Media Education Research in the Twenty-first Century: Touching the Void?

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> The definition of a subject is always problematic, and this is especially true of one which has a variety of contexts which are changing with considerable speed. (McGetterick, 2000: 1).

In 2006 and 2007, two international journals turned their lens on Media Education for themed editions and, in editorial articles, the same author (David Buckingham) raised very important questions about policy and pedagogy:

- 'Should we play the policy game, pragmatically adjusting our arguments in order to make strategic gains where we can?' (2006: 77).
- 'New digital media require a rethinking of existing conceptual frameworks and pedagogic practices, in ways that take many of us well beyond our 'comfort zones'' (2007: 117).

Three years on, and we can add Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* (2006) and Merrin's 'Media Studies 2.0' (2009) to the mix as catalysts for further inward-looking. But whilst there are a range of places where 'experts' can voice their perspectives – sometimes based on research, sometimes on conjecture alone – where is the forum for a sustained discussion amongst teacher-researchers, the agents who make sense of all this in the systemworld? What opportunities are provided for these media educators to share their own interventions in this changing pedagogical ecosystem without giving up the 'day job' of teaching to pass comment – touching from a distance?

The terms 'Media Studies' and 'Media Education' were once virtually interchangeable and indistinguishable. The subject, as we would currently recognise it, really began in the UK in the 1950s, following on from the first BFI conference in 1946. It was a marginal offering, generally provided by enthusiastic, largely London-based, school teachers. Terry Bolas' book (2009) – reviewed in this first edition of *MERJ* – provides a forensic and

exhaustive genealogy of these developments. This gradually became the 'film appreciation' movement of the 1960s and 1970s – still a fairly subversive activity. Historically, the teachers of media have not had much of a media background, and many of those who were introducing 'film appreciation' into their general studies classrooms were English teachers still bound to Leavis-ite notions of taste and culture. It was felt that if children could be taught to discriminate between good and bad films, then they would become better citizens – and the cinema industry would be forced to clean up its act as a consequence. The early teachers of Media, who used film in their teaching, came from the disciplines of Physics, Geography and Economics. Decades later, Len Masterman (1985) would also argue for media education to be an integral aspect of Geography, Science, English and History subjects.

Genealogy

In the wake of the 1963 Newsom Report, the subject was splitting between those English teachers who saw a media education as an important part of citizenship and a means to help promote 'critical thinking'; those, like Masterman – and the aforementioned *MERJ* editorial board member David Buckingham (whose new book is reviewed in this issue) – who argued for media education for all in schools, and those who studied media, wholly or in part, in polytechnics and later universities, because they wanted to work in one of the many myriad media industries. So, you can study media and you can use media to study media. Or you can use media to study something else entirely.

This confusion was added to by the proliferation of media technologies: television in the 1950s, videogames from the 1960s, video in the 1970s, home-computing in the 1980s and the web in the 1990s. Bolas describes the initial resistance to accept television, what he calls 'the Trojan horse of educational technology' (2009: 4) as Cinema Studies tended to dominate, but that would change as Television Studies became a defined field with its own journals and conferences. As a subject in schools, colleges and (new) universities, it was boom-time as a plethora of programmes sprung up to sate the appetite of a generation eager to participate in some way – many of them wanting to create their own media texts. If you were a young person in the 1970s, 1980s and into the 1990s wanting to make your own television, or radio programme, or you wanted to shoot your own short film, you had to take a media programme of some type at your school or college. These 'Media Studies' programmes tended to focus on Film and Television Studies; to this we can later add radio – which took its time to catch up – and latterly the web, computer animation and videogames. Journalism, up until now the preserve of specialist postgraduate programmes or in-house training, would reluctantly join what was becoming a 'new academy', the sorts of places which for Pierre Bourdieu:

leads students from the dominant class and poorly endowed with academic capital towards the new disciplines, whose power of attraction lies no doubt largely in the vagueness of the future which they offer and the freedom to deter disinvestment which they allow. (1984: 168)

This 'new academy' then was in danger of being dominated by middle-class students, all wanting a career 'in the Media'; Terry Bolas' Trojan horse was now a whole herd. From the 1970s onwards Media Studies was attacked from within and externally. Postmodernism, and its questioning of truths and grand-narratives – made the subject a laughing stock among 'hard' scientists elsewhere in the academy. Journals such as *Screen*, and *Screen Education* were riven with ideological in-fighting. The subject had now been intellectualised and both publications ceased to have influence and became 'stalking grounds for the high theorists' (Masterman, 1985: 43). The neglected *Screen Education* unsurprisingly folded.

Horizontal Discourse

Media Studies was now an umbrella term for a loose collection of disciplines, all with their own critical canons and advocates. Film and television still dominated – and would do until the 1990s – but the effect was to create silos of knowledge, expertise and practice; Media Studies had become *Medium* Studies. While schools and colleges wrestled with using media to teach, and teaching about media, higher education was diversifying even further. So, someone who had studied television as part of their undergraduate studies, who would later go onto to study film at postgraduate level, would be confused about the latter's disdain for the audience and its emphasis on textual analysis. While both Television and Film Studies were being attacked – under the loose umbrella of 'Media Studies' – for being intellectually vacuous, both couldn't be more different. Whereas it had been fine to state that you wanted to 'study the media' on your university application form, now you had to pledge commitment to a medium, often aged seventeen – an arranged marriage difficult to get out of.

The 1980s and 1990s not only saw an entrenchment of Media Studies at GCSE and A-Level, but the attacks on the subject were at its height. John Major's Education Secretary, John Patten, called Media Studies 'cultural Disneyland' and 'pseudo-religion' just as his government established the first 'Heritage' – later 'Culture' – minister, David Mellor. Media – or *Medium* – Studies were generally the preserve of the polytechnics, but the creation of the new post-1992 universities added further impetus; the study of Media was OK if it were in a poly, but not in a university, seemed to be the view. A generation of academics, many

connected to the BFI and *Screen*, found homes in these institutions, and then soon fled to the older universities once the subject had some apparatus of integrity; many History and English courses at these institutions now 'looked' very like Media Studies. It was difficult to study the former without some reference to culture and the latter was almost impossible to teach without using film, either as a comparative text or a teaching aid.

The situation wasn't helped by a series of hoax journal articles being accepted by academic journals, such as Alan Sokel's 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity' published in *Social Text*. The subject was now an area, and the area had flourished with a host of journals and conferences – most of them very medium specific. Like *Screen Education*, media education was now rather neglected. The area had separated from pedagogy. Conferences, and their attached journals, were primarily occupied by theory. As early as 1984, Masterman noted that the International Television Studies conference in London had no papers on educational issues:

> Media education is now less developed throughout the educational system of England and Wales than it is in those countries … where teachers have had the confidence to organise themselves, publish their own periodicals, run conferences, develop their own regional networks and confront academics with the challenge of working collaboratively with them in producing really useful knowledge; rather than immersing themselves in what many teachers see as elitist, formalist and largely unintelligible debates among themselves. (1985: 44).

But he so easily could have been talking about the papers from more recent national Media and Cultural Studies conferences in the UK.

These medium-specific silos, and their obsession with theory, and later archives, completely work against looking at the relationship that exists *between* media: literature and cinema have always been intertwined, and to that you can add television, comic books, videogames and the web. All have co-existed dialogically, but the way in which Media Studies now functioned would not allow too many explorations of this relationship and the texts that were produced because of this dialogism. If digital media heightened this dialogism, media academics in higher education retreated further into theory, concerning themselves with digitally scanning listings magazines, securing archives, publishing monographs on television personalities, putting together edited readers about television institutions most people had long since ceased to be interested in and knocking up yet another dictionary of medium-specific terminology:

Media teaching has historically been dominated by 'critical analysis' – and indeed, by a relatively narrow form of *textual* analysis, which is primarily designed to expose the 'hidden ideologies' of media texts [original italics] (Buckingham, 2003: 49).

The theory and the research had ceased to have any meaning for those toiling in schools and colleges who were at the frontline of the subject, but very distant from the theory it was now being wedded to. Undergraduates, who had studied media before gaining a place at university, were perpetually confused by the clash of medium-specific teaching and the silos they were now expected to occupy, as Neil Postman warned:

[T]he idea of public education depends absolutely on the existence of shared narratives *and* the exclusion of narratives that lead to alienation and divisiveness [original italics]. (1995: 17).

Instead, 'Media Theory' as it was now called seemed to be replicating the activities of the academics of Lagada in *Gulliver's Travels*; instead of trying to extract sunbeams from cucumbers, media theorists were busy inventing increasingly impenetrable terminology and making vast assumptions about audiences and texts.

In a sense, an apartheid within the subject existed just when attacks on Media Studies were becoming their most strident. The journals and conferences did not include, or cater for, those working in schools and in further education. The new GCSE and A-Level programmes were not supported, and were still mainly taught by those who had themselves studied English, or Sociology. The 14–19 diploma would, if nothing else, embody the gap that now existed between schools and colleges, and universities: not only did the advanced diploma demand a higher level of maths and English than GCSE and a lengthy individual project – approximately half an undergraduate dissertation – but it was also effectively a 'basket' into which A-Levels could be put. Imagine then the stunned silence at a BFI conference for school and college teachers in 2009 when a senior tutor from a London university announced that his institution would not even consider applicants with the advanced diploma as it was 'policy to only interview students with academic qualifications'.

Distant Voices

The Media Education Association (MEA), formed in 2006, would give those in schools and colleges who were interested in issues of media education research a much-needed critical voice, and offer an alternative to the myopia of the higher education conference circuit and its agenda. Now established with its own conference and publication (*POV*) the

association would align with new debates about media literacy. Long advocated by first Masterman, and latterly Buckingham, the media literacy debate – a Media curriculum 'for all' – gained further traction after the government's Byron Review in 2007. But, this media literacy agenda still seems to exists outside of 'Media Studies' in higher education – the few exceptions being those newer courses designed in teacher training-based HEIs including modules on 'media literacies' and the 'Media Studies 2.0' debate. It was as if those teaching media in universities assumed that if you were studying the subject, you would gain a medium-specific literacy by osmosis. Indeed, those undergraduate and postgraduate programmes which included elements of practical production work would seem to attest to Buckingham's view that: '[L]iteracy clearly involves both reading *and* writing; and so media literacy must necessarily entail both the interpretation and the production of media [original italics]' (2003: 49).

Buckingham's argument that students of Media should also be producers of media is nothing new. Masterman had argued the same point some 25 years before. Now, as one of us has already noted: the profusion of digital acquisition and exhibition technology in the domestic space meant that our students were already experts in the subject we were teaching:

> The technology young people use these days in their out-of-school/college contexts will often be more sophisticated than what we are offering, and they may find our interventions into their everyday digital culture clumsy and awkward, rather than inspiring and empowering. (McDougall, 2006: x).

What one of us then termed 'a creative apprenticeship' (ibid.: 7) has often occurred *before* the student has selected their post-compulsory educative route. In a sense, it is a *volt-face* of Masterman and Buckingham's view: today's Media student 'reads' Media because they 'write' Media. Web 2.0 practices mean that students are perhaps more proficient producers of Media than they are analysts and researchers of Media. Young people making their own Media is nothing new; fanzines have given way to fanfic, etc. – but they are doing it in much greater numbers, in a far more visible way, often at the cutting edge of technology; all the time in communion with each other and a vast array of Media texts:

> Most student-generated material seeks to 'close the loop' between teaching and learning and to forge a greater dialogue between theory and practice…Good teaching then is about discovery on the student's part, not in the 'reveal' of the teaching. (Berger, 2010: 33)

This is the challenge that faces the media teacher of the 21st century: the compulsion to develop what *MERJ* editorial board member Alex Kendall calls 'the pedagogy of the inexpert', a challenge not to be intimated by: 'In this case, we do not suppress the energy of students, rather we exploit it for benign, constructive and human purposes' (Postman, 1985: 102).

Already our subject has mounted a response, of sorts, with what has been called 'Media Studies 2.0'. What could have been a reboot, or a way of reconnecting all the disparate silos that now congregate under the banner of 'Media Studies' is interpreted by the community of practitioners (rightly or wrongly), as *MERJ* editorial board member Dan Laughey, puts it, 'the maltesser of media theory – lightweight and hollow to its core' (2007: 198). In David Gauntlett's robust defence of his position in a recent edition of *Interactions* he turns to questions of inequal participation and counters the view that, like Bourdieu's 'new academy' it is overly concerned with a white, middle-class and Eurocentrist view of media. So, at least here, a debate is taking place which may move us forward, but it is by no means widespread and has yet to electrify those media teachers in HE; 'Media Studies 2.0' is in danger of occupying a silo of its own.

Taking the 'Media Studies 2.0' debate as a *differend*, from Lyotard, we can identify the key idioms of each language game. Whilst Will Merrin and Gauntlett are wrongly accused of claiming that power has shifted entirely to the 'prosumer' (in fact both are closer to Henry Jenkins' view of hybridity between old and new), the notion of a 'making and doing culture' sets up a parodic sense of how things *were* or at least what Media Studies was interested in against a set of ideas for how 'transforming audiences' might be dealt with instead.

However framed, the institutionalised practices of teaching about popular culture must be understood as a *technology* for the naturalisation of specific reading and writing practices, particular ways of making meaning and understanding the world which are far from neutral. We need to engage with the cultural politics of Media Education through this 'way of seeing'. The precepts (intended or not) spoken by 'Subject Media' about 'the Media' and its assumed audiences form a framing within which discourses reside, and such discourses (ways of speaking and writing about texts in particular) need to be deconstructed and 'de-naturalised' in order for us to understand how they are socio-culturally located – in other words how they are not natural, or simply formed through an emancipatory project, but how they are politically and culturally loaded in order to preserve a range of shifting and permeable illusions about legitimate knowledge and the nature of 'Media literacy'. For example, the project – whereby 'film and media education began to get general acceptance in education' (Bolas, 2009:21) – is skewed from the outset by the institutional framing of such social practices around literature and as such this idea of a 'project' merely reinforces existing power relations and situates 'Media Studies' within such a view of history.

Disconnection

Today's Media teacher may have studied media at undergraduate level, unlike those that taught them, and this is significant; these graduates from the 'new academy' now face teaching a subject in which their students already operate as very sophisticated 'writers' and 'readers'; a subject for which these teachers' own education – a narrow focus on one or two mediums and disassociated theoretical canons – has not been adequate preparation. It is like asking someone who has only read John Updike to teach a course on the 20th-century novel. It is clearly an outrage that generations of media graduates are denied a career in media education in schools and colleges due to the refusal of the gatekeepers to sanction initial teacher education in the subject whilst charging English undergraduates with the task of developing media literacy.

A cross-platform media landscape needs new ideas and new tools for analysis. Our students need to be better prepared as literal and analytical producers of Media, for as Buckingham highlights, young people are 'empowered as consumers' but there is no evidence that they are 'empowered as citizens' (2007: 92). A new focus on new technologies is necessary and the new narratives and texts which are produced by new, more fluid, unions and communities of Media practice and cultural production – tensions addressed in the work of Kingsley Marshall that we publish here.

Media Education in all sectors is currently guilty of allowing policy agendas to proliferate without critique in exchange for the titillation of legitimising credence – beneath a thin veneer of emancipation, media literacy too often recharges a protectionist discourse alongside a banal 'skills agenda' (see Jon Wardle's discourse analysis of Digital Britain in this edition, connecting to Tzu-Bin Lin's critique of Media literacy).

MERJ editorial board member Jackie Marsh, among many others, has extended theoretical conceptions of 'reframing literacy' to the discussion of pedagogical practice and a consideration of how notions of multiple literacies might inform ways of thinking and being within educational contexts. However the recent thrust of 'media literacy' policy, and its adoption by media educators, seems to have drawn little from these debates. UNESCO defines media/information literacy as: '[A] teaching and learning process and application of critical thinking to receiving and producing mass communication media' (Moore, 2008:6).

In all policy and agenda-setting texts relating to media literacy the word 'critical' recurs and thus a distinction is drawn between the media literate (critical) citizen and the deficient uncritical 'other'. A theorised, evidenced discussion of critical thinking is lacking in these documents and their subsequent manifestations in curriculum, where assessment criteria often require professionals to make judgements about students' ability to be 'critical' or 'creative'.

As crucial as such attention to the powerful discourses operating in policy and educational assessment – the last legal form of social ranking – is the urgent need for pedagogy and the scholarship of media teaching, learning and literacy to be taken more seriously in Higher Education, as it is by Carl Schoenfeld and Antonia Clews in this journal. How many of us can gain progression with a career solely focused on teaching and learning? Many in HE would not describe themselves as teachers at all – and many of them (if not most) are not qualified to call themselves such in any case. In the US, however, to gain tenure, you must show a commitment to the scholarship of teaching and learning, and this journal will aim to establish such an agenda in the UK. This is already the case in parts of Asia – as Tzu-Bin Lin writes in these pages and in Australia as Ben Goldsmith also describes here.

Today's media student then could be taught by a 'high theorist' – someone who has no interest in practice; an archivist or reconstructionist – keen to tell those actually involved in producing a particular text what they 'meant'; or a media practitioner, increasingly disenfranchised and disengaged from the 'new academy'. Or all of them. But not many of them will be at all interested in pedagogy, if they are actually 'teachers' at all. Is it any wonder that our students are so confused?

Falling Apart, Coming Together

The *Media Education Research Journal* then, aims to 'stitch' the subject back together; not just the *mediums* of media, but also the teachers of media. Those teachers of media in schools and colleges are perhaps the subject's most important advocates, and this publication now offers them a place where they can publish research which is concerned with the pedagogy of media, including Emma Walters' ongoing project. These teachers, until now, have been largely ignored by higher education, yet they are forced into teaching the high theory, archives and reconstruction projects which pour out of the 'new academy'.

By making *MERJ* the place for a conversation we feel isn't going on elsewhere – a conversation began at the Media Education Association Conference and the Media Education Summit of 2008 and ongoing – the journal will provide a platform for the best research and ideas from those two national forums and from a broader international constituency. This is the kind of conversation that energises other disciplines (see *Changing English*) but has been absent from 'Subject Media' to date. We are keen to talk about pedagogic research in relation to specific learning contexts and more broadly. This dialogue will be informed by research with media students exploring (with empirical substance) the relationship between theory and practice; the social practices of assessing media learning, discourses circulating around creativity and originality, employability and

media literacy, the idea of 'Media 2.0' or how to teach culture 'after the media'; the media teacher as researcher, the academic as practitioner and the boundaries of and within media education.

It is absurd that *MERJ* should be doing anything *new* by hosting such conversations in a peer reviewed journal that sustains – over time – an interest in these powerful discourses and social practices. These discussions can be found in themed editions and international journals with a focus on media literacy or learning and media, and welcome they are. But by establishing an academic journal that gives a voice in every issue to critically reflective researchers who are 'by day' teachers of media, we are 'touching the void' with this overdue alternative to the narrow medium-specific middle-class onanism view of media education in the UK.

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