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Correspondence from the Early Republic to the Digital Era

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I

Introduction

The American Press and International Relations

From the time when getting foreign news meant rowing a boat to catch the packet of newspapers thrown overboard as ships were docking from their Atlantic crossing, to today's anywhere/anytime niche delivery on smartphones, one aspect of international mass communication has not changed: It remains an essential locus for the creation, definition and transformation of the power relationships that lie at the heart of international affairs. It is impossible to understand how nations interact without taking into account what images they form of one another – largely through the mass media – and what consequent expectations they bring to their relations.

This book argues that the press has been a crucial factor – an irreplaceable mediator – in international affairs, historically and currently, by functioning as the public arena where meanings for things literally foreign become understandable realities that, in turn, serve as the basis for policy and action. This new model of the nexus between news and foreign policy is needed to take us beyond traditional analyses that have the media either deviously driving or blindly following foreign policymakers. Rather, the focus here is on how the news media shape, for better or for worse, our basic understanding of what the world beyond our borders is like. This argument is tested through extensive original historical research that answers two fundamental questions: What images of the world outside the United States have American news media helped create? How have those images in news coverage interacted with U.S. foreign policy? In turn, those questions raise two more normative ones that the book also addresses: What should the American press do to better cover the world? What might the future hold for American foreign correspondence?

The very visible role of some foreign correspondents and major international news organizations in the conduct of international affairs is the most studied manifestation of the inextricable link between international mass communication and international politics. The most recent, comprehensive history

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of American foreign correspondence focuses on those kinds of spectacular interactions.¹ Examples abound in this research as well: Cuban rebels and Spanish leaders both addressed Americans directly in interviews reproduced verbatim in the *New York Times* before the Spanish-American War of 1898, and the Spaniards castigated the public's sway over Congress. When Mikhail Gorbachev signed his resignation in 1991, thus penning "the end" to the Cold War, he did so with a Montblanc borrowed from the president of CNN. From the same perspective and the other end of the power spectrum, studies of developing countries have often faulted Western-centric media for perpetuating dependency and imperialistic practices through distorted direction, content and sheer quantity of news flow.

But the vital importance of the press – and today's multiplatform news media – in international relations does not stop at who writes what about whom from where (and in what language and on whose behalf). Important as the flow of information is, it does not explain the essential role that communication plays in international relations at the most visceral level. Assuming that there can be no effective power unless it is buttressed by the perception of it, this book shows that the "translation" of meanings – of national identities, and intentions, across boundaries – is the inevitable and, ethically, most affecting core of international communication. The press matters in global affairs because the images of national identities it helps create and negotiate influence expectations and consequently policies.

Today, the battle for the soul of journalism is being played out just as the United States and the world are interrogating themselves about what the nation is, should do and can do globally; these are concerns that highlight the urgency of the research agenda undertaken in this book. The real way in which Americans engage the world is fundamentally shaped by the images that the U.S. press helps create and perpetuate, making it an "irreplaceable mediator" between the world and how Americans, both citizens and policymakers, act in it. In order to begin to get at that mediator essence, this book proposes a new theoretical framework that integrates mass communication with international relations as a particularly useful way to conceptualize and, ultimately, to call for restoring the power and responsibility of the media in international affairs.

It then tests the model through an extensive discourse analysis, based on more than 2,000 news articles, of how the American press has covered the world and what images it has brought back to its readers. Do the same general understandings of the world, specific countries and regions and the United States' global role inform both media coverage and actual policies? This book is the first to provide a narrative of the evolution of America's understandings of the world, analyzing coverage of twenty defining international events from 1848 to 2008 and including both a production perspective (such as the profession of foreign correspondent and journalism education) and an

¹ John Maxwell Hamilton, *Journalism's Roving Eye: A History of American Foreign Reporting* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009).

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audience perspective (such as the appetite for foreign news among U.S. readers and political engagement in foreign affairs).

Those discourses of the world, and of the United States' role in it, are found to have shaped the box within which foreign policy options were debated – and to have occasionally provided the means to think outside of it. Either by succeeding in enriching the public's understanding of foreign nations, or by tragically failing to do so, the news media have had a pivotal role in shaping national identities and therefore setting constraints for foreign policies at particular historical times. The contribution of such a constructivist approach – focused on exploring the ecology of discourses within which policymakers act – implies that dwindling foreign news coverage must entail less room for understanding, with catastrophic consequences for action. Therefore, this history of American journalism's engagement with world affairs also provides the launching pad for a discussion of what the future of foreign correspondence might be in the twenty-first century, amid a revolutionized communication and policy environment.

A Constructivist Perspective on IR, Communication, and Journalism

Three crucial conceptual assumptions about international politics, communication and journalism underlie this new model of the effects of the news media on foreign policy, and they are first defined briefly before delving into a discussion of their merits as well as the questions they leave unanswered through the existing literature. First, identities and interests are not essentialist but socially, collectively constructed. Thus, both macrolevel explanations of international systems and analyses of individual policies need to take into account discourses – or the collective frameworks that give meaning to material factors (e.g., that define what people understand as the national interest or power) – and provide boundaries of interpretation for decision makers above and beyond their individual psychological and cognitive schemas. Second, communication is not the transparent transmission of a fixed meaning; rather, it serves as a necessary locus for the negotiation of meaning within historically, culturally specific broad understandings. Language, therefore, does not simply reflect a material reality but constitutes it insofar as it provides the only way we can know any social fact. Third, the news media, despite numerous and glaring failings, can and do provide a unique, valuable space for public debate that is not simply a replica of political discourse; if one believed, as many critics increasingly do, that all the mainstream media do is lap up manipulation by political and business actors, then defending their role in international affairs would be a priori a meaningless exercise.

Constructing International Affairs

Exploring international affairs first, then, this perspective is greatly indebted to constructivism and discourse theories, especially the works of Alexander Wendt (at the systemic level) and Henrik Larsen (at the foreign policy

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level).² Neither interprets constructivism as a denial of the great importance of power, interests and institutions, the traditional explicative tools of realism and liberalism. Rather, they convincingly argue that the meanings we give to the material environment – and therefore the effects it ends up having – should not be taken for granted, because an object does not force a representation of it on our minds but rather is relationally constructed. Interests themselves are but ideas, collectively held in a specific culture at a specific historical time – an insight recently shared by strategic culture analysts.³ In a classic example, according to Wendt's famous pronouncement, "anarchy is what states make of it," not because anarchy exists only as a mental construct, but because how states configure their position within it is inevitably influenced by the ideas they share about what anarchy means to them. To paraphrase Larsen and to bring analysis from the first to the third level, nuclear weapons certainly have an intrinsic, easily quantifiable essence, but Washington in 2012 can confidently be expected to react very differently to one such weapon in North Korea or fifty in the United Kingdom, on the basis of a series of existing understandings about regimes, alliances, interests, representations of the past, and other factors.

Distribution of Power and Ideas

Wendt's focus is on the systemic level, the level of culture defined as shared knowledge and constituted of narratives that "are not merely the shared beliefs held by individuals at any given moment . . . but inherently historical phenomena which are kept alive through the generations by an on-going process of socialization and ritual enactment."⁴ The basic tenet of his theory, accepted here, is that human associations (including states) are held together by shared ideas more than by material forces – some of those ideas being, this book argues, images of one's own nation and foreign ones. Therefore, international relations are not governed only by the distribution of power – measured in capabilities, as it is for the realist school – but by the "distribution of ideas" (to which we should add power measured in influence).⁵

The major preoccupation of foreign policy becomes "managing the casting and recasting of socially constructed identities" – an assumption that begs for better study of just what those identities are, how they emerge and how they are transformed, something that this book argues happens through mass communication, too. Interests and identities, then, are ideas "endogenous" to interaction, and they lie at the core of interactions because, as Katzenstein puts it, they are constructed through them.⁶ According to Wendt, states interact in

² Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Henrik Larsen, *Foreign Policy and Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1997).

³ John Glenn, "Realism versus Strategic Culture: Competition and Collaboration?" *International Studies Review* 11–3 (September 2009): 523.

⁴ Wendt, 1999, 163.

⁵ Wendt, 1999, 1, 96.

⁶ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46–2 (1992): 394; Peter J. Katzenstein, *The Culture of*

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part to try to sustain their conceptions of “self” and “other,”⁷ because ideas held by a state are given meaning by ideas shared with other states – another affirmation of the importance of images and the relevance of discourses among nations. Thus, the construction of identity is itself a form of power, as in Wendt’s example about the identity of the United States as “hegemon,” which is constructed by a “generalized other” rather than by the United States.⁸ This casts international communication and its role in image formation and meaning construction as a crucial player in the international arena, recalling Michel Foucault’s statement that “discourse is the power . . . to be seized.”⁹

The assumption that the meaning and consequently the effect of hard and soft power and interests depend on actors’ collectively held ideas raises the two gravest objections to such a constructivist perspective: How do those ideas emerge, and how do they change? More drastically, from a methodological standpoint, how can we even provide evidence that those ideas exist and that they are causal or constitutive of any discrete action? On the question of change, a systemic constructivist perspective seems to imply that change is inhibited because states are interested in maintaining a stable identity, especially when other states have come to perceive such identity as an objective fact and are further disposed to do so by the structure created in the interaction.¹⁰ Some students of newer, supranational identities like the European Union’s have even argued that they are purposefully constructed as timeless.¹¹ Wendt ultimately appears ambiguous on both questions of change and causality, arguing that culture is a “self-fulfilling prophecy,” while not denying the role of agents in “carrying” it, and that constructivism is more of a constitutive than a causal theory seeking to account for, not to explain, effects. In other words, early constructivist work appears to be content with suggesting that social construction matters. But the challenge remains, as noted in a 1998 article about “the constructivist turn in international relations theory,” to address “when, how, and why it occurs, clearly specifying the actors and mechanisms bringing about change, the scope conditions under which they operate, and how they vary across countries.”¹² The biggest catch-22 is the question of agency – if agents and structures, material and discursive arrangements, are mutually constitutive, how can that constitution be operationalized?

National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). Also Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit, “Dangerous Liaisons? Critical International Theory and Constructivism,” *European Journal of International Relations* 4–3 (1998): 267.

⁷ Wendt, 1999, 316.

⁸ Wendt, 1999, 177.

⁹ Michel Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” in *Untying the Text*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 53.

¹⁰ Wendt, 1992, 411.

¹¹ Ian Manners and Richard G. Whitman, “The ‘Difference Engine’: Constructing and Representing the International Identity of the European Union,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 10–3 (2003): 396.

¹² Jeffrey T. Checkel, “The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory,” *World Politics* 50–2 (1998): 325.

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This book highlights the actor role of the news media in constituting a crucial part of the discursive environment that delimits policy choices, with the caveat that this constructivist perspective cannot account for causality in isolation and it cannot predict specific foreign policy actions or their support by the public. What this analysis can reveal, however, is the range of actions that are likely and of others that are literally unthinkable for policymakers and citizens alike. A similar inquiry, bringing constructivism to the finite and causal level of foreign policy, was Larsen's discourse analysis of France's and Britain's politics vis-à-vis Europe in the 1980s. While careful to note that an analysis of political discourse cannot account for, let alone predict, every short-term policy decision, Larsen argues that discourse provides "a kind of framework within which the foreign policy of a particular country *can* take place."¹³ In other words, once established, historically situated discourses – about foreign realities, about one's own country, and about the very nature of international politics and statehood – cannot help influencing foreign policies because they provide the only frame within which decision makers can make sense of material data. Therefore, constructivist analysis can avoid some of the pitfalls of more traditional approaches to foreign policy, which Larsen criticizes for being too centered on individual decision makers, for treating beliefs only in terms of perceptions of the real, and for considering language transparent.

The first two points highlight the essential distinctions between a constructivist approach to foreign policy and the cognitive, psychological treatment of images in foreign policymaking established by Robert Jervis, even though on the surface they may sound similar enough to be confused. A precursor to the study of international images was the UNESCO-sponsored opinion poll in the late 1940s dealing with the "maps of the world" in the mind of citizens of nine nations (including the United States).¹⁴ In the 1950s and 1960s, K.E. Boulding, Ole R. Holsti and others argued that actors on the international stage base their decisions on their "image" of a reality, and they tend to perceive even new information according to existing belief systems predicated on "stereotyped national images."¹⁵ More recently, Martha Cottam argued that images of foreign nations are based on perceptions of hostility and that they influence every stage of foreign policymaking.¹⁶ Other studies suggest that even

¹³ Larsen, 21; emphasis added.

¹⁴ William Buchanan and Hadley Cantril, *How Nations See Each Other* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1953), 1.

¹⁵ K.E. Boulding, "National Images and International Systems," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 3–2 (June 1959): 120–131; Ole R. Holsti, "The Belief System and National Images: A Case Study," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 6–3 (September 1962): 244–252.

¹⁶ Martha L. Cottam, *Images and Intervention: U.S. Policies in Latin America* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994), 19.

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“spectacular” events have little power to change images,¹⁷ and that people’s “world views” have the largest impact on their actions.¹⁸

In his 1970 classic text, Jervis defined a decision maker’s image of another actor as “those of his beliefs about the other that affect his predictions of how the other will behave,” further influenced by the actor’s own goals and estimates of the international environment.¹⁹ Jervis argued that the mechanisms of image making are not innocent mental workings; they are linked to precise power and very concrete interests. States often use images of other states and of their own nation’s role to justify action;²⁰ according to Jervis, states also try to influence others states’ images of themselves in order to avoid making real changes in policies. Jervis focused on how a state can project a desired image cheaply, arguing that such a strategically positioned image – often independent of actual behavior – could prove more effective than military or economic power. There are points of convergence with this book’s theoretical premises: the importance of images and perceptions, their effects in the real(ist) world, and their relative perceptual independence from actions. But Jervis and, as discussed later in this chapter, many scholars of media and foreign policy focus on specific actors’ framing of reality intended as manipulation, deception and misrepresentation both of capabilities and intentions. Even some post-structuralist and critical discourse analysts of foreign policy, who go so far as arguing that identity and policy are ontologically inseparable and there are no objective identities outside of discourse, still appear to conceive of discourses or representations as conscious ways of presenting and legitimizing policies.²¹

The constructivist framework here, on the other hand, focuses on larger, socially constructed discourses – “collectively held or ‘intersubjective’ ideas and understandings”²² – that are beyond direct, individual manipulation, or rather that constrain any attempt to rational manipulation because even that can only be comprehended within the parameters of accepted discursive formations

¹⁷ Karl W. Deutsch and Richard L. Merritt, “Effects of Events on National and International Images,” in *International Behavior: A Social-Psychological Analysis*, ed. Herbert C. Kelman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985), 132–184.

¹⁸ Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, eds. *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 8. Also, Mark Laffey and Jutta Weldes, “Beyond Belief: Ideas and Symbolic Technologies in the Study of International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 3–2 (June 1997): 193–237.

¹⁹ Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 5.

²⁰ K.J. Holsti, “National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy,” *International Studies Quarterly* 14–3 (1970): 233–309.

²¹ Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge, 2006); Dirk Nabers, “Filling the Void of Meaning: Identity Construction in U.S. Foreign Policy after September 11, 2001,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 5–2 (2009): 191–214.

²² Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, “Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 4 (2001): 392.

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and terminologies. This conceptualization returns us to Larsen's third point, derived from Foucault, about the constitutive power of language, which should be studied insofar as it mediates meaning and it is the means through which social meaning is communicated. Language, in other words, is never neutral but rather is the expression and the reification of specific, historically situated discourses. As such, language, the statements it composes, and the discourses those statements in turn constitute take us one step beyond pure ideology and in fact can transcend it, precisely as they transcend individual or national goals. Therefore, studying national texts – political, as Larsen does, or media, as done here – for discourses about macro concepts (e.g., national identity and global role) can give us insight into how each state makes sense of the world and, by implication, what kind and range of policies its decision makers can adopt.

The focus on national discourses spotlights another central assumption shared here – that even in today's age of global cultural, economic and to some extent political interdependence, the state remains a key actor, precisely because it defines its own relational identity. Whereas some have argued that twenty-first-century global communication technology transformations are ushering in changes to the world order and substantially weakening the nation-state, the vast majority of literature in international relations, as well as international communication, rests – as the very term “international” implies – on use of the state as a unit of analysis, albeit from different ontologies, as pointed out by Stephen Crofts Wiley's article on nationality in the era of globalization.²³ Sociologist Michael Schudson argued that using the state as a unit of analysis is not problematic as long as the nation is also examined as a historical, not an essentialist, construct.²⁴ Indeed, since the late nineteenth century, the nation has been defined not so much by race, language (meaning idiom and not discourse), religion, geography and interests but by memories, culture and consent – a common identity creating an “imagined community,” to use Benedict Anderson's words.²⁵ There has been a recent surge in studies of national or ethnic identities, socially constructed and based on selected memories and histories, as fundamental explicative tools in recurring conflicts.²⁶ But most of those

²³ Stephen B. Crofts Wiley, “Rethinking Nationality in the Context of Globalization,” *Communication Theory* 14:1 (2004): 78–96; Wendt, 1992, 424. Also, Larsen, 198; Daya Kishan Thussu, ed. *Internationalizing Media Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Robert A. Pastor, ed. *A Century's Journey: How the Great Powers Shape the World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 5. For the perspective that the world order is being transformed by communication technologies, see Ronald J. Deibert, *Parchment, Printing, and Hypermedia: Communication in World Order Transformation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

²⁴ Michael Schudson, “Culture and the Integration of National Societies,” in *The Sociology of Culture*, ed. Diana Crane (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1994).

²⁵ Ernest Renan, “What Is a Nation?” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 19; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).

²⁶ Eiki Berg and Piret Ehin, eds. *Identity and Foreign Policy: Baltic-Russian Relations and European Integration* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Pål Kolstø, ed. *Media Discourse and the Yugoslav Conflicts: Representations of Self and Other* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

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studies are based on analysis of political statements, whereas one country's construction of another's identity through international mass communication is one of the central concerns of this book.

One last contribution from Larsen's conceptualization is the acknowledgment that such a discourse analysis, despite its inherently high level of abstraction and consequently low falsification, does not necessarily contradict but rather can complement more power-based explanations of policy. Whereas national interests are necessary to explain most policies, it is difficult to see interests "independently of the values of the individual states as they are embedded and constructed in the language."²⁷ As another proponent of the study of "powerful discourses" in international relations put it, discourses render a real thing "meaningful to us in particular ways" and therefore "delimit the possibilities for action in relation to it" above and beyond material interests.²⁸

Therefore, conducting discourse analysis to better understand the nexus between news media and foreign policy does not mean to deny the importance of interests, power and geopolitical factors at the systemic level nor does it mean to exclude the possibility or even likelihood of manipulation, misrepresentation and misperception at the individual decision-making level. Rather, it is to argue for the added value of looking at the socially constructed, historically situated, non-essentialist discourses or ways of understanding and taking for granted certain phenomena, which form the inevitable ecology within which meanings are formulated, communicated and become the basis for actions. We are bound, further, to ask, what else constitutes that ecology? To return to an earlier question, how do certain discourses take hold in certain cultures at certain historical times?

Constructing Communication

This book attempts to provide a part of the answer to that question, although admittedly by no means the complete answer. The suggestion put forth here is that researchers go look for insight beyond political communication into mass media communication – not so much for coverage of specific policies or activist editorials but for the construction of foreign realities per se through history – on the basis of the premise that mass communication is an essential site for the formation of meaning around foreign realities. Once such discursive formations are identified, we can then look for correspondence in foreign policy trends and decisions, which are formulated within the same universe of values and perceptions created and reflected in discourse. Whereas competing frameworks of understanding might exist in other spheres (such as political communication or popular culture) and further explicative factors in geopolitical, economic

²⁷ Larsen, 197.

²⁸ Charlotte Epstein, *The Power of Words in International Relations: Birth of an Anti-whaling Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 6, 2.

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and other terms need to be considered, what we look for as evidence of the importance of media discourse for foreign policy is consonance between those other factors and the discursive values about self and other.

Such a research program is inherently partial, because it seeks to find mediated discourses as they exist, might be transformed through time, and have an influence on material arrangements, but it does not address how discursive formations originated at their inception beyond refuting the suggestion that they be simple, top-down manipulations by elites. Despite that shortcoming, it remains valuable because it can illuminate the formation and the germs for change in the macro concepts about foreign realities that ultimately drive and frame policies beyond systemic pressures and individual mechanisms. Indeed, some students of international relations have argued that the field's lack of media understanding makes it "fail to grasp the new shape of world politics."²⁹ Even if we do not know exactly where certain discursive formations came from, just showing what they are and how they are maintained or transformed in the public sphere is crucial because they delimit ways of thinking and therefore, by default, of acting. For example, the finding that every anti-authoritarian movement abroad has been constructed, at best, as a little 1776, cements the understanding of the United States as the global paragon of democracy, an essential discourse for U.S. intervention around the world.

Creating Meaning through Mass Communication

Such a constructivist perspective, drawing on the works of Foucault again as well as James Carey and Stuart Hall, rests on the definition of mass communication as the creation and negotiation of meaning rather than the transmission of a fixed, agreed-upon meaning.³⁰ Thus, the focus is not on the media – U.S. correspondents abroad, in this case – as capable of objectively and fairly conveying information about the rest of the world, or as serving as legitimization for official positions; rather the focus is on how those written accounts create a meaning for foreign realities for American audiences, including policymakers. This does not imply that there is no reality – rather that any reality, and particularly a foreign one that does not come within most people's purview except through media, is only understandable through some translation and negotiation of meaning. The principal research agenda, then, is to uncover the role the news media have played in negotiating international meaning construction and in serving as essential means whereby "any body of 'knowledge' comes to

²⁹ Brigitte L. Nacos, Robert Y. Shapiro and Pierangelo Isernia, eds. *Decisionmaking in a Glass House: Mass Media, Public Opinion, and American and European Foreign Policy in the 21st Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 27.

³⁰ James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Stuart Hall, "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies," in *Culture, Society and the Media*, ed. Michael Gurevitch et al. (London: Methuen, 1982), 56–90.