



Media Communication & Cultural Studies Association

ESRC International Benchmarking Review of UK Sociology

Contribution from the Media Communication and Cultural Studies Association

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1. Introduction

The Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association (MeCCSA) is the national subject association representing academic staff and students in its fields in UK Higher Education. Scholarship and research within our broad field embrace a number of approaches, some rooted in the humanities, others in the social sciences. Our interest in this Review derives from the very important strand of sociological theory and research in the development of our field, and the vital focus on issues in media, communication and cultural study in the work of sociologists. In the subject overview from the sub-panel most closely aligned with our field in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise it was noted that much work of interest to it was submitted to social science sub-panels (much of which was cross-referred), and that the sub-panel had been “impressed by evidence of the growing impact of approaches and traditions from within cultural and media studies on other fields”. Our field is thus both an importer from and an exporter to mainstream sociological work, and it would be a rare sociology curriculum which did not now reflect the massive growth of research literature in the fields in which our members (many of whom are in mainstream social science departments) work.

2. Comments on Issues raised by the Review

As our concerns are rather specific we have not commented on each of the questions posed in Dr. Farnden’s letter of June 22nd. Rather we note a number of concerns which we feel the Panel might wish to consider in completing the Review, which are particular to our field’s relationship to sociology.

- i. The strength and significance of research in our field is recognised internationally, and much work within it is regarded as world-leading both conceptually and empirically. This is also our understanding of much work within sociology, where UK work is to our knowledge extremely well regarded internationally, not least because of its interest in and attention to those

issues central to our field. The so-called 'cultural turn' within sociology was largely driven by the growth of media and cultural studies in the UK, and UK sociology continues to benefit from this interaction.

- ii. Despite this, we remain extremely concerned by the low level of investment in research in our fields, whether conducted by 'card-carrying' sociologists or by social scientists working in departments otherwise labelled. In 2008 the ESRC made 558 research awards, only 11 of which (1.97%) were even loosely within media or communication studies. The RAE sub-panel noted that funding over the assessment period was similarly low. Between 2001 and 2008 research council funding for media, communication and cultural studies research totalled £7.3 million, compared to £28.8 million for English language and literature or £66.5 million for sociology. Put another way, the research funding per research active academic in the period was £32k for media, communication and cultural studies, and £171k for sociology. The RAE sub-panel noted that "The assessment suggested research funding continues to be more concentrated than is research excellence, and that there is a real danger in the under-funding of research, as of research students, in looking to the future development and sustainability of the field".
- iii. Our point is not, of course, the over-funding of sociology. Sociology as a research field is undoubtedly under-funded (receiving, for example, about 8% of that received from the research councils by biological sciences in the RAE assessment period). Comparisons between sociology and other STEM subjects would reveal further worrying discrepancies. However, we do have concerns about the underfunding of our field, which in turn is to the disadvantage of sociological research embracing our area of activity. This is especially because, given its growing institutionalisation in departments and research clusters, work in this area is not featuring prominently in the core activities of sociology departments, and it is notable, and worrying, how rarely issues related to the media and communication are featured in research published in major journals such as *Sociology*.
- iv. A problem we have frequently highlighted is that of 'boundaries'. Given the inter-disciplinary strength of our field, researchers within it frequently have difficulty understanding whether their work is best addressed to the ESRC or the AHRC, and, like people in other 'boundary' areas, often find themselves disregarded by both. In the past both bodies have recognised this problem and suggested that a workable division of labour might come from regarding work on texts as primarily within the domain of the AHRC and on 'impacts' as within that of the ESRC. However this distinction, never satisfactory, is now long overdue for reconsideration, and we would urge that such discussion be initiated.