Everyone's a Critic (So What Comes Next?)

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Abstract

What is the fate of critique – especially media critique – in a social context that widely and enthusiastically embraces criticism and critical approaches? Starting from the position that critique has become a widespread intellectual orientation across both intellectual work and popular cultural engagement, this article discusses how media critique might produce meaningful and productive knowledge when a critical attitude towards the media is widely considered common sense. Arguing against perspectives that would make postcritique the enemy of critique, it suggests that critique would be better able to illuminate the current conjuncture if the aggression of critical suspicion were replaced with a more democratic and reflexive form of critical doubt.

Keywords

Critique, postcritique, media critique, doubt

Critique is almost always an attractive proposition: flattering, fetching, fit for any occasion. It is adept at revealing the myriad forms of power and oppression that can lurk underneath and in the folds of all manner of everyday practices, rituals, platforms, discourses and texts. Faced with a "problematic" object? Simply apply critique to help reveal the malevolent forces and structures – neoliberalism, patriarchy, speciesism, racism, the capitalocene, the dominant order, the deep state – that lurk beneath even the most benign of everyday objects. Not only does critique promise to advance our

knowledge of the world, but it can also be understood as a meaningful political act that exposes the secret workings of power that contribute to inequality and oppression (which isn't even to mention how it can help you look smart in front of colleagues, friends, and families). To state one's dedication to critique is to present oneself and one's research as taking a stand against what Michael Bérubé refers to as "All Bad Things" (2005: 7): and, conversely, to put one's colleagues on notice that if they are insufficiently critical they might end up on "the wrong side of history" (to coin a phrase). Indeed, sometimes it seems like there's almost no problem that critique can't help solve!

Given its obvious appeal, the widespread adoption of critique across all manner of modes of humanistic, social scientific, and broadly affiliated modes of intellectual practice shouldn't come as a surprise. In the twenty-first century, we're faced with no shortage of critique, critical scholarship and indeed critical attitudes more broadly. From critical management (Grey & Willmott, 2005; Alvesson, Bridgman & Willmott, 2009) to critical animal (Sorenson, 2014; Taylor & Twine, 2014) to critical humour (*mea culpa*) studies (Lockyer and Pickering, 2009; Weaver, 2011), to old standbys such as critical pedagogy (Freire, 2018; Giroux, 2011) and critical discourse analysis (CDA to its friends) (Fairclough, 2013; Van Dijk, 2018), everyone is getting in the act of locating, denouncing, and thereby challenging entrenched systems of power and privilege. Such practice becomes especially important when (best to whisper this part) one fears that one's scholarly work might not act actually, ultimately act upon the world in any discernible way. Perhaps this is why critique has been more enthusiastically embraced in some sections of the academy rather than others (which is empathically *not* to assert that non-critical work is somehow more meaningful or influential) as a soothing balm for the anxieties of those whose activist aspirations and imaginations go unrealised.

This expansion, though, has come at the high cost of any clear sense of what exactly critique and the critical might be. Amidst the proliferation of critical studies, "critical", "critique", and other variations come to signal little more than an orientation towards an oppositional mode of politics that is sometimes supplemented by a passing affinity with the theoretical terminology of a specific generation of Continental thinkers – Marxian, Foucauldian, Lacanian, Deleuzian, even somewhat unexpectedly Derridian –

whose citation helps convey a general sense of learnedness. Further out still, in its popular and vernacular iterations, critique retains many of the rhetorical flourishes and intellectual manoeuvres of those traditions, even as the conceptual vocabularies begin to drop away: leaving at most an impulse to unveil, expose, and call upon others to "wake up" to the dangers and deceptions that encircle them (Holm, 2020; Phelan, 2023).

The irresistible rightness of media critique

Nowhere is this impulse towards critique as a form of diagnostic revelation as apparent or as incontrovertibly applicable as in relation to *the media*. The media is, after all, clearly deserving of critique (especially when addressed in the singular!). At the most basic level, the media as an institution is not just bound up with all manner of legacies of socio-political power but remains, for the most part, implicated in the ongoing perpetuation of those same histories. In its various manifestations, the media is shaped by, most obviously, the operations and priorities of capitalism (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2016; Mosco, 2009), but also the machinations of various nation-states (Lee, 2019; Herman & Chomsky, 2010), the practices and blind spots of different professional bodies (Bourdieu, 1998), and the aesthetic weight of inherited genres and conventions which carry within them all manner of unexamined assumptions and habits of representation (Hall, Evans and Nixon, 2013). Given the importance of the media as a source of widely-distributed common sense, it is little surprise that a broad range of vested interests have worked themselves into positions where they can exert influence upon the form and content of the media.

Moreover, these sociological forces acting upon the media are echoed in the fundamental operations of mediation more broadly. Regardless of intent, to mediate is to modify a message, a meaning, or a representation as a function of the limitations and affordances of a given medium. Content will always be transformed in the process of mediation and in that moment of transformation it is almost inevitable that some form of power will leak in, whether intentional or otherwise. As a result, media are almost invariably going to inflict some form of distortion on that which they mediate and are likely to do so in ways that will serve the interests of one party or another (Hall, 1982). What this means is that media (let alone the terrifying monolith implied by *the* media) are always wrong or at least incomplete, and we are therefore right to be critical.

This should not be a surprise, though, because everyone already knows it. The media, and in particular that aspect of it labelled as the "mainstream media" (MSM to its detractors) has few defenders in contrast to other forms of cultural production, such as literature or theatre. To critique Shakespeare or Roald Dahl is to risk besmirching the integrity of a global treasure. To critique any given TV news network, let alone the sitting ducks of social media, as beholden to shadowy forces that don't have the public's best interest at heart, is to enter into a conversation with which almost everyone is already familiar (even if they are not always in total agreement as to the exact nature and balance of those forces). Not only are very few willing to go out to defend the integrity of the media[1], most don't even have the good manners to be scandalised when its vices and failures are revealed.

In the twenty-first century, the media's failures float near the surface where they can be more easily observed and catalogued. In contrast to other fields of specialised knowledge, like, say Sumerian archaeology or quantum chemistry, the problems and power relations of the media ostensibly require little in the way of specialist knowledge or training to get at. On one hand, this is likely to be because the media, in its many manifestations, tends to be so familiar; such an intimate part of all our everyday lives. However, on the other hand, this can also be understood, at least in part, as a result of the success of Media Studies and related fields of study, whose key claims have found acceptance and resonance with the general public, albeit in somewhat wild and sometimes unexpected forms (Holm, 2020: 155). Nowadays, not only does everyone apparently already know all about the media, they also know that it is as venal as it is powerful. Consequently, little is thought to be required in the way of formal training to mount a resonant media critique: reading against the grain turns out to be going with the flow.

Which raises the question of why then, given what at times can appear as a universal contempt and suspicion for the media, do we need to discover its flaws again (and again and again)? Media critique is in danger of growing stale, like a magic trick with no surprise, or a repeated diagnosis with no cure ("what we need to acknowledge is how the whole thing is shot through with power relations"). The problem here is not that media critique is wrong, but that as traditionally practiced, it no longer seems to be able to tell us or anyone anything new. Instead, it simply threatens to become the

predictable revelation that all objects that full under its scrutiny are *bad*. However, if critique is to count, then it needs to be more than scholarship that takes a negative or politically-predetermined negative view of the status quo: it needs to be more than the repeated revelation of errors that are always known and agreed upon in advance (and the attendant celebration of the critic's ethical fortitude and intelligence in recognizing that error). Critique needs to be able to tell us something we don't already know.

The friend of my friend is my enemy

Given these worrying circumstances, to be concerned about the state of (media) critique is not to be its enemy, but rather to be one of its most steadfast friends: one who is willing to take the time to not just sing its praises and execute its program, but also to check in to make sure that it is still fit for purpose in a rapidly shifting political, cultural, and technological context. This is one way to understand the program of thought often summarised under the name of postcritique, whose purpose I want to suggest is neither to praise critique, nor to bury it, but to think carefully about what it might mean and what it might do in the current conjuncture.

However, postcritique has not always been greeted as a concerned well-wisher to critique: often instead it is denounced as its oedipal foe that seeks to slay and supplant its predecessor. Indeed, many – no doubt still nursing wounds sustained in old conflicts against steadfast administrative or unapologetically positivist foes – demonstrate a stubborn inclination to interpret the term as nothing less than an inexcusable call to surrender arms: to abandon the critical project in favour of descriptive or recuperative scholarship that apologises for the status quo. From this perspective, postcritique appears an abdication of intellectual political duty that is negligent at best, treacherous at worse. Such charges are often premised on singularly ungenerous misreadings of key figures in postcritique, like Bruno Latour (2004) or Rita Felski (2015), that seem to work from the assumption that those authors are not fully versed in the work of the Frankfurt School, or as if these highly theoretically-literate authors were somehow against "theory" in an easy and straightforward way. In their execution, these counter-arguments can often take the form of an almost parodic instance of the critique they seek to defend: unflinchingly aggressive in their prose, strident in their calls for retribution, and seemingly unconcerned with acknowledging any subtlety or merit in the complex texts they seek to rebuke (Leo, 2020; Haker &

Otterspeer, 2020; Tally Jr., 2022). In their attempt to assert mastery over what is perceived as postcritique's critique of critique, such authors provide a powerful illustration of what Latour refers to as 'critical barbarity', where the goal is to destroy the enemy, rather than advance understanding (2004: 240).

A growing sense of doubt

As is often the case, part of the problem has to do with words. Although it feels preposterous that this needs to be stated again, as with all the best posts (postmodernism, postcolonialism, postpolitics), the post in postcritique does not mean that the subject that it is affixed to is over and done with: that somehow modernism, colonialism or, yes, critique have finally finished and we have moved on (Mishra & Hodge, 2005). Rather, as with the previous posts, it means that the conditions of production (both material and intellectual) have changed such that it no longer makes sense to imagine its object in ways that once seemed obvious and necessary. Postcritique thus suggests the possibility of something new regarding the practice of critique: if not outright progress, then at least the chance of moving forward in time by acknowledging the limitations and lessons learnt from the last century of critical thought.

Consequently, given the opposition to postcritique and the enthusiasm in some quarters to characterise it as a form of anti-critique, perhaps a different, more regressive, temporal move is in order to help clarify what is at stake. Rather than moving forward, perhaps we ought to instead look back to the modern origins of "critique". Too often a sense of history is missing in debates over critique and postcritique, which can result in a worryingly absent core to the argument, where critique becomes a term to which everyone wants to lay claim, but which no one can be troubled to define.

In order to do justice to that admittedly very complex problem, I'd suggest we could do worse than cast our gaze back to the work of Immanuel Kant, the central thinker of the Enlightenment, whose presence often sits quietly behind many more recent attempts to pin down the critical. For example, it is to Kant that Theodor Adorno turns in his essay on "Critique", which ends up as a lament for West German political culture, but which begins as an endorsement of Kant's negative emancipation from

not just "dogmatism of rationalistic systems", but also from that which "is urged by others" (1998: 282). For Adorno, this Kantian critique becomes a way for either a system or an individual to achieve a form of political maturity by coming to better know itself and direct its challenges inwards as well as outwards. Or perhaps we might look elsewhere, to the work of Michel Foucault, who, in an extended exegesis of Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" [*Was ist Aufklärung?*] argues that critique is "not so much a matter of what we are undertaking, more or less courageously, than it is the idea we have of our knowledge and its limits" (2007: 49). For Foucault, critique, following Kant, is about how we might "know knowledge" (2007: 50).

What both these accounts share in common, beyond their turn to Kant as an authority, is a concern with critique as not just a practice to be aimed outwards at one's target, but rather as a form of investigation characterised by an awareness of the limitations of knowledge. These limitations apply not only to the object of critique – the "target" – but also to the limits of one's own knowledge which informs that practice of critique. Critique, in this earlier form, is less a practice of suspicion (as it has come to be overwhelmingly characterised following the work of Paul Ricœur [1970]), but more a sustained operation of doubt radiating out in all possible directions. Contrary to suspicion that is directed outwards – in the direction of the ulterior motives and dangerous assumptions of others – doubt is both more narcissistic and more democratic. It has scope to take in everyone: even, especially, the critic. For both Adorno and Foucault, like Kant before them, it was this aspect of critique that made it an essential aspect of a democratic politics because it could lead to self-knowledge, intellectual independence, and a maturity of thought.

Make critique great again

An idea of critique that emphasises doubt over suspicion takes us away from the "interrogation" of the object – which in the twenty-first century almost cannot but evoke CIA black sites and all the accompanying nauseating awfulness – towards a practice that is more curious, and more willing to learn in the encounter, rather than risk imposing an interpretation. Too often what passes for critique emerges from a sense of certainty: the critic already understands how the world works and approaches their object with a set of theoretical tools at hand that will allow it to be neatly unpacked and explained. To be mastered. Latour was right. This is an intellectually

ugly practice, and we can do better (though this needn't mean that we do so in the ways associated with or advocated for by Latour himself). Better that the scalpel of critique be used as a medical implement than as a torture device.

Postcritique is thus not about abandoning critique, but rather how we might make (media) critique great again™. A reclamation of Kantian doubt is one way this might be done by thinking not only about the sins of the object in front of the critic, but the systems of thought that sit behind them. Behind us. Rather than the encounter between a theoretical framework and a media object of analysis almost always leading to the domination and exposure of the latter (or conversely its celebration as a good object!), how might it sometimes lead to a transformation in those initial systems of thought, or those who enact them? How might we acknowledge the ways in which the media and its objects and practices call to us and shape us – maybe even charm and delight us – while still retaining our perspective as critical analysts? Or trickier yet, could it be possible to move from diagnosing and exposing the problems of "media", "mediation" and "the media" to addressing how on earth we might begin to do something about them: a question that is likely to be of particular interest to our students: many of whom study the media because they want to be part of it.

Such new forms of critical practice are likely to be difficult: more difficult than a theoretically-informed takedown of regressive identity politics in reality TV, of Fortnite's implication in the military-industrial complex, of the circulation of reactionary misinformation on social networks or, indeed, of neoliberalism once again (look out, there it is behind you!). Indeed, it *is* difficult to consider how to build better intellectual foundations for our own practice in ways that shape how the media is both researched and taught. However, without this sort of work, critique risks becoming an intellectual orientation that is limited to repeatedly rediscovering what is already known, rather than the expansive, exciting mode of intellectual practice that it ought to be (which is not to say that this type is not already being done, just that it does not often take place under the sign of critique). Situated in terms of this broader challenge, postcritique needs to be understood not as the rejection of critique, nor as the abdication of critical responsibility, but as a timely provocation to reconsider how best to ensure critique endures as an enlivening and enlightening means to engage with our (mediated) world.

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Notes

[1] It should be acknowledged, though, that in practice critical distrust in media is not distributed evenly between national polities or social classes, as is captured in research like that undertaken as part of the Reuters Digital News Survey (Newman et al, 2023). I thank the anonymous peer-reviewer for raising this point.

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