, cultural, and geographical situations around the world, and yet excludes me from emergent political movements that rightfully challenge that very system. It is this recognition of a global privilege as simultaneously a local loss that haunts this theoretical project.

At the same time, as I outline above, an explicit theoretical discussion cannot be avoided for an ethical research practice. For some researchers, it may be that established knowledge frameworks in Western academia apply to their work, objects of study, and themselves with little modification. Under such circumstances entering into the "real world" of local experience is a useful exercise to test these frameworks. But in the discussion of informational socio-economic inequality, I would argue that there is already too much "research data" being carried in very leaky theoretical "containers" that do not hold it effectively. The "research data" (e.g. media-use statistics, interviews, discussion list postings) may appear not to be scarce in the information-intensive new media environment, but it is worth remembering that this data is people's lives, and livelihood. It deserves to be treated with care, respect, and professionalism. The ethics here are too often defined *negatively*: not breaking protocols, jumping through University ethics committee hoops, getting appropriate release forms signed, or maintaining informant anonymity. But the ethical concerns I propose require more than this. If as researchers we design packaging for data, then we owe it to those producing the data to make these theoretical packages the best we can – our conception of "best" being explicitly accountable to both our informants and our professional disciplines. This work, then, is an attempt to improve these packages, to produce more sustainable ways of thinking socio-economic inequality in this new media environment.