



***Understanding the Media* (3rd Edition), Eoin Devereux (2014). Sage, 9781446248805**



Laughey's Canon

Editor's note: This review is part of our series in which a current media teacher re-examines a 'classic' text in honour of MERJ editorial board member Dan Laughey and his provocative 'Back to Basics' article in MERJ 2:2.

Understanding the Media is a busy textbook for media undergraduates, first published in 2003, and now in its third edition. The book now comes with a companion website which is stocked full with an impressive array of online readings (from the SAGE catalogue, naturally) and resources for instructors. Perhaps the most useful element though is the 'toolkit'; an array of questions and tasks, directly referenced by each chapter in the book. For example, students are asked to keep a diary, and then reflect on it, to design a poster presentation, etc. In this way, as they go through the book, the logic is that they will be gently taken toward nasty words like 'methodology' until the secret work of applied media research is revealed to them at the end. The case studies here are extensive and up to date (e.g. football and subscription television).

In the book proper, eight icons are used to flag-up 'key thinkers', further case studies, as well as pause points to 'Stop & Think!'. Only one of the key thinkers is a woman (Naomi Klein) which neatly illustrates a chapter headed 'Media Re-presentations in an Unequal World' perhaps. That aside, the book employs a nice address, and talks directly to the student – although perhaps there are a bit too many 'you might...' do this, and 'you could...' do that. The introduction encourages students to ask 'awkward questions' and then explains how the book is to be used.

Each chapter has an overview, and flags up the 'key concepts' it will take you through. The 'Do it!' prompt directs students to the toolkit on the website, and while it can be difficult to not make this look contrived, it never feels patchy in *Understanding the Media* – largely because Eoin Devereux has taken the web resources seriously.

Power and the use/mis-use of it (and where it resides) is of central concern, but the book does manage to take in David Gauntlett's 'Media Studies 2.0' proposition in a fairly balanced-way. Devereux is more interested in the students making up their own minds,



rather than telling what they ought to know, hence all the prompts and pause-points.

Chapters on globalisation and ownership feature *Big Brother* and Rupert Murdoch. The ideology chapter perhaps tries to cram a little too much in: Marx, Gramsci, Althusser, Chomsky and Foucault all vie for our attention. The aforementioned 'Re-presentations' chapter does have an excellent case study on the word 'Chav', its journey to a signature term for working class youth, and a chapter on audiences finally reveals the raw mechanisms for media research. The final 'New Media' chapter is perhaps the most revised part of this edition, and includes a comprehensive account of the Arab Spring, and how it was represented across an array of different media.

Rather than the standard summary conclusion, *Understanding the Media* ends by directly asking students to do their own media research, and gives them a real sense of what that might look like.

If a student started at the beginning, and worked methodically and chronologically through this book, dipping out to the toolkit when prompted, there is no doubt in my mind that they would gain an awful lot of understanding, and would be well-set for their undergraduate studies. The problem is perhaps that students do not read books in that way anymore – if they ever did – and undertaking all of the tasks, as well as presumably their undergraduate essays and fieldwork, is not going to be a mean feat. However, it is no surprise that *Understanding the Media* has become a classic student textbook, and I feel this is down to the author's understanding of his students, his careful preparation of case studies and the wealth of supplementary material he makes available online.

Reviewer – Richard Berger. CEMP, Bournemouth University, UK

***Software Takes Command*, Lev Manovich (2013). Bloomsbury, ISBN 9781623567453**

Lev Manovich made a major contribution in 2003 with the first comprehensive study of the poetics of new media. When I read his assertion that the most frequently watched animation in the world was the 'page loading' icon on Internet Explorer, it felt like someone was looking at 'new media' quite differently: at the cultural media dimensions of digital environments, in the same way one might study a film, an advert or a magazine.

That book was also an ambitious history of these media: one with an argument, plotting a powerful trajectory that ought to change how we think about digital experiences, texts and culture. The origins of computing, he claimed, were in the Jacquard looms of French and Flemish weavers in the later eighteenth century; they influenced Babbage's 'computational engine', itself the precursor of Turing's Universal Computing Machine, by