Piracy & Media Studies
"Towards a Pirate Media Studies"
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Media studies hardly needs another subfield to complicate an already amorphous discipline. What I propose as pirate media studies is therefore not about adding another topic, but about enacting an orientation, one that attends to the forgotten, mischaracterized, or disregarded agents that produce, distribute, and consume media in unorthodox ways. One etymology of the word *pirate* traces it back to the old Greek verb *pirao*: to make an attempt, test, get experience, endeavour, or attack. What "pirate" practices can we enact that not only extend the reach of media studies but also, perhaps, critically evaluate its fundamental tenets?

Thinking piratically includes questioning how our methods of research and inquiry replicate certain idea(l)s about authorship, property, and autonomy. Who counts as a media user has long been determined by the established industrial producers of media, shifting scholarship away from the myriad forms that people around the world regularly engage with media. The "shadow," "dark," or "underground" circuits of media are often anything but; their indecipherability remains an epistemological, not an ontological issue. To study the piratical is also to trace a different lineage for media capital and its transnational reach. Even intra-nationally, piratical practices are coded across gender, race, and class lines. The "side hustle," for instance, connotes differently when it refers to work-at-home ventures promoted through Pinterest boards to middle-class users or to selling bootleg CDs outside a food marts in low-income neighborhoods. It also carries vastly different consequences.

The concepts that we (over)rely on as media scholars also need questioning. Participation functions as a catch-all term that obfuscates the distinct modes of involvement between users and media, modes dictated by changing levels of access, interactivity, and inclusion. The street seller who creates a separate cover for his pirated DVD and the fan who creates an unofficial trailer for it both participate in the paratextual ecology of said film, but their aims and effects can vary widely. A simplistic definition of piracy as reproduction that adds no value or novelty fails to account for the ideological implications of who decides what is valuable and what metrics signal novelty. Creativity is always already a contested term.

Finally, accounting for pirate practices in our studies of media reinforces the need for situated analyses because these practices continuously illustrate the instability of any given media text. Different edited versions, subtitle options, and bootleg aesthetics construct various publics for media and demand attentiveness to these historical and geographical contingencies. Situated analyses are also crucial to undoing the fixity of categories. A

hacker can designate a digital freedoms advocate or an information bounty hunter. Trolling can signal a practice of resistance or a form of hegemonic browbeating. Disabusing ourselves of the notion that these categories are static and morally unambiguous is one of the goals of pirate media studies.

Moves towards a piratical orientation to media studies are already underway. The recent work of Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas, for instance, provides a framework for disaggregating the erstwhile binary of the formal and informal into a spectrum of practices and characteristics. It is my contention that such a framework could be further expanded by developing a matrix that includes, for example, an axis for legitimacy and illegitimacy and one for legality and illegality. Media historians and anthropologists reveal that many of the hegemons of contemporary media production began as piratical enterprises, and remain so in many instances. Then why are most of our analyses centered on their legal afterlives? Likewise, while the work of fan and audience studies already points to the variety of ways consumers relate to media products, these fields often presume devotion to or appreciation for an original text. Once the illusion of unfettered access is dismantled, shouldn't our assumptions about the inherent appeal of a media text — as opposed to, say, the contingencies of availability — also be questioned?

Such a move is not without reservations. Taking on any scholarly project that seriously engages practices that remain illegal brings its own methodological and ethical problems: IRB clearances and the scholar's own safety, for starters. Yet confronting these challenges is itself an opportunity to rethink and reevaluate what media studies is, what it does, and what is its role in the world.