Media Studies 1.0: Back to Basics

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Editor's note: Dan Laughey, MERJ editorial board member, concluded his excellent textbook 'Key Themes in Media Theory' (OUP) with a condemnation of Media Studies 2.0 which he subsequently followed up in more detail with this article, first published in Three-D, and a MERJ seminar at the Media Education Summit in September.

I do not think that in East Asia they are saying 'isn't it terrifying, the massive growth in the number of English students who have achieved mastery of Media Studies? Their sophisticated interpretation of the plot lines of Hollyoaks will ensure that they have economic power for the next 100 years that we will never be able to beat.' (Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, quoted in *The Times*, 1 July 2010)

Soft subjects are usually subjects with a vocational or practical bias, for example: Media Studies, Art and Design, Photography and Business Studies. (Informed Choices: A Russell Group guide, February 2011)

Well, wouldn't you know it? Media Studies is under attack! But whereas in days gone by the critics were tabloid reporters, has-been educators like Chris Woodhead or indulgent philosophers like Roger Scruton, in today's climate of higher education cuts the critics make up the frontline (Gove) – or worse still, the enemy within (the Russell Group). Recently I carried out a basic content analysis, searching for all UK press articles that included the terms 'media studies' and 'soft subject'. The result? 322 hits (as of March 2011) – far more than any other subject, as the table shows:

SUBJECT	HITS (Nexis UK)
Media Studies + soft subject	322
Psychology + ss	140
Drama/Theatre Studies + ss	110
Art & Design + ss	107
Sociology + ss	75
Business Studies + ss	71

PE/Sports Science + ss	50
Photography + ss	49
Film Studies + ss	18
Computer/Video Games + ss	14
Golf Course Management + ss	7

Media Studies, as if anyone needed proof, is the archetypal Mickey Mouse degree. The question is: what should we media academics/teachers do about it?

We could trust our Biblical instincts – 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' – and go on the offensive ourselves. In the second edition of *Ill Effects*, Martin Barker and Julian Petley take precisely this approach. Barker writes: 'I have yet to meet a journalist with even a passing understanding of audience research from the media/cultural studies tradition' (Barker and Petley, 2001: 202).

And echoing Barker, Sally Feldman – perhaps the most vocal defender of Media Studies – remarks: 'Journalists who spend so much of their professional lives intruding and probing don't much like it when they're the ones being scrutinised and assessed' (*THE*, 24 January 2008).

Journalist-bashing is fine at one level, but when political and university elites join in the assault, is it time for a rethink? Instead of fighting fire with fire, should we view this latest and most serious challenge yet to the institutional status of our subject as an opportunity, not a threat?

To put it bluntly, the opportune time has come to get back to basics; to return to some core values (of the academic variety) wrongly neglected during the vocational turn in media/journalism degrees over recent years.

The unfortunate outcome of an overemphasis on vocationalism and creativity is uncritical technophilia, propelled by user-generated content and all-in-one iMacs, and manifested in jargon-laden pedagogical models like Media Studies 2.0 (or, even worse, Media Studies 3.0 – the catch-all solution that solves nothing).

Media Studies 2.0 should rightly suffer the wrath of journalists. The problem is, of course, that the press do not discriminate between banal pomposities on the one hand, and on the other, theoretically rigorous approaches to Media Studies that would stretch the minds of any Oxbridge don.

Media Studies 2.0 claims to live in the post-broadcast era of wise crowds, mass collaboration and unfiltered creativeness. In this *whole new* era anyone can tweet, blog, tag, poke, upload videos to YouTube or photos to Flickr. But the question rarely addressed

is: who cares? Who really cares if joeblogga94 posts his 'Hey Dude' movie – at the same time several thousand other nobodies do likewise? Is anybody watching? Highly unlikely. What the post-broadcast era amounts to, in quantifiable terms, is one huge and collective exercise in vanity publishing.

If we take the enormous liberty of extending the *logic* (if that's the right word) of Media Studies 2.0 a little further, it would appear those good olde days of broadcasting are behind us. The multi-channel, multi-platform digital age has changed everything, finally, and forevermore. So why do 20 million people still watch talent shows on primetime Saturday-night telly? And why is analogue still favoured over digital radio? And why are the most popular news sites still provided by longstanding news organisations? And if the speed of media change is so swift, why did more people watch televised (BBC/ITV) coverage of the 2010 World Cup than the 2006 tournament?

Why? Because as well as embracing increased choice, audiences/consumers continue to crave the common culture that big/traditional media provide. The only significant change in recent times has been the migration away from linear scheduling/viewing to on-demand services like the BBC iPlayer – hardly a digital shake-up.

What Media Studies 2.0 suffers from, above all else, is a technologically deterministic fallacy of revolutionism. The revolutionist narrative goes something like this: *Hail the Internet! Reformation 2.0! Life will never be the same again! And hey dude, what about mobile phones too? Throw them in for good measure! Old ideas now obsolete! New paradigm please!* The basic mistake made by Media Studies 2.0 is to pontificate about new media transforming society, before a carefully considered evaluation of their contemporary significance can be drawn.

With Media Studies 2.0 floundering on its wiki-knees, here I outline five basic principles underpinning not a *whole new* but a revised, revamped, academically-challenging, critically-analytical Media Studies – if you like, a Media Studies 1.0.

Another fundamental flaw of Media Studies 2.0 is its failure to appreciate – or even delineate – what it claims to supersede. Media Studies 1.0 is simply bagged up and disposed of indiscriminately. To be sure, Media Studies 1.0 principles are not novel or revolutionary; they are merely forward-facing and evolutionary. Some approaches to Media Studies already satisfy one or more of these principles quite adequately. The challenge is to fulfil them all.

The Five Principles

Method: How often do we encourage our students to do focus groups? Or content analysis? Hampered by a compensation culture that causes research ethics committees to impose blanket restrictions on human-participant research of any description, we should nevertheless do the best we can to make students method-diverse. The critical breaking point occurs, in my experience, during final-year dissertations. Mention the words *research* and *analysis*, and prepare for a blank response.

Yet the fault lies not necessarily in our students, but in ourselves. It appears a whole generation of media students go through school, college and at least two years of higher education without being taught *how* to do Media Studies.

Of course, there are exceptions to every rule – and two excellent methods textbooks (Deacon et al., 2007; Bertrand and Hughes, 2005) should be stocked in the libraries of every institution that teaches our subject. But too often the assumption persists that Media Studies is all about some vague application of textual analysis along the lines of: 'Read this film: what does it say about class?'

Students need to be equipped with an array of analytical tools (and Lego-building isn't one of them): discourse analysis, content analysis, narrative analysis, semiotic analysis, intertextuality, iconography, psychoanalysis, frame analysis, conversation analysis and thematic analysis. They also need skills in sampling and selecting. No need for specialist computer software – the best way to learn is to tally up, code, collate and categorise manually. First-hand engagement with data/source materials is – and should always be – part of the research process.

And as well as doing multimodal analysis of, say, a film (exploring characterisation, soundtrack, etc.), students should be encouraged to analyse the multi-mediated environment in which that film operates (how it synergises with publishing, merchandise, magazine and web campaigns, etc.). Media Studies is less effective in capturing the various mediated interactions emblematic of contemporary cultural consumption/production when it centres attention on *just* Film Studies, or *just* Television Studies, and so on.

No discussion of method, though, can ignore the pragmatic issue of assessment. Researching media constitutes one set of skills; writing about it involves another set entirely. Good written style – a fundamental academic requirement – is almost wholly deficient among the present-day student populace. Liberal voices in the Media Studies 2.0 camp profess to know the answer: let them blog, vlog, podcast, do anything other than write a properly referenced essay.

Blogging is fine on one account only – as a drafting platform for academic essay-writing. I couldn't care less whether I'm reading *a well-structured essay containing a sustained argument* via Wordpress, Word, or any other format. Indeed, the interactivity of blogging can only be a good thing in the long run. But the next time I receive a *txtspk* s-a ripped from the pages of Wikipedia, then I'll… Who knows, perhaps I'll start agreeing with Gove.

Internationality: One of the most ambiguous terms I stumble across in textbooks is 'British Cultural Studies'. It's British, despite being informed principally by French structuralism (semiology, ideology) and Italian Marxist thought (hegemony). On the other hand, placed in a wider context, there is much justification in distinguishing between the critical tradition of British/European Cultural Studies and the empirical tradition of North American Communication Studies.

In recent times, however, some fruitful attempts have been made to utilise the best of both traditions, and, beyond that, to de-westernise Media Studies. Of course, the systematic study of media began in those countries first touched by mass communications, and the work of pioneering media thinkers like Lasswell, Angell and Lippmann should not be forgotten – this work still tells us much about the social and political impact of media old and new.

A truly international Media Studies, then, can evolve – and is evolving – by applying current ideas to new contexts, and adjusting those ideas accordingly. Internationally-recognised media research, however, must always be recognised in our teaching too. Perhaps the most pressing issue remains social and technological exclusion. New media enthusiasts sound off about a networked, user-generated, interconnected, ever-more-equal world of broadband sweetness and mobile delight – a fairy-tale world that does not exist.

To all Media Studies 2.0 Malteser-munchers I recommend Evgeny Morozov's *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World* (2011) – an excellent attempt to dig beneath the hype and expose the impotence of Internet 'slacktivism'. Even respected foreign correspondents utter uncritical remarks about 'the Twitter revolution' in Egypt or 'the collapse of traditional media' in Libya – as if 140 characters triggered the domino effect.

Social media technologies, without doubt, added to the weaponry of those who brought about the recent uprisings in Arab societies. But massive public demonstrations in response to economic and political oppression – um, that had something to do with it too. That's why internationality in Media Studies, as in all disciplines, actually requires in-depth knowledge of individual nation-states – before comparative analysis can identify transnational trends.

Theory: What I don't mean by theory is – as it is often conceived – everything that is not production, practice, doing things. Theory should be, without exception, integral to practice; it should inform it and be informed by it. But theory, by which I mean *critical and systematic thought*, should be the key distinguishing factor between higher and pre-higher education.

This was my (relatively happy) experience of the school-to-university transition. Whereas A-Level English Literature honed close reading and interpretation of texts (Chaucer, Shakespeare, etc.), English *Studies* at degree level introduced me to 'modern criticism' – structuralism, Marxism, new criticism, feminism and so on. The accusation that old theories no longer apply to new media cultures is all too easily thrown.

Semiotics, for instance, a focus of juvenile hostility in Media Studies 2.0, is far too seminal a perspective not to have survived the age of television, or the computer, or the internet for that matter. The best theories stand the intellectual test of time; all the rest follow Media Studies 2.0 down the road to oblivion.

History: We need better and more extensive historicising in Media Studies. James Curran's (2006) point about media history being the neglected grandparent of Media Studies – often thought about but rarely visited – is even truer of teaching than it is of research in our subject. Students need a better understanding of the wider social, political and economic contexts in which media technologies have emerged, evolved and (sometimes) declined.

Those all-too-familiar, historically blinkered clichés about media sexualisation or surveillance society or celebrity culture or 3D-virtual-reality-TV-living stem from profound ignorance about what has gone before. My favourite question to students: when was Nintendo founded? Replies range from about 1950–90. The answer? 1889. Of course, no one was playing Wii Sports in 1889, but the fundamental properties of video games were foreseen and developed long before mass-produced home consoles left the shelves.

As well as espousing the value of media history, we also need to reflect on the history of Media Studies itself. No longer in its infancy, there is no longer any excuse not to canonise a set of readings in the subject. Two major factors continue to hinder such a project. First, the use of bibliometrics in research assessment exercises gears scholarly attention predominantly towards up-to-date references and citations. And second, publishers are often reluctant to re-print works that appear – on the face of it – outdated and commercially unviable.

Thankfully, a recent example that goes against this grain was the re-issuing of Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* by Penguin in 2009. Hoggart rightly deserves a place in

the Media/Cultural Studies canon, as does Williams, McLuhan, Barthes, Baudrillard and several other notables. But even these great intellectuals share in common a vulnerability to the whims of academic fashion. McLuhan, for instance, was almost forgotten about in the years following his death. And yet now, thanks in part to new media developments, McLuhan is back on the agenda – a prime illustration of historically-informed Media Studies 1.0 rendering ahistorical MS 2.0 redundant.

Discrimination: Nonetheless, seminal voices only stand the test of time when other voices – those that go after – reinterpret and re-evaluate their continuing contemporary significance. This is why canonisation should never become, if enough people contribute to the process, an exercise in academic snobbery. Discrimination is no bad thing in the pursuit of excellence; it is the essence of critical judgement, as Leavis and Thompson taught us in their timeless *Culture and Environment* (1933): 'to train critical awareness of the cultural environment… is to train in discrimination and to imply positive standards' (1933: 5).

Those positive standards of quality, whether in literature, drama, music, film, television, radio, in the press or on the web, remain constant. Rather than appealing to the lowest common denominator of mass appeal and sentimental melodrama, the best of popular culture captures something original and progressive about the social, political and moral attitudes of its time. That's why we will always value Hitchcock over Hammer Horror, *The Wire* over *Without a Trace*, The Beatles over The Bee Gees, serious over citizen journalism.

To sum up: *Method, Internationality, Theory, History, Discrimination*. These five basic principles, taken together, supply a vital antidote for Media Studies 1.0 detractors of all persuasions.

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