It is with great excitement, enthusiasm, and trepidation that we take over the helm of International Journal of Cultural Studies. All three feelings grow from our admiration of everything John Hartley and his spectacular team have done. Hartley launched the journal in 1998, and has presided over its 101 issues to date. By our unofficial count, that translates to almost 700 articles and almost 100 reviews, plus the 13 articles in this current volume that Hartley and Managing Editor Tina Horton reviewed and accepted. Amid those many articles are some by each one of us, as along the way we’ve been rolled into the journal’s massive extended family. We sought to publish here in large part because...
we always knew we’d be in such good company, and because we appreciated knowing we’d contribute to the journal’s broad topographical and disciplinary range, not contribute to the formation of a limiting dogma. And this is why we are excited and enthusiastic to continue this legacy, but also meet the task with trepidation, not wanting to let down this extended family of authors, reviewers, and readers. Hartley and his team created something of great value, and for this we thank them profusely, though we’re also mindful that they’ve set the bar high.

So, what are we doing, and where do we go from here?

To answer that first question, we start by going back to John Hartley’s opening editorial in 1998, in which he offered that the journal:

focuses on culture as an object of study and cultural studies as a mode of inquiry. The object of study is understood very broadly as the production of meaning in new topographies of knowledge, with an investigative emphasis on popular media, everyday culture, ordinary life. The mode of inquiry into culture is inter- or even post-disciplinary; culture needs explanation from multiple perspectives, including textual, social, political, and historical approaches to questions of international communication, power, exchange and technology. While the journal recognizes that theory and position are important in analytical work, priority will be given to studies which also explore a definite archive or cultural form. Hence, among other things, the ‘international’ journal will be a cumulative source of ‘local’ analysis across the range of media (from music to multimedia), and ordinary practices (from eating to acting). The International Journal of Cultural Studies is post-disciplinary in the sense that it seeks to identify and promote approaches that go beyond the disciplinary as well as the national geography of 20th-century modernism, dealing directly with the topography revealed by cultural studies during its current phase. (1998: 5)

This is still the case. The focus of the journal has not changed, nor will it. We still wish it to be ‘a lively meeting place for international perspectives on cultural and media developments across the globe; and a place where different intellectual and political traditions can come into fruitful dialogue with each other’ (Hartley, 1998: 5). In the last 21 years, the field has eked its way closer to being more legitimately global and international, and though the path ahead is still a long one, we want to continue to use the journal to push and pressure, to keep or ideally increase momentum towards that lofty goal. Key to that ideal is that we want the journal truly to be a ‘meeting place,’ where readers encounter and interact with a broad range of ideas; we see limited virtue in simply placing various inward-looking pieces alongside each other. We encourage prospective authors to think always about how this case study, this theoretical development, or this specific cultural context has something – or, better yet, many things – to offer readers less familiar with the case study, approach, theory, or context. In short, and deviously, we seek articles that render editorials about what we’re doing redundant, since they already model best practices for the development, enrichment, and expansion of an international cultural studies.

If, however, we see the journal as a ‘meeting place,’ what are we meeting about? The need for a topical nucleus to our gatherings – recalling that ‘topic’ stems from ‘topos’ – returns us to Hartley’s definition of ‘culture’ as our object of study: ‘understood very broadly as the production of meaning in new topographies of knowledge, with an investigative emphasis on popular media, everyday culture, ordinary life.’ A number of
challenges to this definition, already nascent in 1998 and acknowledged as such by Hartley, have today reached such levels of conspicuous tension with it that they require recognition and discussion. Each challenge indicates not only shifts in thought and in historical conditions, but demarcates and potentially internalizes an outside to cultural studies – theoretical perspectives and scholarly frameworks for researching the putatively ‘non-cultural’ – which cultural studies is impelled to encounter. Three challenges in particular are palpable: the decentering of meaning, the expansion of media, and the need for decentering scholarship.

The decentering of meaning

Cultural studies was never only about meaning. Revisiting Stuart Hall’s ‘Cultural studies: two paradigms’ (1980) makes it clear that both the ‘culturalist’ and ‘structuralist’ strands he discerns defined ‘culture’ as the field of relations between meanings, social practices, and conditions of existence. Although meaning was conceptualized through such dissimilar terms as ‘experience,’ ‘ideology,’ ‘representation,’ and ‘discourse,’ it was understood (along with the forms and means of its (re)production) to be always already embedded in social and historical processes. This relational theorization of meaning has undergone a series of displacements in the intervening years, partly describable by the familiar figure of the intellectual and scholarly ‘turn’ (performative, material, etc.): these ‘turns’ have, by and large, sought to rethink the intersections between meaning and aspects of social action and existence that have been comparatively neglected or were otherwise invisible to the dominant theoretical approaches. Perhaps the most radical displacements have accompanied so-called ‘non-representational’ intellectual currents, most obviously the turn to affect. While the ascent of affect in cultural studies has proved fertile for articulating aspects of embodied human activity and experience which are pre-discursive and non-conscious, it also clearly implies a deliberate de-emphasis of ‘meaning’ in its conventional sense, while also reconceptualizing the social processes in relation to which meaning is thought as, in Thrift’s words, ‘inhuman or transhuman’ (2004: 60). At its best, the turn to affect unsettles and expands understandings of culture, encompassing embodied socially formative energies whose character and dynamism cannot be fully comprehended through the terminologies of representation and social practice. At its worst, it promotes a dismissal of the cultural and the social in the name of a philosophically attired genuflection to psychobiology and neuroscience. As cultural studies scholars we should also be aware of the organizational politics that can shape these intellectual movements, as some of the poorest parts of the academy (often in the humanities) ally themselves with some of the richest, though we should also not reduce intellectual correspondences to merely economic or institutional determinations (yes, it pays to remember Althusser).

More broadly, what does it say about the historical conditions in which we undertake intellectual work that we describe it as proceeding through innumerable ‘turns’ – a word which rhetorically performs the transformation that it appears merely to describe – rather than through paradigms, paths (whether forking or not), approaches, schools, or, for that matter, assemblages? Does the ‘turn’ make cultural studies a largely tactical project, foregrounding incessant maneuvering as its primary mode of interchange? Might it
express a consciously ‘interstitial’ understanding of cultural studies as a post-disciplinary or even anti-disciplinary force for executing localized and temporary interventions in knowledge-production? Or could the constant impulse to turn (Which way? Have I missed it?) be an intellectual symptom of cultural studies’ institutional precarity, at a time when going ‘beyond the state of the art’ (a favorite phrase for certain research grants) is increasingly important for departmental and individual career success? As ever, navigating these latest turns, and any other metaphors to come, requires thinking about their meanings in relation to social conditions and practices; the challenge remains to vivify that thought with theoretical audacity while tempering it with historical reflection and political critique.

The expansion of media

Hartley states that the journal (and cultural studies) will have an ‘investigative emphasis on popular media, everyday culture, ordinary life.’ It is unlikely that he was offering a list of discrete mutually exclusive categories, but the question nevertheless arises today of how much of everyday culture and ordinary life are not pervaded by popular media. Thanks to the proliferation of interactive mobile digital devices and their infrastructures, media penetrate and structure our everyday routines, saturate our physical and symbolic environments, read our fingerprints and recognize our faces, occupy our fantasies and dreams, put us to sleep, wake us up, locate us, remind us, record us, promote us, entertain us, inform us, excite us, distract us, and even monitor us. Media, in a broad sense, have become omnipresent, if not omniscient: we meet them, and are greeted by them, at every turn, and we are bereft when we mislay them. Obviously, the ‘we’ of the preceding sentences should not remain unqualified: the extent of media pervasiveness is highly variable across the globe, both between countries and within them. Part of the challenge facing scholars is to specify and investigate different formations of infrastructural media presence and practical usage, and also to analyze whether apparently similar constellations of media ‘saturation’ in different locations and times have the same cultural implications. Yet even given this variability the broad global trajectory is that everyday culture and ordinary life are more overtly and intensely structured in relation to media technologies than in the past, to the extent that for many populations the default framework for routine everyday activities as well as for momentous life experiences is through and in the company of media.

This then raises an important issue: does the expansion of media technologies necessitate the expansion of media studies, and where does that leave cultural studies? If the condition of contemporary (or even all) culture is that it is mediated, is cultural studies now merely media studies’ impoverished sibling, picking up the leftovers and curiosities judged to be (somehow) less mediated – or, more cynically, to be mediated by less fashionable technologies – than the bulk of ordinary and extra-ordinary life? And since the increasing colonization of the lifeworld is performed by media technologies which produce data about their operations, whose traces and uses are observable at levels of microscopic resolution hitherto only dreamt of, and are calculable in new combinations and at scales that seem to provide gateways to the socio-cultural totality, where does that leave cultural studies’ conventional concern with meaning and interpretation (not to mention the text-centered and
ethnographic methodological training of most of its practitioners)? None of this of course obviates the need for critical, reflexive, and historically informed analyses of the meaning of these developments: in fact, quite the reverse. Perhaps, then, cultural studies should rearticulate one of its primary roles as doing media studies that is non-media-centric?

The need for decentering scholarship

Since its early days, cultural studies challenged scholarly orthodoxy that has assumed and reproduced the cultural, social, and political centrality of the west, of whiteness, and of high culture in ordering the world. Despite the inevitable trajectory of cultural studies toward institutionalization and its accompanying ossification, there have also been questions about the way that such power has accumulated and how we can resist its exclusions. The anti-colonial legacy of cultural studies in the 1970s and 1980s fed into post-structuralist scholarship that challenged racism, heteropatriarchy, western hegemony, and cultural imperialism. In the 1990s and 2000s, cultural studies aligned with many critical thinkers in the humanities and social sciences in calling for scholarship that identified globalization as a driving force of cultural and social change locally, regionally, globally (Curran and Park, 2000; Thussu, 2009). The project of decentering scholarship, especially under the heading of ‘de-westernisation’ and ‘internationalization,’ has gained prevalence since then – but this is by no means a complete or shared project. De-westernisation, moreover, does not mean a closure of academic dialogue between the ‘west’ and the ‘non-west,’ nor should internationalization mean simply an embracing of ‘non-west’ culture. Rather, the essence of decentering scholarship echoes more with what Abbas and Erni espoused in their volume titled Internationalizing Cultural Studies: An Anthology (2004), calling for a wider recognition of voices, many of which have been silenced in cultural studies and omitted in the global academic discourse, as well as recognition of cultural studies’ multiple and historically diverse trajectories across regions of the world. In this same volume, Abbas and Erni call for a version of cultural studies that is ‘inclusive of a wide array of diverse speaking positions’ (2004: 7).

What does this call mean at present, and what does it mean for IJCS? Is it a call for more even distribution of articles from across the world in the journal’s pages, or does decentering scholarship require decentering intellectual imagination? What does it mean to rethink who and what are studied, by whom, and how scholarship is produced and disseminated? Do we need to look within and recognize the many theoretical and empirical trajectories that have always shaped cultural studies and our key inquiries? Or does the call for decentering scholarship demand that cultural studies challenge and refute the hegemony of western scholarly traditions (which are stubbornly reproduced through the recirculation of ideas produced, taught, and reprinted in English)? What does decentering scholarship mean for cultural studies today?

These three overt challenges to the definition of culture – and to the mission of cultural studies – mentioned by Hartley are not glitches to be fixed or difficulties to be resolved. The idea of the journal as a ‘meeting place’ is not to establish consensus about what culture is and does, or about what it means to ‘study’ it, but to encourage civil modes of passionate and productive debate on these questions. The journal as an assembly ground for conversation and civil contention signals the importance of fruitful
disagreement, not hostility: agonism rather than antagonism, to use one of Hartley’s favorite distinctions. It means, in effect, that culture remains, despite the shifts in thought and in historical realities, a problematic rather than a problem: an idea whose dynamism and uncertainty generates new avenues for debate, investigation, and critique.

* Practically, we’ve been on the job for a year already, albeit working on material for this current volume and beyond. The transition to our team is thus already under way. The journal submission and review system now occurs online, accessed via https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/ijocs. As of this issue, Sage is removing page limits for the journal, thereby allowing us to shorten publication queues and to innovate with other forms of content. We have a Facebook page and a Twitter handle – @IJCS_journal – and encourage readers to follow us at both places. We have a new editorial board who have already been put to work. We have already moved to a second editorial assistant, Leah Steuer, following our amazing first assistant Austin Morris, and we extend heartfelt thanks to both for doing so very much. And we aim to roll out several other innovations in the coming months.

References