

A preconference, a petition, and a place for media sociology in the association: a personal account

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In late December 2012, I saw Matthias Revers venting his frustrations on Facebook. Why, he wanted to know, does the American Sociological Association have a section on Animals and Society but not one on Media Sociology?! I commented on the post: How serious are you about this issue? Maybe it was time to stop complaining and actually *do* something about it.

I understood his frustrations quite well. For junior sociologists like Matthias who had been trained in the United States, the *de facto* choice seemed to be between a career in media sociology *or* a career in a sociology department in the United States; aspiring to both at the same time was unrealistic in the extreme. As for myself, although I am an American with no particular academic career aspirations outside of the United States, I'd discovered approximately four years prior to Matthias's Facebook post that if I wanted to write a PhD dissertation on a part of the American publishing industry in the discipline of sociology, I would have to leave the United States to do it. What I had not fully understood at the time was that, as things stood, there was unlikely to be a place for me in American sociology post-PhD either.

From my College room in Cambridge, England, unable to return home for the holidays because I needed that money to move to London to take up a faculty position there come the turn of the year, I knew the problem was a real one. I had, after all, already faced some consequences and suspected that any change which might be effected was probably too late for me personally. Nevertheless, I thought, perhaps I could help make a difference for the sociologists-in-training who came after me. And besides, who was going to be the change if not the people who experience the problem most acutely?

To clarify, the "media" in media sociology I would define as encompassing all forms of mass-mediated communication and expression, including, but not limited to, film, television, radio, books, magazines, videogames, popular music recordings, and online blogs. Use of the somewhat outdated term "mass" in this context is intended to exclude mediated interpersonal communication, such as telephone calls, text messages, and Skype chats. What distinguishes media sociology from media and communication studies is that it is not satisfied with studying media in its own terms. Instead, it relates media production, communication/discourse, and consumption to other important key sociological subfields, such as social inequality, social problems, collective action, and identity. Media sociology, furthermore, is attentive to wider power structures and institutions, the problem of reconciling social structures and agencies that generate media representations, and the collective construction of mediated communication, including (but not necessarily privileging) the technologies which facilitate it.

In January 2013, Matthias and I reconvened to discuss seriously what might be done. We spoke to a number of senior academics who agreed with us that this was an important institutional gap in need of filling. Matthias also brought Andrew Lindner into the conversation, whom he had met at the ASA annual meeting in Denver the previous year, and Andrew suggested that we organize a preconference ahead of the next annual meeting, to be held in New York City, to help raise awareness and assess wider enthusiasm for the possibility of a Media Sociology section.

Our efforts were met with a groundswell of enthusiasm which, although not wholly unexpected, was nonetheless delightful. With assistance from Rodney Benson, we were able to secure venue space for the first preconference at NYU's Institute for Public Knowledge and the Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute in August 2013. We scheduled a morning keynote, a relatively junior scholar, and a special discussion plenary featuring senior scholars. The rest of the program was left open for those who wished to participate. Our core operating principle was inclusivity, not boundary-policing; any individuals who saw their work as a part of the media sociology subfield were welcome. In total, we had over eighty registered attendees.

The event at NYU generated further energy for the online petition to form a media sociology section of the ASA that we had posted earlier that year, and we were able to secure the requisite 200 current member signatures required on our first attempt. This, for me, is a not inconsiderable point of pride, as I was the one primarily responsible for the work of coalition building. Ultimately, however, political pushback from the then-named Communication and Information Technologies (CITASA) section, as well as organizational concerns within the association, prevented the formation of a separate section. Yet we remained adamant that "media sociology" as a named subfield be represented in some form in a manner that did not subsume it within the study of technology, and at the end of 2014 a deal was brokered with CITASA to change its name to "Communication, Information Technologies and Media Sociology." This became official in 2015.

This recognition of the subfield of media sociology within the ASA is an important milestone for an association which, unlike its counterparts in Germany and Britain, for example, has never previously had an explicitly-named institutional space for it. If anything, the prominence of the American association and its centrality to the discipline worldwide makes it important even for scholars outside of North America as well. It is a positive change, and I remain optimistic about the fruits it will bear.

In the meantime, what began as a one-off event has become an annual tradition: The Media Sociology Preconference is now in its sixth consecutive year and will be hosted by State System @ Center City in Philadelphia on August 10, 2018. My commitment to raising the profile of media sociology has not wavered, and I am grateful to everyone who, in their myriad ways, has helped make all of these things possible.
