Aims and Objectives

- In the following, we explore the basis of epistemology, or the science of knowing, by considering how we know anything about anything.
- In order to investigate the relationship between technologies of knowing and epistemology we consider four broad ‘ways of knowing’:
  - the ‘oral’ tradition and pre-literate ways of knowing;
  - the classical, Aristotelian system of logic and rationality;
  - the way of knowing associated with conventional scientific knowledge or ‘modernity’; and finally
  - post-modernism and discourse analysis.
- We offer some suggestions for further reading.
- Some follow-up activities are provided for you to take your studies further.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we look at how we know anything about anything, exploring issues around epistemology, logic and validity to investigate changing ideas of knowledge and understanding. Looking at the philosophical bases underlying ideas of knowledge and research will help you to appreciate the different traditions of epistemology which operate within the study of media and culture. We consider some of the key questions from philosophy: What constitutes knowledge? What is the relationship between knowledge and truth? How do we make a logical argument? How do we know whether a statement is ‘true’ or ‘false’? What is the relationship between reality and
representation? How do we persuade other people that we are telling the truth? How does a researcher prove anything? These are questions about epistemology – the study of knowledge. They are the fundamental bases of how we know anything about anything.

The question of epistemology is crucial for students of media and culture as there is no prescribed method for us to use; no single way of knowing about media and culture. The research methods we use are borrowed from other disciplines, among them anthropology, economics, literary studies, psychology, political science and sociology. There are researchers studying the media in business schools, art departments, humanities and social science departments. The fact is that the way we know about media and cultural studies is not especially unique – many of the approaches we use could be applied to a host of other topics.

We could define research as the process of investigating the world to discover new things, and the goal of any research project is to add to our knowledge. Before we get down to the details of how to conduct your own research, this book begins by asking: What is knowledge?

WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE?

This question goes to the heart of understanding any kind of research. Today we scarcely think about the processes by which we come to know anything – ‘It all seems so obvious; you just know’, I hear you say! However, one of the key ideas of communications, cultural and media studies is that it is precisely those things which seem most obvious – those things that we take for granted and that we don’t question – these are the very things which we most urgently need to unpack. For it is precisely the ideas which seem ‘obvious’, ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ that exercise the greatest power over us; this is where the essential truths of our society rest – in the way we think about the world. Our world view is embedded in the taken-for-granted ideas which attach to the concepts of reality, truth and knowledge. An appreciation of the ontological construction of knowledge itself is a prerequisite to understanding the research processes in any field. In the areas of communications, media and cultural studies, where matters of epistemology and ontology are central to so much of our endeavour, this is so much more urgent. In a field of study where there seem to be so many paradigms for research, and so many apparently equally valuable modes of study, it is important that we spend some time thinking about what constitutes knowledge and the various paradigms of knowledge and epistemology.

HOW DO YOU BUILD A TOASTER?

Knowledge comes in many forms. We all have ‘common knowledge’ – for example, that you need to connect the plug on your toaster to a power socket.
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to make it work. But how many of us have the more ‘specialist knowledge’ that we would need if we were to build our own toaster? As societies have become larger and more complex, so the kinds of knowledge that each individual needs has changed. Work has become more specialized so that we each perform a relatively narrow range of tasks; the economic system in which we live allows us to pay someone else to make our toasters for us, while we earn money from performing other, perhaps equally specialized, tasks. We have acquired the necessary knowledge to be able to prepare our food using electronic technologies like toasters. However, we do all still ‘know’ that you can cook food using fire. Even though we may use a toaster every day, we do know that we could make toast under a grill or even over an open fire. The kinds of knowledge which we possess, about cooking and about many other things, differ through time. New technologies of food preparation, such as the grindstone or the blender, the microwave or the toaster, enable us to make different kinds of food, even rendering edible some things which were not so before, and changing how we think about food. Despite the fact that in the modern world we may use sophisticated technology and ‘know-how’ in conducting ordinary food preparation, we do still know that you can pick an apple off a tree and eat it when it is ripe. The old ways of knowing do not disappear: they linger still in our social memory or as the principles behind the new technology; they are there for us to draw on when needs must.

We can consider the different ways of knowing in general as somewhat analogous to technologies of food preparation. At different times, in different situations, particular kinds of knowledge are necessary and useful; it is great to be able to cook the perfect soufflé, but it is not going to help you prepare a meal on a camping trip.

FOUR WAYS OF KNOWING

In terms of culture and communication, we might consider how different kinds of media used for the distribution and dissemination of knowledge constitute different ‘technologies of knowledge’; thus, in the great evolutionary history of humankind, the technology which is deemed to separate humans from the beasts – language – is the single most important technology of all. The ability to verbally communicate is the foundation of every subsequent media technology. There are different ways of knowing which are in some regards successive, making older ways redundant: the keyboard may have replaced the pen for most writing tasks, but we will be teaching children to form the letters of the alphabet for a long time to come. We will see in the following discussion how different ‘ways of knowing’ are associated with successive media technologies and how they each play an important part in the processes by which we know anything about media and culture today.

In the following sections of this chapter we will look at four different ‘ways of knowing’. First of all, we will consider the ways of knowing associated
with the ‘oral tradition’ – the epistemological foundations of the earliest civilizations before the introduction of writing (Ong, 1982). The second way of knowing, as writing was being introduced, is based on the know-how developed in the ancient Greek agora – a public space for decision-making by debate; we refer to this rhetorical method as ‘classical’. The birth of science and the spread of print technology are associated with our third period, the ‘modern’, which laid the foundation of many of our contemporary modes of discourse. To describe a fourth way of knowing, following from the disillusion with the modern, we use the term ‘post-modern’. These four broad ‘ways of knowing’ are very general and open to challenge, but are posed as four schematic categories which provide a useful way of thinking about how different epistemological systems operate. Although presented successively, it will become clear that they are cumulative, so that, for example, the principles of story-telling that we can identify in the Iliad and the Odyssey, in Beowulf and The Canterbury Tales, are present in the highly complex media form of the Hollywood film and in the sophisticated oral culture of rap battles in Los Angeles street culture (see, for example, Alim, 2006). All four ways of knowing are used in media and cultural studies today; yet they are rarely expressly acknowledged. I contend that a lack of awareness of these different epistemological positions often blinds us to the insights of others working in our own field. Without an understanding of the specific ways of knowing that different scholars in our field employ, we are destined to be divided amongst ourselves at a time when the need to respect academic diversity seems to have never been more urgent.

WAYS OF KNOWING IN ORAL CULTURES

Let us consider first the way of knowing associated with the ‘oral tradition’ – a term used to refer to linguistic communication of the past before societies became ‘literate’, or to refer to societies which have yet to embrace writing. When we talk of ‘oral societies’ we are referring to societies in which history, science and belief are relayed exclusively through oral accounts and stories, passed down through generations. These are societies where the only repository of knowledge, culture and history is in the memory of its people. We can identify a strong oral tradition today when we tell a joke or recount a family story; it is present in our music – from classical lieder to contemporary rap. All human societies rely on language as a means of communication, and we do still learn a great deal about the world through oral forms.

Before we had computers, or books, or even writing, the main form of cultural transmission (of history, science or knowledge) was spoken language; there are some societies today where this is still the case. Walter Ong describes ‘primary oral cultures’ – those cultures ‘untouched by writing’ – and contrasts them with literate cultures (Ong, 1982: 31). An oral culture is bound
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by memory – human knowledge goes as far as one person can remember. The skill of remembering is highly valued in oral societies; the griots of Africa, for example, developed sophisticated mnemonic strategies for extending their memory and for being able to recall lengthy genealogies and stories (Ong, 1982).

There are still very high levels of illiteracy in some parts of the world; many millions of people can’t read or write. Many millions, too, who grew up in an oral society, have had to adjust to the literate world. One such person is the Ugandan President, Yoweri K. Museveni, who describes his education growing up as a member of the nomadic Banyankole Bahima people of Southern Uganda during the 1940s and 1950s in his essay about ‘The Power of Knowledge’ (Museveni, 2005). The culture of the people, the skills, the morality and the history were all transmitted from one generation to the next via speech (Museveni, 2005). Museveni describes how each evening the elders would tell stories for the children and adults. These ‘oftarama’, he says, are evidence of the way in which memory is so important to oral societies. He says of these evenings:

[They] were not only for the children to listen but for the adults to refresh and keep up the collective knowledge of the tribe, for example by scraping back together details remembered by different persons. (Museveni, 2005: 12)

Knowledge, among the Banyankole Bahima, as among other oral cultures, is verbally transmitted and is collective.

This point is also made by Bert Hamminga in his discussion of the differences between African epistemology and Western ideas of knowledge (Hamminga, 2005a). Hamminga argues that in Ugandan society knowledge is not something to be acquired by an individual, but is something shared by a community. People speak, not of what ‘I know’, but of what ‘we know’. According to African epistemology, Hamminga tells us, ‘the clan or the tribe is the knowing subject’ (2005b: 59). There is a great respect for authority, but authority is something which is also shared by the whole community. He uses an analogy from nature to describe African attitudes to truth and power:

All power, all truth comes up from the roots of the family tree, the dead ancestors, to the trunk, the elders, and passes up to the parents and children, the branches, leaves and flowers. (Ibid.: 61)

Power is not something external to us, nor is it associated with an individual; it is within the people as a collective. In pre-literate African society togetherness is a quality valued so highly that agreement is not just expected, it is required. Everyone has their own part to play and a group does not move without
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consensus – if someone veers from a point of view taken by the group, the rest of the group either wait until that person changes their mind or they all decide to follow; no action is taken until consensus is achieved. The idea that one would develop an argument to support a case is just foolishness: ‘From the African point of view, arguments are a sign of weakness, of lack of power and vitality … truth is not argued for but felt’ (Ibid.: 61). And here Hamminga makes the point that the Bantu word for ‘felt’ is also ‘heard’ – knowledge is understood as something which you hear, which comes from a community acting with one voice.

Daniel Everett is a cultural anthropologist whose work provides an illustration of the distinctive quality of the epistemology of oral cultures. Everett first encountered the Pirahã people of Amazonian Brazil as a Christian missionary, intending to translate the Bible into the indigenous language. He spent several years studying the language and culture of the Pirahã, an experience he recounts in his book, *Don’t Sleep, There are Snakes* (Everett, 2008). Living among the Pirahã he made many friends who helped him learn their language, but he made no converts and abandoned Christianity. Everett identifies several examples of the relationship between language and epistemology which challenged his literate, Western and Christian understanding of the world. When Everett wanted to know the words for ‘right’ and ‘left’ – he held out his hand and asked his Pirahã friend, Kóhoi:

‘OK. This hand is the one that Americans call the “left hand”. Brazilians call it mão esquerda. What do the Pirahās call it?’

‘Hand.’

‘Yes, I know that it is a hand. But how do you say left hand?’

‘Your hand.’

‘No, look. Here is your left hand. Here is your right hand. Here is my left hand. Here is my right hand. How do you say that?’

‘This is my hand. That is your hand. This is my other hand. That is your other hand.’ (Everett, 2008: 215)

Everett could not discover how to translate ‘left’ and ‘right’ – a necessary pre-requisite to some fundamental ideas in Christianity, such as explaining the position of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in relation to God. When Kóhoi told Everett, ‘The hand is up river’, at first, this confused him even more. Later, when out hunting with a group of men, he noticed they gave directions to one another in terms of the river. Instead of saying ‘go left’ or ‘go right’ they would say ‘go up river’ or ‘go down river’. It was then that he realized that the Pirahã oriented their world around the Amazon River which was such an important part of their lives.
In European and American culture, we orient ourselves relative to our own bodies—we believe ourselves to be at the centre and our sense of direction relies on us knowing our ‘right’ from our ‘left’. This can be referred to as ‘endocentric orientation’—when directions are understood in terms of one’s own body. However, the Pirahã language is ‘exocentric’ in orientation, relying on a directional system external to their own bodies—*up river* and *down river*. The Pirahã example illustrates how the language and knowledge of an oral culture is embedded within geography and location. Nature and place play key roles in structuring a way of thinking that is in a synergetic relationship with one’s sense of location and identity.

Knowledge and truth are historically contingent within oral cultures, changing as different economic and political situations demand. Ong gives an example of what has been called ‘structural amnesia’ taken from the research of Goody and Watt (1968) among the Gonja people of Ghana. At the turn of the century, British scholars working in Ghana recorded details of the etiological myth about the founder of the Gonja state, Ndewura Jakpa. They noted that Jakpa had seven sons and divided his kingdom into seven so that each son could rule a province. Sixty years later, the myth was again recorded by anthropologists, but by this time there were only five provinces in Gonja and the story had been altered to reflect this new political reality: in the more recent account Ndewura Jakpa had five sons and the destiny of the other two provinces was not mentioned; they had been lost from the history. Ong writes:

… the part of the past with no immediately discernable relevance to the present had simply fallen away. The present imposed its own economy on past remembrances. (Ong, 1982: 48)

Language and demonstrations are the primary means by which knowledge is relayed in oral societies through forms which are still in use today: storytelling, singing and poetry. Much of our lives are still lived within this oral culture—much of our interpersonal communication with friends and family takes place verbally, despite the advances of ‘social networking’ and other means of mediated forms of personal communication. Think of the stories which circulate in your own family on holidays or ritual occasions—how many of these are told and re-told on every family get-together? These kinds of memory and recollection are recorded only in the verbal reports of family members, so that our sense of self, of family and kinship is still very much embedded in an oral culture in which recitation and repetition are important, if unacknowledged, parts of our cultural lives. In society more broadly, too, the mainstay of many media forms is the spoken word: one might think of radio, but also songs and poetry. A film or television programme without a script is a pretty rare thing. Language is the mainstay of human culture.
in oral and literate societies alike and remains the central means by which communication occurs.

The oral way of knowing prevailed in human society for more time than all the subsequent ones combined. The different manifestations of epistemology in pre-literate societies is doubtless vast, but we are unlikely to learn too much about them all mainly because, by definition, they were not recorded. The introduction of writing allowed the recording of human knowledge in a form more permanent than memory – and this in itself was revolutionary. The culture clash between literate and pre-literate societies has structured much of our global modern history. It is evident in places like Uganda where Hamminga did his research, and also among the poor, disenfranchised and dispossessed in every country of the world. High rates of illiteracy plague countries as rich as the USA, excluding people from participating in contemporary social, political and cultural life. The different uses to which working-class people put their newly acquired literacy in the early part of the twentieth century is the subject of a founding text of British cultural studies, *The Uses of Literacy* (Hoggart, 1957). The epistemological shift from oral to literate cultures is a cultural revolution with profound and continuing implications.

**THE IMPACT OF WRITING ON WAYS OF KNOWING**

The advent of writing presented a challenge to orality. The earliest evidence we have of writing comes from Africa, where some 5,000 years ago the earliest marks were seen. Writing seems to have developed in Sumeria, in China and in Mesopotamia at around the same time. For most of its history, writing has been the preserve of the few. The idea of ‘universal literacy’ as a public policy is barely a century old, a tiny period of time in the history of human culture. The introduction of writing creates a different epistemic base; writing ‘technologizes the word’ according to Ong. Writing renders words and language abstract; it reduces the force, the power and the magic of the spoken word. Walter Ong contrasts ‘orality’ with ‘literacy’ to argue that the ways of knowing, of understanding the world, are significantly different in each kind of society. With the introduction of writing, knowledge shifts from being something that comes to you, to being something you can find out. Writing allows for records to be kept which cannot be ‘contingent’ or ‘relative’; it makes for certainty and repeatability. Thus genealogies and etymological myths like those of the Gonja people can be recorded, and become harder to change in the light of subsequent real events. The word itself is a concrete thing when it is written; something which you can see on the page – its potency shifts. Literacy, it has often been observed, renders words less powerful, less awesome. It also ossifies language and makes truth an external to the human mind. The role of language and the spoken word is very important to our lives, and elements of
oral culture prevail in our ceremonies and rituals – ‘I pronounce you man and wife’; ‘With this ring I thee wed’. For PhD students, we no longer have to recite the entire dissertation, but we are still obliged to have a ‘viva’ or a spoken ‘defence’ of our dissertation. In Islam, a man can be considered honourable only when he has learned, and recited, the whole of the Koran.

Oral ways of knowing have not been lost: they remain an important form of epistemology in the form of oral history and ‘auto-ethnography’ (Maréchal, 2010). Auto-ethnography is a research method which investigates the experience of the self using ethnographic methods and is most used in performance studies and english (Chang, 2008). The method relies on personal and subjective accounts of one’s own experience, and values narration as a specific way of knowing. In our fields you are most likely to come across auto-ethnography within cultural studies, for example Ben Carrington’s account of researching a cricket club (Carrington, 2008) or Alexander, Moreira and kumar’s personal accounts of their experiences of fatherhood (2012).

Writing allows for the development of administrative systems, laws and so on. It permits a society to operate as a larger unit; allows for the greater reach of power across a society; and facilitates larger links and control over a bigger geographical area. Writing is central to the development of larger and more complex societies. The value of writing as opposed to orality was much contested by the ancient Greeks from whom derives our second way of knowing: classical epistemology.

CLASSICAL EPISTEMOLOGY AND RHETORIC

The Greek city state or polis was organized around a central market place (agora) which served as a meeting place and was also the location of the debates which were both part of, and productive of, early democracy. This was a society which used slaves and subjugated women, but whose way of thinking and rules of rhetoric have been vitally important to the development of ideas of parliament and liberal democracy. The concepts of logic and epistemology developed during this time still resonate and are important constituents of all our work; these ideas go to the heart of how we construct an argument and make a reasoned case. Writing was a relatively new technology 2,000 years ago and was much debated. The threat was perceived to be that people would no longer be obliged to remember or use their mind to work things out, but would get lazy and rely on written texts. The ancient Greeks advanced their ideas through debate and developed a sophisticated system for thinking about rational argument. Many of our contemporary ideas about language and truth developed in the Greek city state.

Rhetoric is the term given to the art of debate as practised by the ancient Greeks. It comes from the Greek word, rhetorike, which dates from the fifth century when it was first used by Socrates in Plato’s dialogue Gorgias.
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Aristotle, Plato’s student, wrote the first full exposition of rhetoric and proposed three different forms of argument – *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*. These remain useful analytical categories which we can apply when developing our own arguments or when analysing those of others.

_Ethos_ relates to the person speaking or giving you the information – are they reliable? Are they ‘ethical’ and honest? Can you believe the speaker based on what you know about their character? For example, on the subject of climate change, someone says: ‘I am the leading researcher of climate change; I have all the qualifications necessary therefore you should believe me.’ Or: ‘I am a farmer and I have noticed that the seasons are not changing in my 30 years of working on the land.’ These are all appeals to ethos – to the honesty and integrity of the person speaking – and have no bearing on whether the argument itself is sound or reliable or has any basis in truth. Ethos relates to the credibility of the speaker and resonates with the more modern concept of _source credibility_. Thus, an oil company spokesperson is probably less credible and reliable when talking about climate change than an ‘impartial’ scientist.

The second form of argument, _pathos_, relates to how well the speaker draws on the listener’s emotions – how are we moved by their words? A good speaker would be able to persuade the listener by playing on their sympathies. For example, the tabloid press often tell their stories in highly emotive terms, appealing to our _sentiment_ and _feelings_. We may laugh or be moved to tears by some of the coverage, but either way we take notice and are moved. Using pathos appeals to our feelings or emotions, and we see this used in contemporary media of many genres; we are made sad by pictures of people in areas devastated by natural disasters such as earthquakes, or by the sight on the television news of a parent grieving the loss of their child in a war zone. These are rhetorical tropes designed to pull at our heartstrings. To return to our climate change example, we are moved by images of starving polar bears, which may well be losing their habitat owing to climate change but may equally be unaffected. Appeals to our love of animals and our sentimental side in making arguments about the damage done to wildlife and the wilderness (regardless of whether there is any evidence of any causality) can be very persuasive.

_Logos_ is the logical basis of the argument. Does the argument make sense? Does each part follow logically from the previous one? In this case our rational self is being appealed to – we are taken through an argument, presented with evidence that the temperature is the highest since records began, so yes, there is global warming. If we are shown factual evidence of the changes in the climate and it can be proven that there is a relationship between CO₂ gasses and rising temperatures of the earth, then we are likely to believe it. Logos is that element of an argument which appeals to rationality and good sense. It is founded on a well-structured argument with credible evidence,
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and it has validity. Aristotle believed that the best way to make a case was through logos – through the appeal to rationality. This is certainly the rhetorical trope which has been most important in developing science and technology and which contributed most to the scientific revolution, which we will talk about later in the chapter. But before we do – let’s consider some of the rules of argument that enhance our rhetorical skills.

**SO WHAT MAKES A GOOD ARGUMENT?**

How can you demonstrate through the application of logic that something is true or false? For example, the idea that an argument should be built on sound premises is associated with the rhetorical trope of the *syllogism*. Syllogisms are sets of statements where a conclusion can logically be drawn from two preceding statements. If you can prove the first two statements, then the third is necessarily true. Thus, for example:

All dogs are mammals.

Rex is a dog.

Therefore Rex is a mammal.

The conclusion – Rex is a mammal – is based on the two preceding premises. The first is a general statement relating to the definition of the category ‘dog’; the second is a specific statement about a particular example, in this case, Rex. We can conclude logically that if ‘All dogs are mammals’ and that ‘Rex is a dog’ then Rex must be a mammal. However, the reverse is not necessarily true: if Trudi is a mammal, it does not follow that she is a dog. The logic of the syllogism is important to our understanding of how a well-structured argument can be made. Sometimes our work does involve categorizing objects, artifacts and events according to set criteria. For example, we can see how films and television programmes are designed and marketed according to genres which are a form of category order. We might phrase a syllogism thus:

All musicals feature people singing.

*Glee* features lots of people singing.

Therefore *Glee* is a musical.

Does this follow? You can see that there is logic to this. If you can prove the first two statements to be true then the conclusion does indeed follow – it makes sense, it is logical: *Glee* is a musical. You can see from this example how careful you have to be about defining your categories, though, because
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Glee is not a musical in the sense of ‘a cinema genre in which music is heavily featured’. We have based our argument on false premises – Glee is not a musical because we dispute the assumed definition of ‘musical’ in the first premise. ‘People singing’ is necessary to musicals but is not the whole answer; it is not ‘sufficient’. This is a useful structure to think about for an argument in a dissertation – in the first phase you establish a general statement as being true before going on to prove the second. An understanding of the basic rules of logic will help protect you from the danger of building your argument on unsound foundations. Classical philosophy teaches us to pay close attention to the logical structure of arguments; to build our case on sound premises and to establish the facts carefully. Constructing a good, well-reasoned dissertation requires you to be able to make a persuasive argument based on the tenets of Aristotelian rhetoric. The reader must be persuaded that you have the necessary ethos to be a credible speaker. The best way to demonstrate this is by showing you have read widely and have mastered your topic well. You can also prove that you are a credible speaker by discussing your personal experience. For example, if you are looking at the cultural lives of young people in your own neighbourhood, then the reader will be interested to know about your own background; it will add to your credibility as a speaker if you can say that your background has something in common with your subjects. Your use of language and figures of speech will enhance your essay through the judicious use of pathos, but the most important by far is that you design and develop a good research question which follows rules of logic and argumentation. We still adhere to the principle developed by Aristotle that, in academic writing at least, a logical, rational argument will be most convincing. When you read academic books and articles, you should consider how the arguments are built and developed. Some useful exercises to help you develop your skills in analysing and building arguments can be found in Stella Cottrell’s book Critical Thinking Skills (2011).

The allegory of the cave

The ancient Greeks railed against the impact of writing on the human mind even as they used writing to circulate their ideas. We can identify early studies of communication and culture in the writings of the ancients who concerned themselves with politics, philosophy, the arts and drama. In his Republic – written around 380BC – Plato creates a dialogue between Socrates and various interlocutors about the importance of the correct education for the ‘philosopher-king’ of the republic, a treatise on the training of the statesman (Plato, 2007). The importance of understanding dialogue and dialectics are crucial, and there is a strong emphasis on rhetoric and training in skills of public speaking and persuasion.

Plato is also concerned about ideas of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’, and ‘representation’ and ‘verisimilitude’ in art. The famous allegory of the cave is discussed
in a dialogue between Socrates and his brother Glaucon. They consider the hypothetical case of a group of people who have lived in a cave their whole lives chained to a wall with only shadows of people outside cast on a wall to look at. Socrates asks whether the people in the cave: ‘in every way … would believe that the shadows of the objects … were the whole truth?’ (Plato, 2007: 241). He concludes that they would, and, since they would not know any different, they would not be troubled by their predicament. However, if a man was to break free and leave the cave, it would take him a while to become accustomed to daylight and to learn about the world beyond the cave. He would think back on his time in the cave and realize that the visions on the wall were not reality. If that man then returned to the cave, he would not be able to take part in the old world; he would know they were just images and he would be frustrated and angry. He would be an outsider, and would be vilified by the other people in the cave. The allegory of the cave shows that concern with images predates the modern era, for here Plato is considering how people apprehend representation. The ‘cave’ of this allegory has often been compared to the cinema or the television – if representations and images are all one sees, how then can one be educated to understand the truth? If one’s world view is garnered only through the mass media, how can one have any understanding of the real world? This form of argument resonates with what Jean Baudrillard would later refer to as ‘simulations’ and themes within post-modernism relating to what is knowable in a mass-mediated society (Baudrillard, 1983).

**Beware the sophists**

The *sophists* were philosophers and educators in fifth-century Greece (Duke, 2012). Gorgias of Leontini, the most famous of the sophists, argued that knowledge was ultimately unattainable, and so, why bother? C. Francis Higgins (2006) characterizes the sophism of Gorgias as a trilemma thus:

i Nothing exists.

ii Even if existence exists, it cannot be known.

iii Even if it could be known, it cannot be communicated.


The sophists believed that since knowledge was unattainable and impossible to express anyway, one should train oneself to be successful in communication and to be able to construct a good argument in order to be a good leader, but not to be concerned about using language to understand ‘reality’. Sophist philosophy was anathema to Socrates, who considered them to be a ‘public menace’ and was highly critical of their philosophy as they could speak very well, but what about? It is from this movement, and later writings about it,
that we get our current word ‘sophistry’ – the term has come to refer to an argument which may sound impressive but lacks substance and may be misleading. In terms of sophisticated rhetorical skill, there are many excellent sophists among the ranks of media and cultural studies scholars; certainly there is a great deal of work that is expressed through sophisticated arguments with varying degrees of reference to the real. Are they the ‘public menaces’ who Socrates vilified? In the next section of this chapter we are going to think about a third way of knowing – that associated with ‘modernity’.

THE MODERN WAY: SEEING IS BELIEVING AND THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION

So far we have considered the shift in world view from an epistemology of ‘hearing’ or ‘feeling’ typical of Bantu and other oral societies, to one of ‘rhetoric’ and ‘speaking well’ in the classic period. We now come to consider the age of the Enlightenment and a shift away from what was called ‘the Dark Ages’ – when truth comes in the light, and observation and experiment become the means of knowing; when seeing is believing.

The Scientific Revolution was both the product of, and produced by, what we might call ‘modern’ ways of thinking (Henry, 2012). The project of the Enlightenment, so much associated with the rise of the modern, rests in the belief that human experience can be improved through science and technology and that we have a social obligation to ensure that improvements take place.

The mathematician René Descartes (1596–1650) wrote the principles of an epistemology which was to be the basis of much Western thinking in his 1637 *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason and Reaching the Truth in the Sciences* (Cottingham, 1999). The fundamental basis of Descartes’ writing was that everything could be measured and that the world was accessible to scientific investigation by humans. All human knowledge was interrelated; Descartes used the metaphor of the *tree* to explain the relationship of the various areas of philosophy and science to one another:

*The roots are metaphysics, the trunk physics, and the branches are the various particular sciences, including mechanics, medicine and morals.*

(Descartes, quoted in Cottingham, 1999: 224)

The idea of ‘natural philosophy’ (what we would now call ‘science’) spread across Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It reached a high point in the French Revolution when the philosophy of *equality, liberty and fraternity*, presented a lethal challenge to that other triumvirate: *monarchy, the aristocracy and the church*. This is epitomized by the ‘Encyclopedists’ who in 1747 published the first volume of what was known in English as the
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*Encyclopedia, or a Descriptive Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts and Trades.* Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert were the editors of the 17 volumes of essays, which were intended to collate all the existing human knowledge with the aim of understanding the world as a ‘general system’. Today the assumption that one could collect all knowledge would be considered a vanity, but the *Encyclopedia* embodies a particular philosophy characteristic of the ‘modern’. As Jean-Loup Seban says:

As the most ambitious and expansive reference work of its time, the *Encyclopedia* crystallized the confidence of the eighteenth century bourgeoisie in the capacity of reason to dispel the shadows of ignorance and improve society. (Seban, 1999: 264)

In the ‘modern’ epistemology, everything is ‘knowable’ and progress is not only possible but is a historical inevitability. Scientists advance knowledge by proposing hypotheses which they then test against the available observable data before going on to make conclusions which add to the sum of human knowledge.

This was also the period of the rise of the nation state in its current form; and the quest for knowledge became associated with that of national identity (Anderson, 2006). The leaders of the nation states used a particular kind of scientific endeavour to promote the ideology of their supremacy, even competing with one another to employ the best scientists to work for them. Descartes himself was employed by the monarchs of Europe – it was as tutor to Queen Christiana of Sweden that he died, by some accounts after having caught a cold tutoring her in the early morning. The Royal Institute in London was set up by King George to ensure the British had an advantage in the battle for science.

The Scientific Revolution transformed ideas about epistemology – it created a shift in understanding the material world away from argument and logic (based on language) towards observation and measurement. Thus, while the early scientists called themselves ‘natural philosophers’, they were creating a philosophy based on an engagement, observation and understanding of the real (‘natural’) world. Scientists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made machines and objects to enhance their skills of observation. The Science Museum in London is home to a collection of instruments which constituted state-of-the-art technology in the time of King George III (see the ‘Science in the 18th Century’ gallery, Science Museum, 2011).

The modern or scientific way of knowing then is based on observation and experiment. Knowledge is built up incrementally by a special class of people, *scientists*, who conduct experiments and test hypotheses. The assumption is that everything is knowable to humans through research in opposition to the ideas of the sophists.
We can think of research paradigms as being of two broad kinds: *inductive* or *deductive*. In media studies, questions of representation may come from observing a situation; for example the gay and lesbian activist group, Stonewall, hypothesized that gay people were under-represented in television for young people and set out to determine whether that was the case by a content analysis of these shows (Stonewall, 2010). They were able to reach conclusions based on their observations and confirm their original hypothesis. On the other hand, when Lisa Tripp wanted to investigate the use of computing by Latino school children, she was really not sure what she would find; her research was much more ‘*inductive*’. Although she started with a concern about how the lack of access might be influencing the performance of the youngsters at school, she found it was the social connections that they really missed and which the young people perceived as more of a concern (Tripp, 2010). Sometimes you have a theory or an idea and you want to ‘test’ it to see if it is true – this is the way scientific knowledge developed incrementally through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and is still the way most scientific (and social scientific) work is conducted. Sometimes you are just curious about a situation and you want to try to find out what is going on; you induce your conclusions from the situation. In either case you conduct research from a position of having a strong grounding in the theory and you are building knowledge from an established base.

The modern scientific method is based on the idea of universal truth. It assumes that knowledge is out there, waiting to be discovered. The idea that all human problems can be solved through the investigation of (social) scientists prevails in an epistemology dedicated to progress and improvement in the human condition. It is this concept of knowledge as positive and positivist that post-modern philosophers have challenged.

**THE REVOLUTION OF THE STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS**

Within the scientific community there have been many debates about how we understand and interpret the world. Thomas Kuhn’s 1962 book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, was a radical contribution to the theory of science. The traditional, modernist way of understanding knowledge (of epistemology) is that knowledge is always improving and evolving. The model of theory building and hypothesis testing central to modern epistemology is predicated on the gradual evolution of science. However, Kuhn argued that all the important breakthroughs in science had come as a result of something more like a *revolution* – a complete change in perspective. Kuhn argues that every so often in science there is a ‘paradigm shift’ – a leap away from one way of thinking and towards another. Once a paradigm becomes established, it becomes ‘normal’ and ‘normal science’ comes to dominate until the next revolutionary breakthrough (Kuhn, 1962).
Kuhn’s work was just one assault of many against the belief in the unending scientific progress which characterized ‘modern’ epistemology. Was it after World War II when we saw how the technologies which promised so much in terms of human liberty could be used to slaughter so many millions of people? Theodor Adorno saw the Holocaust as the defining moment in the central struggle which he saw to be at the heart of civilization – the struggle between culture and barbarism (Adorno, 1967). Adorno’s exhausted disillusion with the modern world is a theme which runs through much of the literature of the post-war period but disenchantment with modernity in the arts was expressed in many quarters.

In literature, the heyday of the ‘realist’ novel was marked by great works by Thomas Hardy in England, Tolstoy in Russia and Henry James in the US – authors who wrote works in which they created a whole world, integrated and integral. It was a world we looked in from above, as if we were looking down a microscope; an efficient world with a story-teller who spoke as if his characters were there for his delight – a world in which the narrator was ‘the voice of god’. In the novels of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, the so-called ‘modernist’ authors, we can see this world view disintegrating as the faith in the old order diminishes. In Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, we see multiple perspectives on the world as Woolf (and her central protagonist, Mrs Dalloway) struggle to make sense of their world in a new way. The novelist gets to grips with the fractured identities and dislocated understandings of characters with partial views and different ways of knowing. James Joyce takes it further in *Ulysses* – the character named after the hero of Homer’s poem – for here he builds a novel using every possible writing style. In a stream of consciousness – writing from the point of view of a particular character, a point of view liable to shifts and changes – it is contingent, subjective, flawed and partial. This challenges the model of the nineteenth-century realist novel, a novel in which the reader could rely on the absolute certainty that the author knew how it was all going to end. The literary high modernism marks a starting point for a post-modern sensibility which is also the beginning of media and cultural studies.

**POST-MODERN WAYS OF KNOWING**

During the middle of the twentieth century, this ‘modern’ idea of scientific knowledge, sometimes referred to as ‘positivism’, began to look increasingly jaded. The spectre of fascism began to look like the historically inevitable outcome of the ideology of the machine age. A cynicism with the modern was one reason for the introduction of the term ‘post-modernism’. The advances of science had not brought about the universal changes in the human condition which one might expect. In the wake of the war there was little to be proud of. A generation of scholars grew up to be cynical about the positive influences of science and technology. A way of knowing steeped in
looking beneath the surface, in analysing the meaning of things, in dissecting discourse, in questioning appearances grew up. For the language we used no longer referred to the real world; to explain, decipher and understand ‘natural philosophy’. Now we focused on understanding the social world, the realm of culture. Post-modernism began to dominate the epistemology of much of the humanities and social sciences in the middle of the twentieth century.

The post-modern shift can be seen in the work of Jean Baudrillard (1981); Baudrillard damned the reign of the sign in his work on *Simulations* (1983). Jean-François Lyotard wrote about the suspicion of grand narratives – the modern way of knowing relies on a big idea – that everything is knowable, that progress is inevitable, that good will overcome evil (Lyotard, 1984). These stories we tell ourselves are just that, stories. Lyotard examines how the ‘narrative’ way of knowing exists alongside the modern. Perhaps the most influential of the post-modern theorists is Michel Foucault (1991; 1998; 2002). Foucault uses psychoanalytical techniques and insights to investigate the social construction of criminality in his work *Discipline and Punish* (1991) and sexuality in *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1998). In *Archaeology of Knowledge* (2002 [1972]), Foucault dissects the way we know, and provides an analysis of the relationship between knowledge and power. Foucault identifies the multiple processes by which discourse is used to shore up authoritarian control and maintain the status quo of even liberal societies. The impact of discourse analysis as a method used in media and culture has been profound, as it enables us to dissect the ideological position of the media and to recognize the location of power in language.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994; 2004) further advance the move away from the scientific methods when they discuss the metaphor of the ‘rhizoid’ as a means of understanding knowledge. They eschew any idea of linear cause and effect; the importance of their work is that they highlight the complexities, the intricacies and the delicate nature of epistemology. In their idea of knowledge in relation to *immanence*, are they returning to an instinctive idea of knowledge more typical of the oral way of knowing? To something both pre- and post-modern – a knowledge which tries to cut out the whole of the Scientific Revolution?

One of the most infuriatingly interesting writers on the theme of post-modernism today is Slavoj Žižek. His book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) unites Hegel and Lacan – philosophy and psychoanalysis – in order to discuss the operation of ideology within our culture. His television appearances, his blog and several books show an active demonstration of the idea that we need to engage with the media as we critique it. The work of media and cultural studies scholarship is to understand the world better through observing, yes, but also by acting and being part of it. The way of knowing by doing is evident in the current trend in media and cultural studies towards ‘research by practice’.
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A post-modern epistemology does exist; it is critical of epistemology itself. Post-modernism is self-reflexive – always considering that it speaks from a particular, specific, discursive position. We need to be aware of our own subject positions in relation to the discourses we have to work with. The post-modern scholar is *knowing* without assuming omniscience. The post-modern world in which we currently live recognizes the limits of knowledge, recognizes it as a discursive construct, and accepts and acknowledges that we always work within the constraints of the discursive limitations. The sensibility of the post-modern scholar is cynical and sceptical about the ways we discuss and consider the world. But we would fall into an ideological trap if we allowed ourselves to believe that the world itself is not real; or that our actions do not have consequences. The work that we do is devoted to ensuring a better world, and that may well be a myth of modernity, but it is a trick of post-modernism to accept it – we will return to sophistry and ignorance if we do not keep our work connected with the actually existing world.

FOUR WAYS OF KNOWING COMPARED

In discussing the four ways of knowing outlined above we must be wary of creating a false teleology and assuming that each of these paradigmatic epistemologies brings us to greater enlightenment – this would be to reproduce the modernist myth of ever-advancing knowledge. When we look back on our necessarily cursory survey of the history of epistemology covered above we can see that they all still exist together in what Braudel called an ‘ensemble of histories’ (Braudel, 1975) – no way of knowing has superseded any other. The four ways of knowing which we have characterized as ‘orality’, ‘classical’, ‘modern’ and ‘post-modern’ are all still very much in evidence in the world in general and in the work of media and cultural scholars specifically. Contemporary post-modern epistemology re-values the located the situated and we find the narrative ways of knowing, typical of oral culture, in revival in areas like auto-ethnography. Indeed, narrative knowing has lived alongside successive ideologies of epistemology (Lyotard, 1984), and language remains the primary means by which we apprehend the physical world and one another.

Each epistemological model we have considered has a different relationship to technologies of communication. Language, the primary means of communication in oral societies, forms such as story-telling, singing and recitation being the dominant means of mediating culture. Location, geography, botany and animals provide significant reference points in cultures close to nature. Most communication takes place one-to-one and relies on co-presence; information is relayed physically through demonstration. The administration of the Greek city state required a special place to be developed for communication – the *agora*. This creates a separate, dedicated space for debate and decision-making in a society where specific classes are
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responsible for such activities. This technology, on which contemporary ‘houses of parliament’ (places of talking) are based, gives communication its own space. The Greeks developed sophisticated rules about the kind of talk which would take place in this special place – the rules of rhetoric, theories of statesmanship and ideas of philosophy emanate from this specific technology. The agora is a special place which, by including some people necessarily excludes others (notably women and slaves). The right to use this particular technology – a specific place to use language and a right and wrong way to speak – brings an ideology of language which is quite different from that of oral culture where decision-making is much more likely to be communal and inclusive. The greater social complexity creates a separate class who make decisions, and new technologies – specifically writing – grew up to ensure control over states. In the modern era we see the development of even more sophisticated nation states and more sophisticated technologies of communication to manage them, thus the spread of literacy in the Holy Roman Empire and the importance of the Bible for maintaining control over a global society managed from the Vatican. As societies became more complex, demands for inclusion from more people became more vociferous. Communication technologies including the book, the newspaper and scientific and other literature helped to create a more unified society as it grew and expanded and demanded complicity from more people (Thompson, 1995). The relationship between technologies of printing and the nation state have been documented by Benedict Anderson (2006). If the modern state is the nation state then the post-modern age is also the age of globalization – with the introduction of the trans-national media of broadcasting and later computing we have the possibility to transcend the limitations of the nation state so laboriously built up during the last three hundred years. Ideologies of ‘globalization’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’ are testament to a new kind of consciousness made possible in large part by the technologies of communication which enable discourse across time and space. We have a different epistemology to help us understand the world; the absolutism and universality of modernity have dissipated and become dispersed.

DISCUSSION

We have considered how the idea of what constitutes ‘knowledge’ varies historically and is embedded within ideologies of nature, society, technology and language. We have looked at four different ‘ways of knowing’ and considered how they relate to media technology and social life. We can see how each epistemological framework is associated with a different mode of communication. We have also seen that the ‘technologies of knowing’ – of communication and media – relate in quite complex ways to the different ‘ways of knowing’.
I hope this chapter has taught us that the very idea of knowing itself is controversial and contingent. We have to think about the ways of knowing implicit in our work and consider how these may be helping or hindering our research. We need to always be reflective, thoughtful scholars and avoid the ‘taken for granted’ and the ‘obvious’. The way we think about the world, the tools we use to think and the language we use to express those ideas are all things we need to be open minded about. We have discussed some historical ideas about epistemology, trying to refute teleological motive. If we understand the various items in the epistemological toolbox of academic thinking, then we can be free to create and imagine new projects, new ways of thinking and understanding.

Within every academic discipline we can identify a prevailing epistemology or ‘way of knowing’ which will close off certain avenues of enquiry, and direct us to others, constraining our potential for investigation and understanding. If we can better understand the limits and possibilities provided by the way of knowing of our society and our discipline, I believe this will enable us to be more broadminded and to think ‘outside the box’ of prescribed research and analysis. The idea of this book is not to tell you the correct way to do media and cultural studies, or even to tell you the way I prefer to do it, but to help you to do media and cultural studies in your own way. Media and cultural studies have provided some of the means by which scholars have challenged the obvious, the necessary, the ‘goes without saying’. Media and cultural studies have been at the forefront of adopting new philosophies to challenge our actually existing society. This is why we do it. This is why, in the words of Roger Silverstone, ‘we must study the media’ (Silverstone, 1999).

In the next chapter we explore some of the specific imperatives motivating Media and Cultural Studies scholarship.

FURTHER READING

Providing examples of how to (and how not to) make an argument and helping develop your critical skills, this book is a terrific aid for anyone studying at undergraduate level.

This is a fascinating study chronicling some of the key historical shifts in the philosophy and practice of science.

A rich theoretical discussion of some of the themes discussed here with close reference to the media and communication research. This edited volume
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includes a number of contributions from leading scholars in communications research. Of special significance to the discussion above are the two chapters in Part 1: Klaus Bruhn Jensen’s ‘The Humanities in Media and Communication Research’ and Graham Murdock’s contribution ‘Media, Culture and Modern Times: Social Science Investigations’.


This is a very engaging book. See especially Chapter 1: ‘A Philosophy of Social “Science”’, which gives a good, simple and straightforward guide to the basic binaries of qualitative/quantitative and inductive/deductive research.

TAKING IT FURTHER … ON YOUR OWN

Thinking about media, culture, epistemology and everyday life

Keep a diary of the sources of information you use during the course of the next week, whether it be to find out which movie to see or where your next class will be. Think about which medium you are using at each different hour during the day. Note what kinds of information or entertainment you garner from each different medium: computer, iPhone, book, newspaper, notebook. At the end of the week, compare the number and range of information media you have used. Do you use one more than another? Which medium are you likely to use for which kinds of information? Are some communication forms more suited to certain kinds of information than others? Think about the relationship between technology and knowledge - for example, what kinds of technology are suited to conveying ‘interpersonal’ communication and which for communicating with a large group?

Rhetorical analysis of news reportage

Select a current news story which is being reported across a range of different media. Choose one medium to focus on, for example, newspapers, radio or the internet and collect three news reports from different outlets on the same story. If you are looking at radio in London you might choose the BBC station Radio 4, a commercial news and talk station such as LBC, and the commercial music station Capital Radio. In class, analyse the reports to identify different kinds of argument being articulated. Identify how the various media forms use ‘logos’, ‘pathos’ or ‘ethos’. Consider how the different kinds of argument are used by different media forms. Which is most persuasive and why?
**TAKING IT FURTHER … BEYOND THE CLASSROOM**

Investigating past approaches to knowledge and epistemology

Visit one of the great museums of science such as the Science Museum in London. If you can’t visit in person, websites provide excellent resources for this exercise. Look at the collection of technology and identify three ‘technologies of knowing’ from different periods. Consider what epistemological framework encouraged the scientists of the time to believe that this would enhance their knowledge – and how. Think about the relationship between technology and epistemology in the modern age. What are the similarities and differences between our ‘way of knowing’ and that of people in the past? What are the technologies of understanding available to you? What are the dangers and opportunities of the internet as a means of knowing?