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***Current Perspectives in Media Education: Beyond the Manifesto*, edited by Pete Fraser and Jonathan Wardle (2013). Palgrave Macmillan, ISBN 978-1-137-300201**

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One perspective on media education, in the UK at least, is apparent in threats to its status as a fit subject for the school curriculum. The current thrust is to weight the value of education as an object measurable in examination results and, at the time of writing, Ofqual – the body tasked with the regulation of qualifications – is underway with a consultation on the status of certain subjects inclusive of media studies ([ofqual.gov.uk](http://ofqual.gov.uk)). This task was summarised in the headline of the online arm of the tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mail* thus: ‘Bonfire of “soft” GCSEs: Media studies, astronomy and tourism could be axed in bid to make qualification more rigorous’ (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2645486/Michael-Gove-set-axe-soft-GCSEs-including-media-studies-astronomy-tourism-bid-make-qualification-rigorous.html>). This perspective on the relative worth of media-related subjects is extended to questioning their value as fixtures of university study based on an instrumental sense that HE should ready students for the workplace. That media studies might pay attention to a cultural, economic and social phenomenon like Mickey Mouse is taken at face value to determine the character of that subject.

Such attacks are accounted for in the collection under review and which give a context for an often anxious tone as well as some of an occasional combative optimism about the need for media education. Readers of the *Media Education Research Journal (MERJ)* will, no doubt, concur with the insistence of its contributors that studying the media, at whatever level, rarely lacks rigour or provides an easy option for students. As this collection makes clear, the nature and focus of media education is immensely varied although increasingly vocal questions about the value of the field and its purpose cannot be easily ignored, particularly as they form part of a wider attack on arts and humanities and student-centered learning.

Some of the essays in this collection will be familiar to many readers in their original form from amongst the 50 or so who contributed to the online Manifesto for Media Education which was launched in 2011 ([www.manifestoformediaeducation.co.uk](http://www.manifestoformediaeducation.co.uk)). This project set out to elicit answers to the question of ‘what is the purpose of media education?’ Answers were often centred on an idea of media literacy, particularly in light of the kinds of challenges posed by the trends to convergence occasioned by new media, notably the blurring boundaries of producer and consumer. Responses represented here cover a broad range of ideas, encompassing those that emerge from a tradition seeking to demystify



media forms and representations and those that seek a practical empowerment via the development of production skills as well as those that merge such perspectives and activities. An ongoing theme considers whether media-based learning should be engaged with concepts or a focus on knowledge and skills acquisition. One thing that is certainly demystified in the self-reflexive approach of much on offer here are the misrepresentations of media-related courses and those who teach them. For instance, in her chapter on the education of media educators, Kate Domaille reflects on the numbers of UK school students studying in these areas. With less than 10 per cent of the national cohort, she suggests that this shows that this is a minority area of study and that comparative grade rates undermine claims of a soft option.

The pithiness of the original online manifesto pieces is sometimes lost in extended essay form, questioning the need for a published and less accessible and usable collection. Certainly, an engaging quality of the online site is the evidence of a wider community of readers and pedagogues. Nonetheless, the passion, commitment and integrity of those who contributed to this project is apparent, across a balance of focused case studies as well as more sweeping gestures. It is refreshing to find such a range of experiences and perspectives collected together. Alongside insights from HE and familiar names such as David Buckingham or Henry Jenkins are empirical accounts of classroom teaching from those involved in primary and secondary schooling. Likewise, the insights extend beyond media studies courses, as in the case of Helen Keegan, to encompass the introduction of new media work into courses for MSc students. The weight of these essays is focussed on the UK although there are voices from Australia, the US and Canada where Stuart R. Poyntz's piece on public space and media education is particularly interesting, underlining the democratic value of forms of media education. In light of this Anglophone experience, one wonders at the state of this field elsewhere in the world.

There is a strong sense of the historical amongst these pieces – which means that some ground is trod repeatedly, albeit instructively. The first four chapters for instance offer overviews of 30 years of policy and practice, with Jenny Grahame for one offering an affecting insider account of teaching production begun in 1981. However, this historical purview gives some sense to the waxing of the field and fears for its waning – whether as a result of forces marshalled against it or perceived fears about the various failures of its 'mission'. The final essay here demonstrates the pessimism of the intellect evident across many of the essays as well as that optimism of the will that is characteristic of committed pedagogues. Julian McDougall suggests that 'As a radical pedagogy project, media education has failed' (176). While delivering students into media employment, there has been no challenge to its institutions. Furthermore, he suggests that the very



construction of a subject area has reinforced a sense of the power of media. McDougall offers a challenging last word then by positing a deconstruction of media education, and imagining pedagogy after the subject.

In light of McDougall's pronouncements and thoughts about power for instance, there is a need I think to interrogate the nature of the politics alluded to across these essays. There's a sense of what Johnny one is *against* ('What you got? Neo-liberalism, instrumentalism?'), but there needs to be a better idea of what one is *for* beyond a critical pedagogy that at worst appears as a reactive and familiar form of 'inoculation' against aspects of the modern of which one disapproves. In relation there is an often-disembodied sense of media forms and economy in these essays. This last point can be illustrated with reference to Poyntz's note of the pressure on youth media organisations to align their work 'with labour market expectations' (p.96). Of course, there is much to be concerned about in an instrumental approach to education *for* the workplace as well as being critical of the demands, compromises and excesses of commercial objectives, but what seems curiously absent across this collection is a critical understanding of commercial media beyond their construction as an Other of a proper media education or a faith in a model of public service and idealised sense of the citizenship produced by a *proper* education. In light of concerns about where the field is located intellectually, there might also be some point in taking complaints about media education more seriously in order to consider that sometimes, and in some places, related pedagogy might not offer all that its vociferous proponents claim for it.

These points should not be taken to undermine the value of this book in capturing a particular moment and limited if varied set of perspectives. It would be interesting to hear what those *outside* of media education make of this collection although an egregious figure such as Michael Gove, until recently the UK Secretary of State for Education, is positively immune to evidence that does not accord with his ideological convictions, particularly the testimony of experienced professionals. Certainly, if the hostile voices ranged against media education are often found amongst the various media – notably the right-wing press – it is perhaps there that a need for an education about media education is needed more than anywhere else. This collection offers an education about the philosophies and practices of some of its practitioners and those outside may not care for what they find: which is not a bad thing. Finally, one group of *insiders* whose responses would be valuable to hear about in response to this collection are students themselves. Why do they elect to take media studies qualifications? What do they want from philosophical or production-based work? How do they feel when traduced by politicians and those in the media? Ultimately, what kind of equipment is provided by a media education of the kind described here?

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