

Special Issue: Hidden Gems in Media Studies

Interesting Aspects of Theories for Media and Communication Studies: Opportunities as Reflected in an Old Hidden Gem

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ABSTRACT

Author argues that Murray S. Davis's "interestingness" theory (1971) has been largely ignored in media and communication studies despite its significant influence in other social science disciplines, especially management studies. Davis sees "interestingness" as a primary factor in attracting public and professional attention to theories, and notably, even when those theories may not be true. Rejecting emphatically its use for promoting false theories, the author maintains that Davis's theory, when used responsibly, offers surprising benefits to those engaged in theory-building in media and communication studies. As such, this hidden gem deserves to be better known in our discipline.

KEYWORDS

Interestingness theory, Murray S. Davis, theory building, phenomenology; conceptual novelty

Imagine a theory you hold dear to heart in the field of media studies turned out to be false, pushed into the trash bin of history by a newly developed theory. And what if this newly developed theory proposes just the opposite of what your now-discredited theory had proposed. Among the various sentiments that might run through your mind might well be, "What did I miss about the relevant media phenomena that blinded me to this new reality?" It might also be, "That's great that I now have an improved and corrected break-through comprehension of this particular media studies phenomenon." You probably would want to know more about this fundamentally opposing theory, scrutinize its claims, and assess its prospects for further insights. In other words, it would grab your attention. Well, this little scenario dramatizes and encapsulates the thesis of the hidden gem that I am submitting for your consideration.

HIDDEN GEM ONLY FOR SOME

To understand the unique position of this hidden gem, it's worthwhile to contrast its relative obscurity within media studies compared to other disciplines. A citation analysis of the article reveals that, compared to cognate fields, it has been little attended to by our discipline. Cognate fields have embraced it, granting it a degree of minor celebrity and even some notoriety. Although the gem was conceived by a sociologist, it has found a home not only in the sociological literature but also in management, psychology, education, ethics, computer science and other literatures. It has been cited in over 1800 times and regularly appears on PhD course syllabi.

THE REVEAL

Now, let's reveal the name of the hidden gem. The article I have been discussing is "That's Interesting!: Towards a phenomenology of sociology and a sociology of phenomenology" by Murray S. Davis, published in 1971 in the *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* journal (Davis, 1971). Much like Broadway plays or Hollywood films, this article has garnered enthusiastic reviews. Sociologist Dan Ryan has called it a "cult classic" (Ryan, 2008, p. 15), and the late Joseph Gusfield, a leading figure in symbolic interactionism, described Murray Davis's work as "some of sociology's finest and most original studies of the way in which human beings structure and understand their experience" (Gusfield, 1996, p. 81). This praise carries particular weight considering Gusfield's expertise in how people and institutions create meaning through symbols and signs, the very cornerstone of Davis's approach and of course intimately connected with many media studies' topics. [Author's disclosure note: I was an enthusiastic student of Prof. Davis and afterwards we continued a collegial if distant relationship until his untimely death.]

We may next ask: what is the article's argument

that has provoked both ample praise and sharp criticism? The article's enduring impact stems from its central argument: the interestingness, not the truthfulness, of a theory is what drives its influence and impact. Davis proposes that counterintuitive propositions that challenge our existing assumptions and offer surprising insights which disrupt our expectations are more likely to capture attention and spark further research. As you may recall, this scenario is what I tried to depict at the outset of this article.

In his article, Davis outlines specific criteria for "interestingness" based on principles of logical surprise and conceptual novelty. As he states:

It has long been thought that a theorist is considered great because his theories are true, but this is false. A theorist is considered great, not because his theories are true, but because they are interesting. Those who carefully and exhaustively verify trivial theories are soon forgotten; whereas those who cursorily and expediently verify interesting theories are long remembered. In fact, the truth of a theory has very little to do with its impact, for a theory can continue to be found interesting even though its truth is disputed – even refuted! (Davis, 1971, p. 309)

Expanding on this idea, Davis explains, "All interesting social theories, then, constitute an impact on the taken-for-granted world of their audience. This [theory] will consider any particular proposition to be 'worth saying' only if it denies the truth of some part of their routinely held assumption-ground. If it does not challenge but merely confirms one of their taken-for-granted beliefs, they will respond to it by rejecting its value while affirming its truth" (Davis, 1971, p. 311).

After examining the good number of social theories, Davis concludes that the interesting propositions could be resolved into the logical form: "'What seems to be X is in reality non-X,' or 'What is accepted as X is actually non-X'" (Davis, 1971, p. 313). By drawing on several famous social science theories, Davis then shows how they could

be reduced and analyzed through his analytical framework. I will provide three examples drawn from the array provided in his “Index of the Interesting.”

In terms of organization of social phenomena, Davis gives us the generalized form of interestingness in this domain: “What seems to be a disorganized (unstructured) phenomenon is in reality an organized (structured) phenomenon.” He illustrates the principle by pointing to Karl Marx’s assertion in *Das Kapital* that “the economic process of bourgeois society, which were considered at the time he wrote it to be organized in one way, are in fact not organized that way (but rather organized in another way)” (Davis, 1971, p. 313).

Using another example from his Index of the Interesting, we can reference his assertion that a theory will be deemed interesting if it can show that seemingly disparate phenomena are in reality various manifestations of a single unifying (if hidden) factor. Here he offers the case of Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious. Davis analyzes this theory as follows: Freud asserted that “the behavior of children, primitives, neurotics adults in crowds, as well as dreams, jokes, and slips of the tongue and pen, which were considered at the time he wrote to be not associated in any way with one another, are in fact all the various manifestations of the same instinctual drives” (Davis, 1971, p. 315).

Davis also draws on media studies to provide yet another example of his theory of interestingness in action. One of his axioms of interestingness is in the proposition that things that are perceived as the same or at least quite similar are actually opposite phenomenon. He uses as his example here of Marshall McLuhan. Davis cites the success of McLuhan’s influential book, *Understanding Media*, to demonstrate this principle in action. Davis locates McLuhan in a specific historical era, the 1960s, when radio and television were seen as similar. McLuhan’s claim to fame is that he ostensibly showed that they are “in fact opposite

media (one being a ‘hot’ medium; the other being a ‘cool’ medium)” (Davis, 1971, p. 325).

Remarkably in Davis’s view, theories do not need to be demonstrably true to attract attention and scholarly interest and may even have been debunked. In the case of the theories of Marx, Freud, and McLuhan they largely lack robust empirical support or accurate predictions. Yet, with each new generation these theories continue to have enduring appeal for their intellectual prominence, profound social consequences and provocative assertions. Or to use Davis’s terms, even though they are false, they are interesting. (Popperians, logicians, and critical rationalists, as well as adherents to the above theories, would object to the statements about truth, false and lack of verification. However, delving into the basis of their objections falls beyond the scope of this exploration of Davis’s argument.)

A crucial distinction in Davis’s approach is that while he offers a guide to “interestingness,” he never subordinates quality to it. Though intended as an analytical tool, this framework draws criticism for potentially undermining the central norm of scientific disinterestedness (Merton, 1973). Disinterestedness is a foundational norm of democratic scientific communities. It holds that scientists should be altruistic in their approach to research, driven by the pursuit of knowledge rather than personal gain. Accompanying this principle are behavioral traits such as modesty, lack of self-promotion, and refraining from advertising one’s work. Davis agrees, asserting that “interestingness” should never compromise quality. He subtly accentuates the importance of upholding the norms of good scientific conduct without specifically mentioning Merton. Nonetheless, he still stands accused of providing a pathway to easy self-aggrandizement and thereby short-circuiting quality research and acting as a corrosive on the idealized scientific process. Or, to put it differently, his seeming cookbook to garnering attention for one’s work violates the norms specified by Merton.

In this brief overview, I have highlighted a few major points of Davis's "sociology of the interesting." However there is much more content and nuanced material in the body of the article, and space limitations preclude its recitation here. Still, it is worthwhile to close this review with Davis's own summative words. He contends that "the 'generation' of *interesting* theories ought to be the object of as much attention as the 'verification' of *insipid* ones" (Davis, 1971, p. 344. emphasis in the original).

Interestingness, Media Studies, and Communication: The Road Ahead

Judging by citations, it appears that scholars of media studies have largely ignored (or at least have not stumbled upon) the contentions of Davis's article, a situation that stands in stark contrast to cognate fields, especially management studies.

Looking a little more closely at impact, we can note that his article has also been prominent in organizational and management studies. Management professor László Tihanyi has called it "one of the most influential articles in management" (Tihanyi, 2020), and renowned management theorist Karl Weick made it the centerpiece for his article on theory construction (Weick, 1989).

Not everyone, however, shares this admiration. Professor Eric W. K. Tsang has called it "pernicious and corrosive," whose article subtitle even decries its influence: "A flawed article has influenced generations of management researchers" (Tsang, 2022, p. 150). Tsang must have found plenty to object to, enough to dedicate an entire article to the subject (Tsang, 2022). Yet, even as he casts aspersions on the work, he offers a backhanded compliment by acknowledging its impact on "generations" of researchers. He is by no means alone in his criticisms, as others such as Foss and Klein (in press) have also engaged in critiques. It seems my chosen hidden gem has not resided in obscurity within cognate fields like management

studies.

Considering the impressive success Davis's article has enjoyed in management studies, it is worth asking what his "interestingness" theory could offer media and communication studies. Our field is particularly well-equipped to analyze and utilize this framework. In terms of analysis, we can ask how much communication theories gain traction due to their rhetorical effectiveness rather than their truth value. Regarding utilization, we can explore both fruitful and potentially problematic ways to use Davis's Index of the Interesting to generate awareness of proposed advances, stimulate idea production through concept juxtaposition, and the effectiveness of "logical surprise" in provoking scholars' curiosity in challenging theories. Ultimately, it would be worthwhile to see if such an approach proves particularly persuasive in communication research. Thus Davis's concepts become both an object of investigation and a tool for theoretical innovations and their propagation through the field.

CONCLUSION

Murray S. Davis proposes a valuable and provocative framework for stimulating and guiding scholarly interest when developing or integrating novel theories. Even more valuable, however, is his emphasis on recognizing the cultural and sociological factors that influence how new ideas are received. While figures like Karl Popper, Robert K. Merton, and Thomas Kuhn have made enormous contributions by providing a deeper understanding of the scientific research project, Davis, in his own insightful way has also explored the phenomenological and rhetorical aspects of theoretical innovation. In terms of our own media and communication studies field, it is with rare exception that Davis's phenomenological pivotal concepts are brought to bear.

Davis cautions against abusing his "interestingness" concept as a shortcut to garner impact or a way to woo audience engagement. He recognizes

the inherent tension that often exists between interestingness and relevance in research (a tension that has yielded innumerable media training sessions for social scientists and their ilk to fruitfully steer between the two). Here he stands in favor of relevance, but is aware of how interestingness can lead to insightful and unanticipated directions in research and theory development. The liveliness of his examples and the utility of the “index” of interestingness understandably draw criticism. Davis’s critics fear his recommendations could tempt authors down a path of catchy titles and superficial findings without considering theoretical substance. Even without Davis’s influence, the increasing presence of popular song titles, catchphrases and wordplay in scholarly article titles (Keating et al., 2022, p. 627) reveals the undeniable appeal of such innovations to garner reader interest. For some, the presence of these artifices in scholarly publications are *prima facie* evidence of preference for cuteness over intellectual merit. Recent research on articles published within communication studies sheds light on the consequences of having “cutesy cues.” A study of academic communication articles from 1972 to 2022 found that, generally speaking, stylistic cues were associated with lower citation counts (Keating et al., 2022).

Moving beyond catchy titles in academic publications, some scholars critique the dangers of valuing “interestingness” over theoretical rigor or practical relevance. As I have shown, Davis’s work can understandably be misinterpreted as endorsing the replacement of substantive content with superficial allure. By offering his formulaic “Index of the Interesting,” he runs the risk of being misused by those seeking disciplinary shortcuts. But Davis avers, warning precisely not to take this route. If scholars do, the fault lies not with his framework, but with our “publish or perish” system and authors’ hunger for recognition and validation.

Davis’s contributions could find fertile ground

within another underdeveloped tradition in media studies and communication: the philosophy of communication, which emphasizes the foundational rhetorical and phenomenological meanings of research (Kaplan, 1964). His work provocatively stimulates deeper thinking that both complements and extends current “theory of theories” explorations in communication.

Davis’s article remains a significant contribution to the enduring contestation about the very nature and purpose of social science research. Its high citation count, its influence on current theorizing in cognate fields, and the ongoing lively debate it fuels all demonstrate its continued relevance and influence on academic discourse across disciplines. Media studies would benefit by joining the debate over the rhetorical and ideological significance of Davis’s argument. Likewise the larger communication discipline itself would benefit from explicitly investigating the trade-offs between a posture of disinterestedness versus the many attractions arising from making one’s work interesting.

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Dr. James E. Katz of Boston University is the Feld Professor of Emerging Media Studies and was the inaugural director of the Division of Emerging Media Studies (2012-2023). His research the melding of mobile communication technology and artificial intelligence (AI). His pioneering publications on AI and society, social media, mobile communication, and robot-human interaction have been internationally recognized and translated into a dozen languages. Katz's two most recent books are *Perceiving the Future Through New Communication Technologies: Robots, AI and Everyday Life* and *Nudging Choices Through Media: Ethical and Philosophical Implications for Humanity*, both co-edited with Juliet Floyd and Katie Schiepers. Earlier books include *The Social Media President: Barack Obama and the Politics of Citizen Engagement* (with Michael Barris and Anshul Jain), *Social Consequences of Internet Use: Access, Involvement, Expression* (with Ronald E. Rice) and *Handbook of Mobile Communication Studies*. According to Google Scholar, his works have been cited more than 17,000 times.