

one of the central themes of the book: research is a process, without a predetermined beginning and end point.

The authors make a compelling argument, tested by their own teaching and research, as they pay special attention to the journey of research. One of the main takeaways is the need for researchers to eschew the dispassionate research process for an internally focused one. The research journey should enhance our capacity to be free and to help students live more fully and as better-informed citizens of the world. The overall goal of this book is to provide a guide to develop reflective researchers. The authors accomplish this by providing a practical and useful guide on how to conduct research as an inwardly focused project that is also meant to impact the world. The questions that we articulate should also guide us and challenge our assumptions; while fortifying our desire to know, it is important to keep in mind that our research is only as good as our questions.

This book is an updated and sanguine alternative to some of the better-known books on how to conduct research, namely because it is more than just another how-to book. It's a "how to think and question" guide, focused on placing the researcher at the center of the research process. For this reason, and the fact that this book was informative and enjoyable to read, I would highly recommend it to academic librarians who are engaged in their own research, as well as those teaching students how to conduct research. It is the ideal life-long learning manual, one that will assist the reader in becoming a self-centered researcher whose research is self-directed and focused on making a change in the world.—Darren Sweeper, *Montclair State University*

Writings on Media: History of the Present. Stuart Hall and Charlotte Brunsdon, eds. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. 352p. Paper, \$28.95 (ISBN: 978-1-4780-1471-3).



Stuart Hall (1932–2014) was a massively influential cultural theorist, and his work continues to inform much critical analysis on race, history, and media. Hall was a black Brit, emigrating early in life from Jamaica. Hall spent most of his years teaching and writing about race and nationality in Britain from the Postwar period through the early twenty-first century. Hall's work informed—and continues to inform—much critical historical and sociological work in the United States and elsewhere. Hall was a prolific theorist. *Writings on Media: A History of the Present*, a new anthology of Hall's writing, aims to do historical and biographical justice to the remarkable breadth and diversity of Hall's work across medium and focus.

In her introduction, editor Charlotte Brunsdon explains that, in the work of curating and organizing these analyses, she expected to include Hall's "major works." Ultimately, however, Brunsdon foregoes that approach in favor of something much more ambitious: to produce a collection that reflects both what and *how* Hall theorized. The collected works are delightfully varied in ways both formal and stylistic. Some of Hall's "major" works are featured (Chapter 14 is Hall's brilliant "The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media"); but elsewhere we are treated to less well-known analyses that show Hall's remarkable range and boundless curiosity. This is one feature of *Writings on Media* that makes it such a special and satisfying collection. Further, this variety comports to one of Hall's central ethics: what might be called (to borrow Freire's term) a truly "dialogical" kind of analysis: this collection's range of prosaic mode, methodological approach, and intended audience, from one analysis

to the next, offers readers all sorts of different “ways into” Hall’s work.

These works are organized into three formally defined sections: “Part One: The Photograph in Context,” “Part Two: Media Studies and Cultural Studies,” and “Part Three: Television.” And, owing to Brunsdon’s excellent curatorial work, each of these sections begins with analyses from Hall that are particularly preoccupied with methodological approach to the specific form at issue. The sum of these parts is truly mighty. Not only does *Writings on Media* offer the most diverse and comprehensive collection of Hall’s work anywhere, it also offers as good a foundation as I have encountered on which to build a practice of critical analysis—particularly critical media analysis. This latter quality also makes this review feel like an opportunity to propose a rather broad and ambitious set of possibilities: that *Writings on Media* stands not only to be a touchstone text for the fields of critical media studies and cultural studies in which Hall labored, but also to be a truly transformative text for the field of library and information sciences (LIS). In particular, *Writings on Media* stands to benefit those people in LIS interested in critical information literacy (especially media literacy), as well as those people interested in what might broadly be construed as questions of power, politics, and history in LIS (such as antiracist librarianship).

Hall’s analyses of photojournalism and news media in Part One stand out as particularly instructive works in this collection that stand to add much needed complexity and context to critical LIS studies. As Brunsdon notes in the Introduction, this collection “does not propose that Hall’s media analyses can be digested to produce a one-size-fits-all method that can now be applied” across form, time, and context (7). Instead, Brunsdon suggests that Hall’s project of critical analysis might help sharpen and supplement analyses in other disciplines—to aid in a “search for analytic resources to render any particular analysis more adequate to its object” (7).

Particularly in the last decade, much work in LIS has been dedicated to critical media literacy—particularly to studies of “mis- and disinformation.” Much critical media literacy scholarship encourages readers to engage with journalistic content with questions like: “*how close to the truth* is this news story? Is this news story *objective or not?*” Given these guiding questions, the resultant analysis is often framed in the simple dyad of True and False, without reckoning with the fraught social practices of signification at play in journalistic texts. As Hall argues in chapters 4 and 5 (“Determinations of News Photographs” and “Reconstruction Work: Images of Post-war Black Settlement,” respectively), “The News”—far from a straightforward recounting of “what actually happened”—is in fact a powerful “social practice” (79–81). “The News,” Hall argues, is a discursive procedure that reproduces what is “widely known” (“consensus” and “hegemonic” knowledge) and what is “remarkable” (that is to say, “newsworthy” or aberrant) in a particular social context (68–70). Consequently, “The News” performs a sort of ideological maintenance and reinscribes power relations.

Further, Hall’s analyses (particularly in Part One) feel instantly relevant to those most foundational (and, indeed, still contested) questions of curation, archiving, and cataloging—what these seemingly straightforward practices of collection, description, and ordering *do* to the objects they handle, and how they impart and transform the meaning of these objects in ways that have much to do with the social order at the moments of both collection and representation to an audience or user. Hall’s capacity to be as detailed—if a good deal more accessible—in his analysis as, say, Buckland, while also making arguments about power and discursive formation, and explaining the logic that undergirds each argumentative move he makes along the way, is brilliant in its own right. It also indicates remarkable possibilities

for these analytical forms, which we might model our own analyses after—in critical media literacy and other areas of LIS scholarship.

Part Two, “Media Studies and Cultural Studies,” shows Hall writing more directly about the titular discipline in which he worked, reflecting on pedagogy and critiquing the strategies and discourses of projects of resistance (especially antiracist projects) within these fields. Chapter 12, “Mugging: A Case Study in the Media,” is a particular highlight of this section. Hall’s analysis takes as its object the widespread and peculiarly racialized news coverage of a spike in “muggings” in early 1970s Britain. Hall begins with a fantastic interrogation of the seemingly banal terminological device of “the mugging,” explaining how recently this term has taken on its current criminological definition, and how the very language with which these crimes are commonly described produces fraught and overdetermined social and cultural meanings about race, crime, and policing. This chapter in particular provides a fabulous model for critical historical and discursive analysis, furnished with complexity and care, and deftly argued on the page. This robust reading also comes in at *under six pages*. As such—beyond its merits as a piece of prose—it would also make for an excellent model in any graduate or undergraduate course on critical media literacy. It is such a rich examination, but it is also—crucially—argued in plainspoken terms. Hall engages history with deference and delight, he writes about race with complexity and curiosity, and he neither moralizes at the reader about racism nor avoids the fundamentally moral questions at issue in what he terms the “common-sense racism” that informs so many narratives in media.

In chapter 14, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” Hall approaches questions of race and racism in media in broader and more theoretical terms. Hall explores the ways media “define and construct the question of race in such a way as to reproduce the ideologies of racism” (177). In the final pages of this discussion, Hall expresses frustration about the ways that many antiracist projects tend to undermine each other (and themselves) by “taking absolutist positions” and succumbing to self-righteousness (199). Both of these lines of critique are resonant in contemporary US racial discourses, and the latter observation locates an important area of reflection for contemporary antiracist projects—in LIS and otherwise.

Finally, Part Three, “Television,” begins with another elegant and methodical framework for analysis (Chapter 15, “Television as a Medium and Its Relation to Culture”) before tackling questions particular to the televisual form, like mass-mediation and corporate power, TV’s unique combination of the artistic and the banal, and the manipulative power of TV advertising. Chapter 19, “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse,” offers a wonderful treatment of some of Hall’s most influential theories about how to critically “read” media texts in all of their complexity. These ideas include how to grapple with questions of social meaning involved in media texts, from their production by creators, to their consumption by viewers; what Hall terms “encoding” and “decoding,” respectively. Here we see Hall at his most systematic and directive, laying out these schemes of critical analysis with great precision, rendering his critical analytical approach structurally and diagrammatically. He also describes the complexities of making claims about meaning given the messiness of subjectivity and temporality in epistemological matters, offering “levels” of possible ways of “decoding” a media text—ways of reading that comport to “dominant” and “hegemonic” systems of meaning in a particular social context, as well as ways of reading that involve counterhegemonic or “contrary” interpretation (263). Hall’s attention to these complexities makes his analysis flex to

changing contexts of media objects as well as the ways in which interpretation gets inflected by things like “irony,” attempts at “resistance” to hegemonic ideology, and reactionary attitudes and movements. This furnishing of an analytical scheme that deals with interpretation as fundamentally multiple and always-shifting charts a path for critical discourses in LIS that tend to render objects in ways more singular and fixed.

Both critical information literacy and discourses of power and history in LIS share high stakes, and, though much creative and meaningful work is happening on these subjects, there is also much exhaustion—even despair—that surrounds the big, important questions to which these investigations lead us: *how do we deal with information literacy in a moment characterized by unique epistemic crises? How do we reckon with a profession that seems uniquely haunted by racist, colonialist, and imperialist ideologies? How do we live and labor ethically, effectively, and—most importantly—together?* Our current historical moment has seemed only to intensify these already daunting questions. In critical information literacy instruction, in particular, there is a sense of such great urgency that, in instructional situations, our comportsing to “pragmatism” overrides desires for complexity; that we must sacrifice analytical depth and build instructional tools on simpler and familiar premises like True/False or Biased/Objective, if we hope to impart a sufficiently accessible critical practice in our students.

In *Writings on Media*, Hall’s work suggests that, *precisely because of the urgency* of the problematics in which these disciplines aim to intervene, we must be proportionately careful in how we build our analyses. This collection offers us—in LIS, in education, in these projects of knowledge production, maintenance, and purveyance—an auspicious and instructive blueprint for how to build these analyses. And, most remarkably, it has afforded me new curiosity and excitement about the questions that shape these crucial issues. That is the final, irreducible, profound thing here: that you too might encounter this collection and find yourself possessing a greater appetite for—as well as new approaches to—these questions.

I want to close this review in the same way that Brunsdon begins the text. In the first sentences of this collection, Brunsdon describes Hall’s relationship with media—“reading newspapers, watching film and television, listening to the radio”—and constructing his analysis thereabout: “He loved doing this, even if he didn’t always like what he saw or heard” (1). This is the true magic here: what Hall furnished for us during the course of his life, and what Brunsdon has collected and contextualized in *Writings on Media*, is an invitation into Hall’s world—to see the world as he did. This vision is bright eyed, and delighted, and serious, and humble—Hall was never satisfied in his ambitious investigation, even as he possessed such singular clarity at each point along the way. There is a lot you can read—theory, especially—that will tell you how the world is, and how you ought to feel about that, and how you ought to proceed given these absolute truths. Just the same, there is much writing that will tell you how everything you know—or thought you knew—is wrong, and what sorts of moral and intellectual deficiencies you possess because of that ignorance. Hall is not interested in those things. In all of his prose, it is unmistakable just how much Hall absolutely wants you *in it with him*, and to share his questions, and to identify possible answers, and to figure it out with you. And, *that is a very precious gift indeed.*—Max Wiggins, *University of Maryland, College Park*