JOHN FISKE

Media Matters

Race and Gender in U.S. Politics

2nd Edition

With a new introductory essay on
John Fiske's contribution by

BLACK HAWK HANCOCK

ROUTLEDGE

MEDIA MATTERS

Race and Gender in U.S. Politics
Second Edition

Now, more than 20 years since its initial release, John Fiske's classic text *Media Matters* remains both timely and insightful as an empirically rich examination of how the fierce battle over cultural meaning is negotiated in American popular culture.

Media Matters takes us to the heart of social inequality and the call for social justice by interrogating some of the most important issues of its time. Fiske offers a practical guide to learning how to interpret the ways that media events shape the social landscape, to contest official and taken-for-granted accounts of how events are presented/conveyed through media, and to effect social change by putting intellectual labor to public use.

A new introductory essay by former Fiske student Black Hawk Hancock entitled "Learning How to Fiske: Theorizing Cultural Literacy, Counter-History, and the Politics of Media Events in the 21st Century" explains the theoretical and methodological tools with which Fiske approaches cultural analysis, highlighting the lessons today's students can continue to draw upon in order to understand society.

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MEDIA MATTERS

RACE AND GENDER IN U.S. POLITICS

Second edition

John Fiske

With a new introductory essay on *Learning How to Fiske: Theorizing Cultural Literacy, Counter-History, and the Politics of Media Events in the 21st Century* by Black Hawk Hancock

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To Lisa, Lucy and in memory of Matthew

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John Fiske, 1995

Learning How to Fiske

THEORIZING CULTURAL LITERACY, COUNTER-HISTORY, AND THE POLITICS OF MEDIA EVENTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

> The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.[1]
>
> Michel Foucault

As former students of John Fiske, the question we would always ask was: how does he do that? Specifically, how does John undertake his cultural analysis in a way that is both theoretically driven and empirically rich? What we really wanted to know was how to think like John Fiske.[2] This introduction intends to be an elaboration of some of the facets of his thinking which continue to serve as a model for others to emulate.

Media Matters is a practical guide to learning how to interpret the ways that media events shape the social landscape, to contest official and taken-for-granted accounts of how events are presented/conveyed through media, and to effect social change by putting intellectual labor to public use. *Media Matters* takes us to the heart of social inequality and the call for social justice by interrogating some of the most important issues of its time. Since *Media Matters* is Fiske's most sociological and empirically rich book, and the most accessible and public-audience oriented, the aim of this new introduction is to provide the theoretical and methodological tools with which he approaches cultural analysis. In doing so, it will map out the theoretical framework in *Media Matters* and the lessons we can continue to draw upon for understanding society today.

In short, this introduction will provide a guide to thinking and analyzing like John Fiske, tying these broader concerns together as a backdrop against which to read *Media Matters*. This introduction also aims to introduce Fiske's late work to a new generation, while at the same time encouraging those who are already familiar with his work to revisit material that has been out of print for some time.[3] In doing so, it contributes to John Fiske's ongoing significance and legacy, and to us his students, a musing on the art he gave us, the elusive art we must all continue to study and master, the art of learning "How to Fiske."

The introduction is separated into three interrelated parts: Part one reflects on cultural literacy—how we learn to critically "read" or interpret media events in relation to the larger society around us and to key shifts in the social landscape since the publication of *Media Matters* that readers must keep in mind as we practice cultural literacy today. Part two explores Fiske's engagement with the work of Michel Foucault, specifically the issues of discourses, counter-histories, and counter-knowledges—as necessary for understanding a multicultural society structured in inequality and racial domination. Part three reflects on the politics of media events and the possibilities for effecting social change through intellectual labor.

It is necessary to remember that Fiske is very much a thinker like Michel Foucault in both breadth and depth. As a result, we cannot simply read his books as standalone volumes apart from the rest of his oeuvre. We must read the articles, interviews, and occasional pieces to help us better understand the books. This is a very important strategy in learning "How to Fiske," since the corpus is of a whole. While the books provide us with greater access to the big ideas, it was often in the shorter, or more specialized, pieces where the crystallization of his ideas was worked out. These pieces deepen our appreciation of the books, insofar as they supplement them in that they often contain alternative or different articulations of ideas we encounter in the books. Therefore, I will quote from these materials in several places and allow his own words to best speak for him.

CULTURAL ANALYSIS AS CULTURAL LITERACY

Cultural literacy is not simply the ability to understand and participate within a given culture; rather it is the ability to interrogate how media "matter" in our everyday lives and the ways media construct our political reality. In addition, cultural literacy requires us to analyze how media serve as conduits for deep social conflicts in society. Therefore, we must interpret media in relation to larger questions of social inequality and the ideological apparatuses that reproduce inequalities. Cultural literacy is never fully "accomplished" as if it were a subject over which one gained mastery; rather

it is the ongoing intellectual labor that one constantly engages in by grappling with the multiple "structures of feeling"—the dominant, residual, and emergent cultural currents—that shape society. Following Fiske, we must begin by considering all aspects of culture as "political" in that the production of meaning is always a contested site of social struggle through which the social order can be reproduced, but also questioned, critiqued, challenged, and changed.

MEDIA EVENTS

Central to Fiske's cultural literacy is the ability to interpret what he refers to as "media events." Media events shape contemporary life; media events give definition to a particular historical moment in society. As media have fundamentally changed our social relations in contemporary society, we can no longer rely on a "real" event vs. a "media" event distinction. Media events blur the distinction between media and reality. Media no longer produce secondary or supplemental images about reality for us; media now produce the very reality they mediate:

> On the contrary, images produce a more urgent (though necessarily more unstable) reality than events themselves. Images which once stood in for a reality outside themselves, now increasingly displace that reality altogether. Images become our primary reality. Their exponential multiplication gives rise to the "defection" of reality and referentiality everywhere. Screens and images invade more and more of the territories within which we conduct our lives.
>
> (Fiske and Glynn 1995: 507)

As media images saturate our society, differences and distinctions become eradicated or eroded. Where once media and reality were separated, they have now become one and the same as media define reality itself through the production of their own self-referential images:

> In an image-saturated society, where media images come increasingly from a diverse array of sources—file footage, computer generation, Hollywood films, 'photo ops' (where the 'real' event exists solely for the purpose of media image generation), reenactment, and so on—the distinction between 'true' and 'false' or 'real' and 'unreal' images becomes difficult to sustain, if not entirely meaningless.
>
> (Fiske and Glynn 1995: 509)

As the sources for the production of images proliferate, the notion of an "independent" reality is obsolete. Media determine all significance and

meaning through the entertainment codes, norms, and aesthetic values of media culture. In a media-saturated culture, distinctions of truth and false, real and unreal, objective and subjective become increasingly difficult to maintain. While he sees this as problematic, he does not succumb to a pessimistic viewpoint that society has completely "imploded" into the "hyperreal" where the world is nothing but images. While traditional notions of truth, reality, reason, and knowledge may no longer hold as they once did, they are still very much a part of the critical ways we go about discussing and analyzing the cultural conditions within which we find ourselves.

Media events structure our understanding of who and what we are as a society. As media events become highly visible spectacles that dominate the public consciousness, they draw maximum attention and become shared reference points for people across the social landscape. While spectacles, media events are never unidimensional; nor does the public passively consume them. Media events become flashpoints where the underlying currents of social life boil over into the mainstream of society. As events, they crystallize the deep anxieties, conflicts, and contradictions in society that are often passed over in mainstream media or excluded from official channels of information. As a result, media events become highly contested cultural and political moments that reveal a multiplicity of perspectives, and conflicting interpretations as to their meaning and significance. While media events are highly contested issues, they are also ephemeral and fade from public attention as new events occur and take their place in the public eye. What is most important is not the event itself, but the struggles that exist underneath the events, which continue on long after any one media event occurs. While the social clashes exposed in media events could lead to a political pessimism, they are rather opportunities for public debate and social engagement. As flashpoints of cultural struggles, media events are also potential points of political intervention and political contestation opening up areas of dialogue in the public sphere.

While the media events analyzed in *Media Matters* may have occurred in the 1990s, structurally similar events, particularly those centered on policing the black body, have occurred frequently throughout the 2010s. The heart of *Media Matters* has remained relevant over time—the methodological tools and theoretical frameworks help us to navigate the social landscape through which all media events (past or present) can be analyzed. We can draw upon the examples presented here as mirrors and foils to think about society today. As media platforms have proliferated since the first edition of *Media Matters*—with the development of smart phones, dashboard cameras, police body cameras, the internet, social networking sites, tablets, mp3 files, streaming, and virtual information storage—media are now more pervasive throughout society than ever. As a result, *Media Matters* remains just as

relevant as when it was originally published and has become possibly more important today.

STRUCTURE(S) OF FEELING

Media Matters provides an analytical framework for dissecting the politics of everyday life, for interrogating the cultural currents that run throughout society, and for critiquing the ways that media shape and circulate knowledge through society. Analyzing media events necessitates that we attend to what cultural theorist Raymond Williams terms "the structure of feeling" of our society—that is the understanding of what it feels like to be a member of a particular society in a particular point in time.[4] Drawing on Williams, Fiske argues that we must always view culture as constantly in flux; culture is a dynamic unfolding amalgamation of processes and practices, a mixture that emerges, becomes dominant, and then eventually fades over time. As a result, we can see the world in terms of multiple temporalities. Culture is never completely coherent or integrated; rather, culture is the process of carrying on some traditions, reworking others, and inventing new ones. Culture is at once past, present, and future. It is the diachronic nature of culture that allows it to be something over which to be struggled. Denying cultural homogenization or universalization, people can always work within their specific material conditions to fashion ways of life of their own making. Although the dominant classes may exert inordinate influence over society, we are never completely dominated. Because the past informs the present, we may draw on resources from that past, shaping the present and future with them. As a result, the temporality of culture provides the opportunities for people to contest taken-for-granted assumptions and viewpoints in society. Therefore, the dominant, the residual, and the emergent are categories to capture and describe the ways that the social order can always be contested. Residual values and expressions can come to be oppositional to the dominant understandings and social organization, and emergent forms might also produce new meanings and practices that effect social change.

According to Fiske, culture is always political, as people can always find tools to resist the colonizing forces of capitalist society, the forces that seek to exclude and eradicate different ways of life from that of the dominant social order. No dominant order can ever exhaust the practices, intentions, energies, and capacities that human beings bring to bear on their worlds.

The cultural analysis of media events must always be an examination of specific times and places, of everyday practices, experiences, and representations in the material conditions of their production. The "structure of feeling" is a way to bridge our own personal experiences in relation to the social structures and historical formations within which we are situated. In

this sense, Fiske emphasizes how *feeling*—the meaning, values, and practices lived and felt by those who are caught up in them—has a *structure* that pulls together people's social experiences and articulates them in terms of shared outlooks and values. The notion of a structure of feeling is important in that it articulates how people infused their worlds with meanings that are never fully determined by the dominant social order. The structure of feeling serves to express subjectivities, communities, and ways of life that can never be integrated fully into the social order. Through the analysis of media events, Fiske reveals an unstable multiplicity of smaller structures of feeling in which different social formations, experiences, and perspectives are expressed. While these smaller structures of feeling may differ from the dominant social order, they are always situated in relation to that dominant order. Therefore the structure of feeling(s) is always a terrain of struggle, in terms of the ways in which social relations and social institutions are defined and structured.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THE STRUCTURE(S) OF FEELING

As we learn to become more culturally literate, we must also become attuned to a number of societal changes that have occurred as we entered the 21st century within which any analysis of media events must be situated. Fiske identified changes in three interrelated domains in which the global changes associated with postmodernism were to be analyzed in the contemporary multicultural society of the United States:

> The first is that of the social order and the social formations that compose it, and here the key words are diversity and multiculturalism; the second is that of economics, where the operations of late capitalism can be characterized as post-Fordist; and the third is that of culture, whose ways of knowing and whose cultural products are typically known as postmodernist. To simplify, we might say that multiculturalism operates in the social order as post-Fordism does in the economic, and post-modernism in culture.
>
> (Fiske 1996b: 45)

These changes in the social, economic, and cultural orders have redefined the structure(s) of feeling in American society. While these three shifts are tightly interwoven and affect each other, they occur at different speeds, are always contested, and are never clear-cut. As a result they each warrant analysis in order to better understand the consequences of these shifts for the analysis of media events and the politics of everyday life.

MULTICULTURALISM

As Fiske argues about multiculturalism and diversity in relation to the social order:

> The globalization of capital and its correlative global movement of labor are rapidly turning the European derived societies of the West into multiethnic, multicultural ones. Globalization always provokes localization and one result of these countervailing forces has been the erosion of the nation state from outside by globalization and from within by subnational localization. The subnational conflicts, often between ethnic groups, that are a related feature of the weakening of the nation state continue to produce huge flows of refugees that increase the transnational movement of people. Diaspora, exile, and immigration constitute the normality of a global society . . . And if we realize that those who do not migrate still experience the social effects of migration, then we can say with some certainty that everyone will experience an increasingly fluid and changing social order, and that unstable, multiethnic societies will become the norm that we have to learn to cope with.
>
> (Fiske 1996b: 45)

The issue of diversity and multiculturalism is one that is reconstituting the very social organization of society. With the shifts in capital, labor, and people, the United States is becoming more and more diversified. As a result, previous stable structures, such as nation states, have given way to more porous and flexible social orders. At both the global and local levels, the migrations of people inevitably bring conflict and competition over resources. As a result, multiculturalism and the instability that comes with this new pluralism in the social order is now the reality we must confront. As a result, this necessarily means we must move from a model of society built around a broadly shared consensus of ideas, priorities, and values to one around multiple points of consent in order to account for the diversity that is constitutive of that social order. Only through making multiculturalism both central to our thinking about society and central to our politics can we hope to gain any purchase on achieving social cohesion and reducing, if not eliminating, the mechanisms that structure societies in inequalities.

POST-FORDISM

According to Fiske, the economic realm of late capitalism can be characterized by the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism:

> Globalism is always countered by localism, and as capitalism increased its efficiency and distributed its products ever more widely and rapidly it gave

> the countervailing tendency towards diversity something to fight against. But, true to its nature, capitalism spotted a market in what appeared to oppose it, and Post-Fordism rapidly diversified its products and their marketing in order to incorporate this tendency. Post-Fordist tendencies, then, are pushing the United States towards a capitalism of multiple, diverse, and short-lived products produced for multiple, diverse, and fluid markets.
>
> (Fiske 1996b: 50)

Under the previous economic order of Fordism, capitalism sought to maximize profits by having its products appeal to the broadest possible audience. In doing so, it worked by constructing a homogenizing commonality across all spheres of life. Fordist capitalism worked through mass marketing and mass production that denied differences of all kinds (class, gender, race, etc.), in order to maximize efficiency and minimize the forms of the commodities produced. In response to the changing global order, post-Fordism has abandoned mass marketing and mass production in order to cultivate market segmentation and niche production. Where once homogeneity reigned, now diversification generates products for diverse locales and multiple and fluid markets. Just as the social order has been reorganized through diversification, a parallel shift in the economic order is seen.

POSTMODERNISM

Fiske argues that the cultural realm is defined by postmodernist cultural products and modes of understanding:

> While what postmodernism is continues to elude anchorage, there is an emerging set of issues which most users of the word would agree are ones with which it centrally engages. One of these is the image saturation of late capitalist society that has volatized any notion of a stable and singular reality principle. In these conditions, truth loses its finality and objectivity, multiplies and becomes a process of constant resimulation and contestation. Television has no problems in coping with these symptoms of post-modernity; for, in deluging us with images more comprehensively than any other medium, it is responsible for producing those symptoms rather than responding to them.
>
> (Fiske and Glynn 1995: 505)

Postmodernism defines the conditions whereby culture has shifted from a single coherent understanding of society to a multiplicity of competing and conflicting perspectives. In postmodernism, images are no longer direct reflections or representations whose meanings are self-evident (Fiske 1997). As a result, previously shared foundational notions of truth, objectivity, and

hierarchies of understanding and representation get called into question. The ways that knowledge is constituted becomes a political issue in itself. The constant resimulation of images that media produce only serves to further disorient us. As media platforms expand, society is ever more inundated with images and more efficient and effective technologies have emerged for producing more and more images. However, postmodernism only helps explain the top-down disciplinary regulation and organization of society. What postmodernism doesn't do is:

> say what the people do with the signifiers they have torn away from the ideological signified. But the process doesn't stop there, they then go on to do something with them, and what they do with them is not postmodern at all. They relate them very securely to their immediate conditions of existence, to the immediate conditions of their everyday life. There is no infinitely deferred meaning in the lives of the people, there are very securely grounded meanings in the conditions in which they live.
>
> (Fiske 1993b: 54)

What is more important than the media saturation of society is the ways that people interpret media and the ways they put those interpretations to use in meaningful ways in everyday life. While the social space of contemporary society may be an unending stream of media images that appears chaotic, analyzing society from the bottom up highlights the concrete and grounded conditions within which people make sense of and stabilize that flux. As a result, the analysis of media events becomes ever more important in helping us negotiate these cultural shifts in society today.

DIAGNOSTIC THINKING

These shifts in the social, economic, and cultural have opened up a multiplicity of understandings, perspectives, and ways of life that are not always compatible and congruent. As such, we can see Fiske as a diagnostic thinker who seeks to understand the contemporary reality in which we live—the structures of feeling—and one who offers practical modes of intervention into that reality.[5] Fiske's mode of analysis is always one that is self-reflexive in that media events are always to be interpreted in the context of their historical conditions. *Media Matters* offers us a diagnostic framework to unearth the cultural currents that give rise to the politics of everyday life in the media events that momentarily crystallize them. This diagnostic illuminates the ways media events can reaffirm top-down hegemonic or ideological positions, but also opens those positions up to interrogation. By doing so, this expands our notion of the political by demonstrating how media events are

never straightforward and are always in need of analysis. Media events must be analyzed in terms of their specific contexts, and how different social positions in society render them intelligible and meaningful. Ultimately, media events reveal the complexity of social life and the social inequalities within which our contemporary society is structured.

COUNTER-HISTORY AND COUNTER-KNOWLEDGE

To fully appreciate Fiske's mode of analysis, we must turn to his engagement with the work of Michel Foucault. While he draws heavily on Foucault, especially *Discipline and Punish*, in his book *Power Plays Power Works*, where he works with Foucault's notions of power, bodies and resistance, there is another, although less explicit, Foucault that runs throughout *Media Matters*.[6] This Foucault focuses on the historical construction of truth/knowledge that circulates in societies. Here Foucault's notion of "discourse" and "effective history" are drawn on to theorize the discontinuities in events and multiple interpretations that can be made of them, and to think against hegemonic representations and taken-for-granted assumptions about society.

Extending Foucault, Fiske draws out the multi-discursive and multicultural nature of contemporary society to emphasize the constant contestation by which dominant forms of knowledge and discourse seek to repress, marginalize, and invalidate other forms. The emphasis on "multi," rather than "plural," illuminates the multiple, competing, and non-consensual positions and points of view that exist in contemporary society. By exploring the power dynamics in society and by looking at the ways that the dominant discourses and narratives are constructed, "effective" counter-histories and counter-knowledges challenge the dominant point of view. Because knowledge and discourse are social products with political consequences for societies structured in inequality, they are always terrains of struggle over meaning and representation. Since the political power of "effective" counter-histories and counter-knowledges is not self-evident, Fiske engages in hard intellectual labor to document how power relations are always both productive and repressive, depending on how they are put to use.

DISCOURSE

Fiske argues for an analytical approach to the study of culture, one which moves beyond ideology:

> I suppose the problem with ideology for me is its traditional Marxist use, which is very much a homogenous, top-down way of knowledge. And the more my focus has changed towards how people actually live in capitalism, the more I see that there is an enormous diversity of cultures amongst the subordinate. People live in very different ways, they make very different sense out of the social system that they share. So the first thing that ideology can't do, is account for diversity, and the second thing is to account for what people bring to their lives from their own particular social histories, something that lies outside the reach of ideology. No ideology theory has the room for the people to bring to their lives something that is theirs, that is different. And again, I have become more and more aware of that. So I'm working much more now with notions of discourse, with Foucauldian ideas of knowledge and power, but taking it further than Foucault does, a lot further, by trying to see how there are alternative bottom-up power systems that contest and clash with the much more homogenous top-down one.
>
> (Fiske 1993b: 54)

While the concept of ideology has become central to the study of media, the homogeneous and top-down aspects of ideology offer little analytical utility to explain the diversity and complexity of everyday life. Drawing on Foucault, Fiske argues that discourse is the repertoire of words, images, and practices by which meaning is established and circulated throughout society. Discourse is always constructed from a particular social location out of which it makes sense of the world, and therefore serves the interests of that social location. As a discourse circulates, takes hold, and becomes authoritative or taken for granted, it becomes the accepted way of viewing the world. In being legitimated, discourse becomes knowledge. As a result, discourse is always intertwined with power, since discourse becomes a tool through which social and political beliefs, practices, ideologies, subject positions, and norms can be mediated and instantiated. It is the power of discourse to impose ways of knowing over others in society—where discourse, power, and knowledge converge—that is central to the analysis of media events.[7]

As a result, the way that events are constituted, put into discourse, and made sense of is never straightforward:

> To take an American example (I work in the States now) which is very clear: You remember what went on in the streets of L.A. after the Rodney King verdict? Was that a riot, or an uprising, or a rebellion? If we call it a riot, that puts it in one discursive frame which suggests that it was criminal, it was social disorder. If we call it an uprising, it suggests that it's another discursive frame, another discourse, there was a point to it, there was some organization, it was against something and it wasn't just disorder. So the word "riot" and the word "uprising" come from quite different discourses, ways of talking about an event. So discourse is extremely important. No social event proscribes what discourse we use to describe it, it's our choice as users of language. And the

> way we make the choice of which discourse to put a particular event in, is an extremely important thing to understand.
>
> (Fiske 2000: 2)

It is the ways that media events are made sense of that is important. The sense-making process is one of conflict, as differing interpretations of events clash in their constant struggle to be the definitive or dominant understanding. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the ways that dominant discourses operate to repress, marginalize, or silence other discourses/knowledges that would contest that viewpoint.

Extending Foucault's concepts of discourse–power–knowledge illuminates the ways that top-down dominant perspectives are always met with conflicting and differing perspectives emanating from the bottom up that seek to contest the dominant discourses' legitimacy of framing the world in a particular way. Focusing on these bottom-up discourses/knowledges provides an analytical framework for analyzing the diversity, plurality, and heterogeneity of everyday life. Dominant discourses are those that occupy the mainstream of society, serve the interests of the dominant classes, and therefore serve to structure society in inequality. Discourse must always be regarded as a terrain of struggle whereby the contest to define events is constitutive of the politics of everyday life.

The struggle over the meanings of media events is part of the social struggles of society. Therefore two key points are central to how media events are analyzed and interpreted:

> The first thing, obviously, is that there is no such thing as a single meaning of a text. The second thing is, that interpretational criticism is part of the struggle for meaning. Interpretation is not a neutral, a naive, or an objective act. It is part of the process, so that we need to be explicit that the way in which we are interpreting is a politicized and theoretical way, and that it contests other ways. So I will then say that the text itself then should be seen as a resource, a semiotic resource.
>
> (Fiske 1993b: 59)

In analyzing media events, Fiske assembles all the texts around that event (from multiple television transcripts to news footage, political speeches, etc.) in order to reconstruct both the dominant and alternative perspectives/discourses/knowledges that exist simultaneously around that event. This assemblage works to document particular moments when different knowledges come into contestation, not in abstractions but as particular concrete instances where knowledge is put into practice in everyday life. In doing so, Fiske seeks out the local knowledges that question the dominant interpretation of events, by

reading like an archeologist across the contemporary landscape of events, as well as a genealogist by putting those events into historical chains and contexts out of which they emerged. Out of these reconstructions, counter-histories and counter-knowledges that exist underneath the dominant perspectives are revealed and explored.

COUNTER-HISTORY

Following Foucault, a counter-history, or an "effective history," is one which has four key components. It 1) counters traditional history through revealing the particularities of events and their socializing effects upon bodies (both individual bodies and the collective social body); 2) inverts traditional history's priority of distancing itself from its objects, and instead studies what is closest to us (our bodies and the embodiment of our historical period); 3) emphasizes multiplicity and discontinuity over the homogenizing grand narrative trend of traditional history; 4) contains itself to its own perspective and without aspiring to establish itself as the objective viewpoint (it is effective for bodies in that those bodies are made explicit in that history). Counter-history serves as a corrective or alternative to the official history, or the history that has been institutionalized by the dominant groups in society (the power bloc).

Counter-history assembles experiences and historical events in order to reveal the workings of power relations in society and how those power relations structure societies in inequalities:

> There can be no singular counter-history, for its effectiveness is dependent upon the conditions of the body—of the individual through to the social—that constructs it as it is only in those conditions that its effectiveness can be traced . . . where social power is meticulously inscribed upon the body and which, as a result, embody an "affect," an intensity of feeling whereby the social forces of history are experienced in the body and its senses; in their retelling, such events evoke in the bodies of their listeners traces of those original experiences.
>
> (Fiske 1996a: 188–189)

Counter-history illuminates the effects of those power relations upon bodies, revealing how those bodies have been subjugated, exploited, excluded, marginalized, or silenced. In addition, counter-history reveals the social formations and social positions to which those bodies have been relegated. The focus on the body emphasizes how power relations are not simply conceptual, regulating the mind, but also physical in that our socialization is also always embodied as well.

Counter-history is the embodiment of past experiences that serve as a reservoir of knowledge that has been omitted from the official record. Counter-history gathers those past experiences and articulates them, connecting the past to the present, in an effort to affect the present. Counter-history challenges the production and legitimacy of truth and knowledge by calling into question what official history erases, represses, denies, or excludes. Counter-history is "effective" in that it is functional in giving articulation to a multiplicity of voices, understandings, and experiences that official history tries to silence in its homogeneity:

> Collecting, recording, and documenting information is an urgent concern of the power bloc, as information remains essential to its social control. Selectively documenting others while excluding them from the process of documentation is a strategy of disempowerment against which effective history struggles. The knowledge of the power bloc, with all its technologies and institutionalization of literacy and numeracy, of information collection, storage, and retrieval, necessarily produces more socially powerful truths than those of disenfranchised social formations who are systematically denied equal access to those technologies and institutions of knowledge.
>
> (Fiske 1996a: 191–192)

Counter-history reveals the embodied experiences and truths of the disempowered that have been omitted from the official record. As such, it highlights the ways in which events, objects, statements, are never self-evident, but are always interpreted, articulated, and put into particular contexts. In doing so, the objectivity of official history, as the production of institutionalized knowledge, is undermined and shown to be the ideology of the dominant groups that govern society. Counter-history not only reveals alternative ways of knowing and subordinated experiences, it also illuminates the material, economic, and technological disparities for circulating information between groups. Counter-history is never as strong as the dominant history, nor does it seek to replace the dominant history as the only truth of the world; rather counter-history works to be "effective" as it is constructed and operates to provide documentation and testimony to subjugated positions in society. As a result, the contestation between official history and counter-histories is one which always cuts across social, cultural, and political-economic realms of society.

COUNTER-KNOWLEDGE

Counter-history produces counter-knowledges, which inform the present and create competing ways of interpreting the world. Counter-knowledges seek to reposition and reinterpret the facts of the dominant knowledge:

> Facts never exist independently or in isolation but rather in articulation with others. Their very facticity is a function and product of their discursive relations. Reusing them, therefore, involves disarticulating them from one set of relations and rearticulating them into another. They are never simply inert, like pebbles on a beach, waiting to be picked up by whoever finds them first. While no fact has any essential existence or meaning of its own, it always has the potential for dis- and rearticulation. Evaluating a fact's significance, which always involves assessing both how much it matters and what it means, is, thus, a matter of evaluating its potential articulations, their social location and pattern of interests, and their predicted or interpreted effectivity. The constitution of a historical fact is an articulation. Stealing facts, therefore, involves dis-articulation.
>
> (Fiske 1996a: 204–205)

The formation of knowledge or counter-knowledge, the ways that people understand themselves and their social relations, is always a matter of constructing a set of meanings. Since facts are never self-evident, knowledge is always a process of production in the interests of a group situated within a social system of power relations. Facts are resources that are linked together—articulated—within specific social contexts for particular ideologies, politics, and practices. This process requires a constant and ongoing articulation, disarticulation, and rearticulation of facts in the construction of knowledge. Since facts are always open to disarticulation and rearticulation, we can see how the classes that dominate social relations attempt to dominate the production of meaning/knowledge. Writing a counter-history/counter-knowledge requires "stealing" or the rearticulation of facts for the interests and effectiveness of a group's social location. Challenging those dominant meanings and rearticulating them in a counter-knowledge is what enables those groups to assert and attempt to preserve identities of their own self-definition and self-understanding.

THE POLITICS OF MEDIA EVENTS: INTELLECTUAL LABOR AND SOCIAL CHANGE

> All my work is in one way or another concerned with problems of analyzing how it is that meanings circulate within capitalist societies divided by class, gender, race and all sorts of other divisions, and how we can trace these meanings at work. More recently, my emphasis has been much more on investigating those aspects of the circulation of meanings, which might function as a destabilizing force in society and as an agent of social change. Ten years ago, if you had asked me that question, I would have put the emphasis on the

> other side of the coin, that is, on how the circulation of meanings favors the status quo and works to stabilize society in the interests of a minority with power. Now my epistemological, and therefore political, interest has shifted quite diametrically, although I do not think that it contradicts my earlier work. I think it complements it actually.
>
> (Fiske 1990: 4)

The analyses which run throughout *Media Matters* are critical-political interventions into contemporary life; they document not only the ways that scholarship can help us understand real-world events, but also how intellectual labor can inform our sense of social justice as well as our intellectual understandings of social morphology and social inequalities. Fiske's cultural literacy, counter-history, and counter-knowledge lead directly to the third aspect of his intellectual project, that of politics and the intellectual labor to help effect social change. Therefore, it is necessary to highlight his concern and project for social change so that we can see how *Media Matters* offers theoretical, methodological, and empirical tools for illuminating and dismantling the mechanisms that structure society in terms of domination and inequality.

Fiske writes that critical cultural analysis must always be theoretically driven:

> Theory can help to cultivate a social dimension within interior or fantasized resistances, to link them to social experiences shared with others and thus discourage them from becoming merely individualistic; theory can situate the specificities of everyday life within a conceptual framework that can enhance the awareness of their political dimensions. It can thus facilitate their transformation into a more collective consciousness, which may, in turn, be transformed into more collective social practice.
>
> (Fiske 2010d: 173)

Theory is used to make connections across the social landscape and reveal the structures and mechanisms of society, as well as the shared ways of life within which people are engaged, so as not to view social life in atomistic terms. For Fiske, theory contextualizes the specificities of everyday life and illuminates the often latent political dimensions within those contexts, providing new perspectives and opening up new possibilities. Furthermore, theory provides a shared conceptual language to speak across different social formations and social positions. By doing so, theory can both cultivate a collective consciousness and be put into service for informing social practices. Theory provides the analytical tools to critique hierarchies and relations of domination and subordination that become embedded in

social structures and social institutions in order to interrogate, to transform, and to overturn them.

In Fiske's work, theory played a strategic role in doing cultural analysis. Theory was never used for the sake of theorizing; rather it was always used to figure out "what's going on." In relating theory to popular culture, theory was always to serve the struggles against the power bloc:

> The challenge offered by popular culture, however, comes from outside the social, cultural, and academic terrain: the structure of this essay around the antagonism between dominant and popular culture is intended to emphasize this challenge and to help resist its incorporation. If, as a result, I am charged with oversimplifying the dominant, then this is a price that my academic politics lead me to think is worth paying.
>
> (Fiske 1991: 115)

Theory was only and always evaluated in terms of its effectiveness; if a theory didn't help figure out "what's going on," then he wouldn't use it. As a result, he used theory strategically to dramatize power relations in society and the ways that power could be resisted and struggled against. Applying theory to cultural analysis was always undertaken by evaluating theory in terms of how analytically insightful or innovative it could be.

In undertaking cultural analysis, Fiske refused to accept that academics were relegated to ivory towers and that their work was necessarily disconnected from the public sphere. Rather, intellectual labor contributed to the critique of the dominant regime of truth, and advanced a more democratic society. In this sense, Fiske embodied the public intellectual in his scholarship, teaching, mentoring, and friendship:

> "The public intellectual," then, is a function in a process, rather than a named individual, and "public intellectualizing" can be understood as the process of rearticulating selected knowledges—dominant, local, and counter—that constitute and contest the current regime of truth, and of relaying onward whatever newly effective, critical, and jolting knowledge may result. The teacher is, of course, one important embodiment of the public intellectual and the classroom one of the most effective relay stations. As relay, then, public intellectualizing is one stage in a process that many must join: for public articulation is a social process, within which individual discursive agency, whether exercised as author or teacher, may be necessary, but is neither sufficient nor definitive.
>
> (Fiske 1996a: 209)

Public intellectuals forge alliances across social positions, around recognized social interests, and try to activate that recognition to generate further

discussion. Forging alliances is a process of connecting public intellectuals to organic intellectuals outside of academia that are interdependent, ahierarchical, and ideally mutually supportive. The goal of the public intellectual is not to offer their solutions to other people's problems; rather it is to listen to potential allies' points of view and experiences to gain a richer understanding of any particular social formation. While public intellectuals may operate in a small arena, they can help enlarge the public sphere by forging alliances "to make sure, as far as possible, conditions for forming connections or communities across social differences are encouraged" and by undertaking critical cultural analysis which could "help and motivate people to figure out what's going on . . . in order to identify places where they may contribute in such a way as to make it better" (Gabriel 1997: 18).

Social change was never going to be easy and was always thought of as a long-term project:

> I'm a highly political person myself. My motivation, I suppose, has changed over the years. At one time it was closer to a fairly regular Marxist sort of desire to change capitalism. The desire to change is still there, but I don't think now that capitalism is vulnerable to overthrow. It's too flexible, it's too good at doing what it does well, which is maintaining its own power. So I think it's more vulnerable to change on the micro level, change from within, evolution from within, a gradual shifting rather than a revolution.
>
> (Fiske 1993b: 52)

The enduring strength of capitalism as a political-economic system led to a change in Fiske's thinking about how social change could occur. Rather than thinking about a mass-scale revolution as the key to forging a better society, as was once popular amongst leftist academics, instead he took on a more pragmatic and strategic vision of social reform. Gradual shifts and changes from within the system that occur at the local level, in the analysis of media events and in the politics of everyday life, may prove to be more effective. However, he cautioned that the politics of everyday life are never sufficient on their own to create social change. Everyday life is political, and those politics can be, and often are, possibilities for progressive change. Fiske always advocated for the potential or progressive elements within media events and the possible political ends to which people could put them to use. While he cautioned that the analysis of media events and popular culture alone would not produce radical change in society, there were always interventions and resources that could advance society toward being a more democratic world. As a result, reading *Media Matters* is essential for coming to terms with "what is going on" today.

ON LEARNING HOW TO FISKE

While the intellectual contributions Fiske offered extend far beyond the limitations of an introduction, I have hoped to convey some of the most important found here in *Media Matters*. In his written work, his teaching, his mentoring, and his life, he taught us, his students, to critically question and interrogate the world around us. Just as Foucault sought to fight against the political violence of institutions, Fiske emboldened us to never give in to apathy, determinism, or pessimism in any of their guises in either our work or our lives. He inspired us all to try, as best as we could, in learning the art of "How to Fiske."

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NOTES

1 Foucault (2006: 41).
2 A preliminary version of this introduction was given at "FISKE Matters: A Conference on John Fiske's Continuing Legacy for Cultural Studies," Madison, Wisconsin, June 11–12, 2010.
3 For a reflection on the enduring legacy of Fiske's work, see Henry Jenkins's essay "Why Fiske Still Matters," in Fiske (2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d).
4 Williams (1978).
5 I take the term "diagnostic" thinking from the political philosophy of Hans Sluga. For a comprehensive genealogy of this approach to the political, see Sluga (2014).
6 See Fiske (1993a).
7 For an extension of Fiske's use of discourse, see Hancock (2013).

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INTRODUCTION

EVENTS AND A METAPHOR

In its review of 1992, *Life* called it "a year dominated by a presidential race, a firestorm in L.A. and a single mom named Murphy."[1] The election of the president of the United States and the costliest urban uprisings in this nation's stormy history would conventionally be considered historic events, but the birth of a baby to the unmarried heroine of a sitcom hardly appears, at first sight, to be of the same order of significance. Yet, four months earlier, *Time* had made the same editorial judgment.[2] In May 1992, Murphy Brown's single motherhood was thrust into political prominence when Vice President Dan Quayle identified it as symptomatic of the causes of the L.A. "riots" (see *Sidebar: Dan Quayle,* p. 72). In August, the actress Candice Bergen won an Emmy for her portrayal of Murphy Brown, and in her acceptance speech thanked the vice president for helping her win it. *Time* used Murphy as the peg for a story on the Republican attack on "Hollywood's liberal elite," and strained a simile to bring the Los Angeles "riots" into the discussion: "The gang-stomping of Dan Quayle at the Emmy Awards ceremony two weeks ago resembled a Rodney King beating by the Hollywood elite."[3]

While viewing the unanimity of *Time* and *Life* with the skepticism appropriate to the knowledge that *Time, Life,* and *Murphy Brown* are all owned by the same company, I, like they, view those events as key indices of a crisis in the structure of feeling in the United States. Unlike periodicals, however, a book does not need to confine itself to arbitrary periods such as a calendar year, so I look back a little further than they, to the fall of 1991 and the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings, as a result of which Clarence Thomas won a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court and Anita Hill became a rallying point in the struggles of women and African Americans toward equality.

"Republishing *Media Matters* could not be more timely ... Of Fiske's books, [it] is the one most informed by the particularities of his historical moment but also the most prescient in anticipating the world we now inhabit. Black Hawk Hancock's introduction to this new edition places the work in its theoretical and historical context, explaining why the underlying argument still speaks to contemporary readers, and provides us tools for how we, too, can do cultural analysis as would-be public intellectuals."
Henry Jenkins, *Provost Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts and Education, University of Southern California, USA*

"*Media Matters* is not only a timeless perspective on media culture, but its re-release is made even better by the perspectives of Fiske disciple sociologist Black Hawk Hancock. The lessons shared by the book still ring true, a point that is both unfortunate as a reflection of our current times, yet fortunate for those seeking an in-depth look at media as text."
Darrell M. Newton, *Associate Dean and Professor, The Fulton School of Liberal Arts, Salisbury University, USA*

Now, more than 20 years since its initial release, John Fiske's classic text *Media Matters* remains both timely and insightful as an empirically rich examination of how the fierce battle over cultural meaning is negotiated in American popular culture.

Media Matters takes us to the heart of social inequality and the call for social justice by interrogating some of the most important issues of its time. Fiske offers a practical guide to learning how to interpret the ways that media events shape the social landscape, to contest official and taken-for-granted accounts of how events are presented/conveyed through media, and to effect social change by putting intellectual labor to public use.

A new introductory essay by former Fiske student Black Hawk Hancock entitled "Learning How to Fiske: Theorizing Cultural Literacy, Counter-History, and the Politics of Media Events in the 21st Century" explains the theoretical and methodological tools with which Fiske approaches cultural analysis, highlighting the lessons today's students can continue to draw upon in order to understand society.

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