



Institute for Culture & Society Pre-Print Journal Articles

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The definitive version of this article is published in:

Rowe, D. 2004, 'Contemporary Media Education: Ideas for Overcoming the Perils of Popularity and the Theory-Practice Split', *Journal of Media Practice*, 5(1): 43-58.

The definitive version of this article is available online at:

<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=3&hid=19&sid=827597db-b4c0-414e-8246-336df6092582%40sessionmgr15&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#db=vth&AN=15445257>

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***Journal of Media Practice* is available online:**

<http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-journal,id=132/>

(institutional or subscribed access may be required)

doi: 10.1386/jmpr.5.1.43/0

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Contemporary media education: ideas for overcoming the perils of popularity and the theory–practice split

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Abstract

This article addresses the current predicament of Media Studies¹, which attracts many undergraduate students but is also subject to often-savage criticism, especially in Britain. Mostly focusing on the United Kingdom and Australasia, it argues for more openness about slim Media Studies graduate prospects in ‘glamorous’ media occupations. However, it also advocates sophisticated media education for many more students in the light of the growing power of the institution of the media. Media education, though, has experienced a debilitating theory–practice schism, and its standing could be improved by a greater commitment to quality research and a more confident assertion of the importance of serious, systematic analysis of the media. The article concludes with a brief reference to some research-in-progress involving journalists’ relationships with academics that suggests ways in which Media Studies can deal more effectively with tensions between theory and practice, and can help bypass the rancorous obstructionism of anti-Media Studies polemicists.

Keywords: media education, image of Media Studies, journalism, theory–practice, media labour market

Introduction: ‘Homer good, Homer Simpson bad?’

The most difficult task in addressing the topic of theory, practice and media education² is to say something new or surprising. There seems to be a pattern of rehearsed and recursive moves, sometimes triggered by a provocative intervention on one side or the other. In Australia in the late 1990s, for example, Keith Windschuttle (erstwhile left-wing university lecturer in Media Studies and Social History turned private media educator and, later, right-wing *provocateur*), found an audience (especially through the ‘Higher Education’ section of the Rupert Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper) for his condemnation of university-based journalism education,

¹ With regard to style, all discipline areas have been given capital initials in this article, irrespective of the original style adopted in the publications cited.

² I am concerned here, primarily, with undergraduate media education in vocational and applied programmes and courses in universities that are primarily publicly funded, with a principal focus on the United Kingdom and Australasia. As John Hartley (1999: 22) points out, Media Studies is a ‘portmanteau term for an eclectic array of different types of study, from different disciplinary perspectives, into different media’, and cannot easily be captured and classified. The media education embraced in this article involves university teaching of and about mainly newspapers, magazines, TV, film, video, radio, recorded music and the Internet, with an emphasis on journalism education.

which he sees as the captive of Cultural Studies scholars who know nothing of the workings of the media. For Windschuttle, there are ‘three characteristics of journalism that most teaching in the field upholds’. These are:

First, journalism is committed to reporting the truth about what occurs in the world ... Second, the principal ethical obligations of journalists are to their readers, their listeners and their viewers ... Third, journalists should be committed to good writing. (Windschuttle 1998: 11)

University-based journalism education in Australia, however, he sees as increasingly undermining these traditional virtues of good journalism, as the language games of Cultural Studies academics relativistically corrode the concepts of ‘truth’ and of ethical responsibility, shroud the field in obscurantist language, and fail to deliver the advertised ‘product’ – job-ready, professional journalists. Thus:

Cultural Studies is different. It engages in media theory but ... it is diametrically opposed to journalism and to similar forms of media practice in terms of its methodology, its understanding, its language and its operating assumptions. This puts constructive or useful criticism of media practice somewhat beyond its reach. (Windschuttle 1998a: 27)

Windschuttle’s position, setting aside its dyspeptic tone and the reactionary drift that has since seen him become a leading advocate of revisionist readings of White treatment of Australian Aborigines (Windschuttle 2002), can be criticized on several grounds. It displays a theoretically naïve belief in an unassailable journalistic canon, mission and regime of truth (Hartley 1996), and betrays a technicist emphasis on skills training, while in straight empirical terms it exaggerates the influence of Cultural Studies over journalism education in Australia, and the strength of textualism within Cultural Studies itself. Nonetheless, the predictable heat generated by such public utterances indicates that the theory–practice schism is still something of a feature of the media education landscape. The constructed divide mutates and reconstitutes in different discursive domains – for example, in debates about specialist language/jargon, the role of public intellectuals, Media and Cultural Policy Studies in relation to ideological and textual critique, or reconceptualizations of media practice education (see, for example, various contributions to *Media International Australia* (1999), *British Journalism Review* (2003) and to *Journal of Media Practice* (2000) – but a split within media education clearly persists.

Windschuttle accuses universities of not producing graduates with the requisite craft values and skills, but he is not, *prima facie*, against media education in universities – as long as its theory is not derived from Cultural Studies. He does approve of ‘practical’ instruction performed by those who have made the transition from industry to education:

Most of the practical training of journalists that goes on in higher education is done by former practitioners. The curriculum is well developed and most of the teaching in this country [Australia] is of a high standard. It is well attuned to industry needs and its graduates have a good success rate in gaining employment. (Windschuttle 1998a: 26)

There are some, though, who see the entire notion of university media education (usually described as Media Studies) as illegitimate. As Toby Miller (2002: vii) notes in a preface to a

collection on Television Studies, there is a ‘a serious set of concerns [among] family members, colleagues and intellectuals [that] devoting time to understanding popular-culture icons such as television abjures the historical mission of the university to elevate its students and the public more generally, in either a technical or a moral sense’. News stories such as the following have now become routine in the British media at least, especially at the commencement of the university enrolment season:

Pity the poor Media Studies students.

Lampooned by their peers for ‘studying’ soap operas, sneered at by industry folk for not getting their hands dirty, and now rubbished by England’s [former] Chief Schools Inspector, Chris Woodhead.

Mr Woodhead lived up to his reputation for controversy when, on Thursday, he cited the subject as being a one-way ticket to the dole queue.

‘If you embark on a degree course and finish it and then you find yourself unemployed, is that enhancing your life? I don’t think so.’

Among media employers, he said, there was ‘profound scepticism as to whether these courses teach students the skills and understanding they want’.

It’s not a new criticism, Mr Woodhead acknowledged. But evidently media students are still fighting the sort of prejudice that used to be directed at Sociology scholars in the ‘70s and ‘80s.

So is a Media Studies degree really a waste of time? Is it just an excuse for lazy students to collapse in front of the television and, three years later produce a 12,000-word dissertation deconstructing plotlines of *The Bill*? (BBC 2000: n.p.)

In the news media there is frequent attention to well-known antagonists like philosopher Roger Scruton (usually right-wing guardians of ‘traditional’ education), and their quotable pronouncements that ‘Media Studies course content is sub-Marxist gobbledegook and courses are taught by talentless individuals who can’t get jobs in the media, so they teach instead. There’s nothing to learn except by way of apprenticeship on the job’ (quoted in Bell 2002: n.p.). This position represents another kind of split, seemingly rejecting university-based media education altogether, or tolerating critical theoretical inquiry into the media only where it originates in a prescribed set of traditional disciplines clearly separable from the stigmatized Media Studies³. It is an attitude that implicitly dispatches media education from university precincts and returns it to the cadet training rooms and ‘in on the ground’ workplaces of newspapers, broadcasters and similar non-university organizations that once monopolized formal instruction in the ways of the media (BBC 2000). There is clearly a need for a robust defence of media education against the

³ ‘Traditional’ disciplines, though, are something of a moveable feast. Sociology, for example, has moved in a little over a generation from traditionalist target and whipping boy to established field and disciplinary origin of several British university vice-chancellors, including former Sociology Professor and now Sir Howard Newby, currently chief executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). It is intriguing that Media Studies has been described as the ‘Sociology degree of the 1990s’ (Bell 2002: n.p.) and, it seems, of the first decade of the early twenty-first century.

often lazy and ignorant jibes of its detractors, but the efficacy of such a defence is weakened by two significant factors: the vocational claims made by universities when seeking ‘customers’ (undergraduate students) in the educational marketplace, and the tensions (sometimes schismatic) between theory and practice among media education practitioners themselves.

‘Promising the BBC and delivering the dole queue’?

At present, media education has – ironically for a pedagogical area that claims legitimacy on the grounds of the profound social significance of media representation (Silverstone 1999) – an image problem. To a substantial degree this is because it is a victim of its own success as an attractor of students at advanced school and tertiary education levels. For example, in Britain in 2003, school enrolments in ‘A levels’ (the gateway to university) in Media, Film and TV Studies rose by almost 20 per cent, while they fell in subjects like Physics, Chemistry, Biology, German and French (although only in a narrow band from 3 per cent to 0.5 per cent – BBC 2003: n.p.; Harrison 2003a: n.p.). Those who are losing strength in the educational marketplace often claim that rising student recruitment in media education can be directly attributed to its glamorous vapidness, in contrast with – and at the expense of – traditional arts and sciences. Hence the publication of such new stories as the following giving prominence to the apocalyptic pronouncements of those whose cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) is derived from the social class-based rationing and sanctioning of legitimate knowledge:

Some A-levels are so useless to students they should come with a health warning, a leading head teacher has said (bolding in the original).

Graham Able, chairman of the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference (HMC), which represents 240 independent schools, criticized so-called ‘soft’ subjects, which have grown in popularity in recent years.

One of them, Media Studies, ‘promises [students] the BBC and delivers them the dole queue’, he said. (BBC 2003: n.p.)

Not only is Media Studies regularly identified as a ticket to un- or under-employment, it is also seen as having lax standards of assessment, with the overall rise in A level pass rates in Britain claimed by some head teacher representatives as ‘fuelled by pupils switching from Maths and Science to supposedly easier subjects such as Psychology and Media Studies’ (Harrison 2003: n.p.). These criticisms are made despite statistics that do not support the arguments of anti-media education polemicists. For example, in the United Kingdom, Media Studies has the seventh highest employment rate among university subject areas, with 76.5 per cent of graduates employed on a full- or part-time employment basis within six months of graduation⁴, with the most employable graduates in Computer Studies achieving only a moderately higher employment rate of 83.6 per cent (BBC 2000). In fact, by 2003:

the latest survey by the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) suggests that Media Studies students rank alongside Civil Engineering, Accountancy and

⁴ The article refers to this period as ‘within six months of leaving the job’, but this is clearly, in the context of its discussion, an error.

Business Studies graduates in the employability stakes.

Indeed, for the first time those holding Media Studies degrees were more successful at securing professional employment than IT graduates. (BBC 2003a: n.p.)

In relation to standards, again UK official statistics reveal that ‘Some 38.9 per cent of those who took a Maths A-level this year emerged with an A grade, while only 12.4 per cent of Media Studies students achieved the grade’ (BBC 2003a: n.p.), suggesting, perhaps, by the standards of evidence used by many critics of media education, that Maths is over three times ‘softer’ than Media Studies. Of course, any statistics can be misleading, and questions relating to the chosen field, professionalism (see discussion below) and starting salary of employment must be posed, as well as those concerning self-selectivity in less popular subjects and the flattening effect (statistically known as ‘regression to the mean’) in those that are heavily subscribed. Similarly, it is necessary to acknowledge the possibility of gaining perfect scores in some areas like Maths and Physics requiring correct answers, in contrast to areas with largely essay-based formats, such as those in English or Sociology, in which ‘perfection’ is almost intrinsically unattainable. Sweeping condemnations of Media Studies as ‘Mickey Mouse’, however, do not usually acknowledge such complexities, with critics preferring the kind of ‘soft’ reasoning and superficial observation that they routinely ascribe to the field of media education.

There is, then, a plethora of news stories, especially in Britain, with mockingly questioning titles like ‘Homer Good, Homer Simpson Bad?’ and ‘Is Media Studies a Doss? Discuss’, and opening with damning statements like ‘Media Studies as an academic subject is under fire once again as universities reopen. This year, students opting for the course are accused of returning us to the dark ages’ (Harrison 2003a: n.p.). This state of affairs reflects both the unedifying ideological preoccupations of a certain stratum of right-wing educational representatives, bureaucrats and pundits, and the field’s own difficulties in determining a legitimate mission when confronted with the competing demands of the competitive undergraduate university market, ready employability and academic respectability. The origins of these problems lie, though, to a considerable degree outside and above media education, in the general field of university philosophy and practice and in the persistent tension between generalist, critical education and specialist, instrumentalist training. It is important, therefore, to place media education in its wider socio-institutional context.

Media education: context and graduate prospects

Media education is no different from other vocational or applied areas of university-based teaching and learning in being required constantly to rebut challenges to its legitimacy – Leisure Studies, Sport Studies, Tourism, and sundry other established and emergent applied fields in universities have analogous difficulties (Rowe 2002, 2003). Media education, furthermore, can also hardly be expected to resolve a problem that besets the entire tertiary education sector (Bygrave 2003), which is struggling to understand its nature, purpose and future under conditions where ambitious participation targets are unmatched by commensurate increases in public funding, and where there are increasing pressures to commercialize research knowledge and streamline students’ passage to employment while putatively maintaining the elements of undirected scholarly reflection and critique that distinguish universities historically from most

other organizations (Coaldrake and Stedman 1998; Coady 1999; Marginson and Considine 2000). Media Studies has ridden the crest of a vocational wave in universities that has valued the idea (if not necessarily the outcome) of immediate employability in specified industry sectors above the intrinsic worth of a university education with less certain but more expansive eventual employment possibilities. Student and employer preferences, however, are subject to cycles of fashionability and unpopularity – in Australia in 2003 and 2004, for example, generalist Bachelor of Arts programmes have returned to favour after some years in the ‘wilderness’ (*The Australian Higher Education* 2004). Media Studies and other vocational degree programmes, it might be suggested, could take advantage of such intermittent trends towards generalist education by distancing themselves from unsustainable claims to offer guaranteed employment in certain occupations, and embracing more open, critical inquiry into media theory and practice in non-vocational or only mutedly vocational terms. By such means, Media Studies could help significantly to resist those forces that conceive of universities as little more than preparatory schools for currently in-demand occupations that may be virtually extinct within decades.

The rising demand for vocational education feeding through from the schools (Harrison 2003) has corresponded with increasing interest in a limited range of media occupations that, even with a corresponding expansion of the media sector, cannot come close to absorbing the graduate cohorts produced for them. Media education has a similar relationship to employment in the media industries as, for example, leisure and tourism education in their respective service sectors. That is, it is vocationally directed towards a relatively small number and range of occupations, which may often be entered only after a period in comparatively menial or casual employment. According to recent UK statistics concerning the occupational destination of Media Studies graduates:

only 15 per cent of first jobs are actually in the media sector (a classification which includes advertising sales, public relations and journalism) while another five per cent start in media research jobs (BBC 2000: n.p.)

Such graduates may drift between different occupational sectors and, in many cases, Media Studies graduates will never enter employment in the restricted occupations of print and electronic journalism, television, radio and film production that originally attracted many of them in their choice of degree programme and which were promoted to them by universities as career options. This, of course, does not mean that experiencing university media education has been unproductive or futile, but it does invite unfavourable assessments of the failure of Media Studies to realize the promise contained in course promotional materials, with their inevitable visual depiction of the more prestigious media sites that will, of necessity, be inaccessible to most graduates for some time and perhaps in perpetuity.

The primary cause of the popularity of media education can be analysed and expressed through the kinds of theory that it commonly deploys – the ‘mediatization’, ‘culturalization’ and ‘postmodernization’ of society, the burgeoning culture of media celebrity, and the decline of secondary sector employment in favour of the tertiary and quaternary sectors of the labour market (Harvey 1989). It is unsurprising that universities should respond to such undergraduate student demand by offering Media Studies. In Britain, for example, only two universities offered Media Studies degrees or major options in the early 1980s, but virtually all of them had engaged in

media education by the turn of the twentieth century (BBC 2000). In Australia, similarly, media education (classified as Communication and Media Studies) can be found in some form in all but three of the 38 universities in receipt of commonwealth funding (Putnis and Beverley 2002), and among many other education and training providers, with Communications and Media the fastest growing area of study in the humanities and social sciences for over a decade. At the University of Technology, Sydney (formerly the New South Wales Institute of Technology), Communication has been for several decades one of the hardest Australian programmes to enter in any field of study, and the recent (and belated) move of the more august University of Sydney into media education has finally sealed the place of the field in the Australian university system. In Australia, Media Studies was pioneered in the colleges of advanced education and institutes of technology (the equivalent of British polytechnics) which, as in Britain, were allowed to become universities. The origins of media education outside the established universities have, undoubtedly, contributed to elite hostility to them, but seem to have had little impact on undergraduate demand.

Yet the appeal of the media labour market far exceeds its size, and in any case the established electronic and print media are as subject to boom and bust as any other industries in capitalist mixed economies. The battalions of graduates looking for jobs in television, newspapers and other major media organizations are not all able to be accommodated in good recruiting years, let alone in bad. Despite the rise of credentialism and the increasing requirement of a university degree as a base qualification, labour market entry in the media field is still relatively open, allowing non-graduates and graduates from non-media disciplines to compete in the public, corporate and independent media labour markets. The appeal of knowledge in areas such as literature, law, history and economics remains strong for those many mainstream media employers who see in them a more reliable measure of employee promise and aptitude than the experience of formal media education (BBC 2003a). For those media employers who do seek graduates from specific Media Studies courses (Green 2002), many seem to be seeking little more than the craft skills that were once taught on the job at company expense. Such rejections of Media Studies *in toto* or as anything other than publicly subsidized skills training might be more effectively countered, however, if there were not such continuing anxiety and division among media educators.

Media verses practice – again

In its own sphere, it might be argued that the theory–practice tension in media education, evidenced by Windschuttle above, is inevitable given the competing and substantially incommensurate demands of (to use the current managerialist jargon) its ‘stakeholders’ (students, parents, potential employers, academics, governments, and so on). The admirable aspiration of a seamless theory–practice synthesis should doubtless be preserved as an ideal aim, but it is difficult to realize under current conditions that, as noted above, are largely beyond the control of media educators, yet for which they must bear some responsibility⁵.

⁵ As is also the case in Britain, there has been a pronounced tension in Australasia between critical theory and industry practice that has been played out in professional organizations like the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association and the Journalism Education Association, in journals like the *Australian Journal of Communication*, *Continuum*, *Metro* and *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, and in university departments, schools and faculties. There is considerable variation in status, intellectual orientation,

Synthesizing theory and practice in Media Studies requires an acknowledgement that those who engage in it are involved in forms of cultural practice across a production–interpretation–consumption continuum. This is not to argue that all media educators, in the broadest sense, can or should do everything that can be considered as Media Studies, but rather that media education presents myriad opportunities to explore the relationships within the structures and spaces where culture is made, reproduced, modified, understood, reconfigured, deployed, received, transformed, and so on (Real 1996). Synthesis, though, is not easily achieved in Media Studies or anywhere else, with intellectual and occupational boundaries often easier to preserve than to transcend.

Repeatedly (and, no doubt, often justifiably), then, the theory–practice issue is placed in the foreground of books in Media Studies areas such as journalism (such as Breen 1998; Herbert 1999; Tapsall and Varley 2001) and revisited in conferences. For example, the theme of the 2003 Annual Conference of the Journalism Education of New Zealand (Jeanz) was ‘The Odd Couple: Academic Degrees versus Skills-Based Training’. The issue is also frequently aired in journals, such as the 1999 ‘Media Wars’ special issue of *Media International Australia*, occasioned by Windschuttle’s critique of journalism education, and more consistently in journals such as *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*. It is important not to resort to caricature in typifications of media educators, and to acknowledge that a range of theory–practice relations can exist. There is, though, a persistent division between approaches that by various means deeply and critically interrogate media structures and practices utilizing advanced social and cultural theory, and those limited largely to the adoption and refinement of occupational techniques observing the currently prevailing media standards and practices that can be described as ‘industry wisdom’ (Silk, Slack and Amis 2004).

With media educators originating in a range of traditional disciplines, new interdisciplinary areas, practice-based programmes and industry organizations, this diversity, and its accompanying disparate skills and orientations, inevitably produces some awkwardness and conflict as well as reflecting instances of compatibility and peaceful coexistence. Many media educators have a deep commitment to the study of the media for its own sake and resent the suggestion that they are merely in the business of skills transfer. But it is difficult not to talk the language of vocationalism given that Media Studies is substantially funded by and sold to students on those terms. While there might be lively disputes about vocationalism within media education and large numbers of students with expansive intellectual interests, there is no doubt that it is the lure of media employability that has been the bedrock of the expansion of media education. Coming to terms with the dominant vocationalist ethos in media education has been a difficult process given the diverse qualities, philosophies, experiences and motives of those who engage in it. Internal tensions between those who see their role as predominantly the theoretical critique of media within its wider social context, and those more concerned with imparting production-oriented skills, have left Media Studies especially vulnerable to attack from those commentators like Woodhead and Scruton, and some journalists in the tabloid press, anxious to mobilize derogatory terms like ‘Mickey Mouse’ and ‘soft’ when describing the field.

formal academic qualifications, and research attainment in Australasian media education, but system-wide pressure to improve research performance has tipped the balance somewhat towards a more conventional university academic ethos requiring peer-reviewed research and publication.

Without wishing to impose a ‘keeping up appearances’ regime on the field, it is surely desirable that professional media educators should share similar broad assumptions about the rationale for and conduct of their work, and that they do not try to ‘undercut’ each other by playing to the galleries (that is, by encouraging denunciations for anti-intellectualism on one side and unproductive pretentiousness on the other). It would be hoped that media education could defend itself more effectively from unwarranted criticism by making a more modest claim in one respect and a more ambitious one in another. The former approach would require greater openness about the limitations of university media education as a means of ready entry into the formal media labour market that attracts university students, and an emphasis on the vast range of ancillary occupations in both the public and private sectors where a critical knowledge of the media and some command of media production skills are of considerable value. Indeed, this appreciation leads on to the latter, greater claim for Media Studies – that it is of paramount importance in an age where the media is a key social institution and where cultural citizenship, viewed as access to and understanding of contemporary media, is a vital aspect of contemporary citizenship in general (Miller 1998; Stevenson 2003). Therefore, a degree of sophisticated media education can be regarded as helpful for students irrespective of their career ambitions. In playing down its vocational role and playing up its generalist relevance, media education may be in a better position to improve its intellectual standing, even if at some cost to a vocationally-based undergraduate marketability that was always rather misleading. If it is accepted that media education’s principal object is cultural practice, and that knowledge of the explanations, conditions and techniques of cultural practice are desirable in variable measure for students who cannot escape it in a mediatised society irrespective of their career ambitions, then an education in synthesized media theory/practice is very intellectually appealing indeed.

It would be hoped, then, that most media educators would agree to the following propositions that, while not constituting any kind of manifesto for university-based media education, might help contribute to a pedagogical memorandum of understanding:

- Successful completion of undergraduate Media Studies at university is not, in itself, a professional qualification entitling a graduate to practise media work without further formal or on-the-job education and training.
- University-based media education is distinguished from other forms of pedagogy through its indissoluble linkage of research and teaching, and consequent commitment to the critical interrogation of, and frequently challenge to, currently dominant modes of media practice.
- Media education is of value to those who do not wish to work in the media, while those who wish to work in the media should be educated about more than the workings of the media.
- Because the media industries and so their labour market are volatile and dynamic, flexibility and breadth of learning in media education should be carefully balanced against specialization and depth in developing portable qualities and skills.

The promulgation and acceptance of such shared understandings among university media educators of varying types might, it is to be hoped, assist in the promotion and defence of Media Studies in the face of the external assaults and internal tensions illustrated above. In other words,

media educators might take the strategic decision that they have enough people and groups within and outside Academe ready to disparage them without obligingly presenting themselves as targets. This is not an argument in favour of hiding disciplinary dirty linen and staying together for the sake of the students, but of recognizing that media educators have a contingent community of interest. The theory–practice split has had a debilitating impact on that professional occupational group, not least because it has been endogenously reproduced as well as exogenously induced. My summation of the theory–practice divide is that, where it occurs, it is institutionally generated as well as an outcome of the different career trajectories and orientations of university media educators. If it is to be overcome, ameliorated or contained, a sense of common purpose needs to be cultivated rather than the self-infliction of wounds. At the same time, some attempt must be made to protect media educators from those professional media personnel prone to criticize them and to remain unconvinced of the utility of media education.

The uses of media education

Media education, it has been shown, is under some considerable pressure to defend its *raison d'être*, partially because of its own success, but also arising from its insecurities. Given, as noted above, the long-standing nature of this problem, it is easier to dwell on the diagnosis than on prescriptions for overcoming the condition. However, some recent research in which I have been engaged – concerning the professional relationship between university academics and journalists⁶ – has provided some unexpected guidance in addressing the present dilemma of Media Studies. In preliminarily analysing the interview data, some clues have been found to the possibilities of resisting the routine attacks on Media Studies and transcending the theory–practice tension in media education. The editors and journalists to whom I have spoken have consistently stated that they value the ideas and input from university academics (both those from Media Studies and other disciplines). This is not only because of the depth and breadth of their knowledge, but because that knowledge often diverges from the dominant positions taken in the contemporary public sphere. The ‘herd’ instinct of some commentators, especially when coupled with the highly ‘interested’ positions of privately employed ‘experts’ like bank economists, public relations practitioners and political lobbyists, was contrasted by several interviewees with what was seen as the relative disinterestedness, originality and wider view of university academics. Those academics who are ‘media savvy’ – who understand the workings and needs of the media – are especially valued by journalists. This ‘media-friendliness’ among academics is problematic if it oversimplifies or traduces academic knowledge, but the skill of being able to express complex ideas economically and informatively in the media is a considerable one, although, of course, only of value when the academic has something fresh and cogent to say.

Below are some brief transcribed excerpts from interviews with journalists (whose names have been disguised) illustrating these points:

⁶ This research-in-progress, ‘The Ivory Tower Meets the Fourth Estate: Academics and Journalists as Cultural Workers in the Contemporary Public Sphere Project’, funded by a University of Newcastle Research Committee Project Grant, is not concerned with media education *per se*, but issues of relevance to it have emerged in its empirical process of interviewing both types of professional in order to establish the nature and politics of their encounters. Some of the academics I have interviewed have been media educators and others not, but here I will refer briefly to some of the reasons that journalists have given for seeking out academics for comment.

You always get the sense with the other two groups that I talk with, city economists and different think tanks, [they] very often have varying agendas to push ... So they have a very strong financial incentive to tell you things ... Academics on the whole, you have a reasonable amount of confidence in them just being disinterested purveyors of the truth, and although while it's not entirely true, it is in an academic's interest to raise their profile and so on, it is a much less direct linkage with the incentive structure facing academics to get into the press, so there is a lot more trust for what an academic tells you, than what a lot of other people do. (Eric, economics editor, broadsheet newspaper)

If I think about what academics have, a luxury that very few other people have, including journalists, is time. They can devote themselves to a particular project over a large number of years. The result is when they come to people such as ourselves, who have to deal with say, day-by-day emergencies, and have constant turnover with work, they have a bit more time to do the research that, you know, we would ideally like to do but really can't do. So I would say that is their main function, as far as I am concerned, is that [with] vital information about the way organizations do things, the way people work, for example, you know that the work is done properly ... has been rigorously researched and has got some legitimacy. (Malcolm, management editor, broadsheet newspaper)

These senior journalists display a traditionalist respect for the functions of universities and of academics (and, in the case of Eric, for academic 'truth'), and especially for the kind of institutionalized independence that, as was noted above, is being eroded by the penetration of marketized logics. The maintenance of institutional space between the contemporary university and private commercial organizations that is so deeply unfashionable (Marginson and Considine 2000) is supported by such 'hard-nosed' media practitioners who want academics to be academics in the sense of not attempting to shadow or mimic other professionals in other spheres of working life. Applying these principles to the field of university media education would require its practitioners to temper the vocationalist ethos, and its frequent reliance on claims to simulate so-called 'real-world' occupational experience and values, with an emphasis on the distinctiveness of the production of knowledge within universities.

Of particular importance here is the concept of disinterested and rigorous research. While, of course, no knowledge, language or practice can entirely transcend the conditions of their own production (Foucault 1972), the relative critical autonomy of universities can nonetheless be advocated and even celebrated. For Media Studies, following the example of Sociology before it, the key means of evading the stigma attached to it by right-wing polemicists, and its inevitable replication to some degree in the wider world, is a strategic combination of the sustained assertion of its demonstrable disciplinary relevance and the quality of its own intellectual performance. Objections to the systematic, specialist study of an institution as important as the media can be continually and convincingly exposed as perverse at best, but this exposure must occur both in university environments and on the terrain beyond where public criticism is mounted – in the media. This task requires, as noted above, making realistic claims for the occupational prospects of graduates after undergoing vocational university media education, and promoting the value of media education for all as a significant contemporary accomplishment. It also demands that high-level, critical research of various kinds in the field of Media Studies is performed by all university media educators, as it is this practice that sets them apart from others who claim competence in and even command of the knowledge field of the media. Finally, as

several of the interviews with journalists revealed, there is a need to encourage the deployment by media educators of the knowledge of their institutional object in their dealings with that institution itself. In other words, media educators are well placed to use their theoretical, conceptual and empirical knowledge of the media to foster productive relationships with media professionals, and to skilfully communicate their knowledge and ideas beyond the hostile Media Studies ‘commentariat’ to a wider audience. As one journalist put it:

Well, in an ideal world, it’s nice to think that you would just seek out people specifically for each story, but in reality when it comes down to it, you tend to rely on the same small group of academics who you know are very reliable, and are very good on the radio or on the television. I think, particularly for what I do, and for broadcast purposes, you need somebody who’s savvy, you need somebody who can talk on the air, without sounding too academic or without sounding too longwinded, because I have had bad experiences with academics where they can just sort of ramble on, and it does not necessarily help your story move along. I mean the thoughts and everything may well be there, but unfortunately we are in a business where everything needs to be pretty and presented in a sort of a slick way.
(Daniel, journalist, public service broadcaster)

While such constraints may be irksome, university media educators are better advised to tolerate them than to allow other, less qualified (in every sense) commentators to assert control of their subject area in the public media space. Working journalists, when seeking academic knowledge, require it to be delivered in a form sympathetic to the requirements of their medium. Media educators can be assumed to be sufficiently expert in their sphere of media knowledge to work with – and, perhaps, artfully against – such formal requirements in communicating beyond the academy. As one journalist stated:

I do get a lot of phone quotes from academics that are exactly what I need, they are punchy, they are straight to the point, they are interesting, they are entertaining, which is really something that we [the newspaper] go for, and that I go for also.
(Bernard, senior writer, provincial newspaper)

Of course, such matters should be handled with great caution, lest academic knowledge be reduced to a media ‘beauty contest’ and public intellectual interventions turned into a form of media ventriloquism. It is unfortunate that university media educators should feel coerced into public displays of their utility, but this is a dilemma that they share with fellow academics in History, Classics, Sociology, and so on. Nonetheless, however brief and debatable this example of Media Studies engagement with the media might be, it suggests one linkage between theory and practice in media education that is a fruitful alternative to the tired and tiresome wars of media commentators versus Media Studies, and theory versus practice among media educators.

Conclusion: ‘Is media studies good for your health? Discuss’

Almost two decades ago and in another century, books like Len Masterman’s (1985) *Teaching the Media* proliferated as Media Studies began to make its mark in British schools, polytechnics and universities, and in the equivalent institutions in other countries. Re-reading such books today reveals that some things have changed – such as many media technologies and new

analytical authorities, the diminishing interest in the high–low culture distinction, and the degree of establishment of media education – but there is much that is familiar. Masterman (1985: 1) opens the book by complaining that ‘It is a sad fact ... that rationales of media education have rarely managed to match the pace and sophistication of developments in the media themselves’. He also engages with the theory–practice split, warning of the dangers of ‘*the technician trap*’ [his emphasis], which he defines as:

A reductive process through which media education and the practice of media criticism come to be seen as a series of purely technical operations. A heightened awareness of the technician trap is necessary because the high degree of expertise and training in the arts of audio-visual production possessed by some media educators has, as its obverse, a tentativeness – a lack of confidence emanating from a lack of training – which is felt by many media educators when they engage their students in the crucial activity of critical analysis. (Masterman, 1985: 27)

It is clear from this assessment that many media educators still fall into the technician trap, and probably into new ones besides. I have tried in this article, though, not to exaggerate the problems of media education by suggesting that it is in crisis. Nonetheless, its discursive landscape is still stalked by ‘cut-out’ figures of ethereal theoreticians and mediocre, superannuated practitioners. It is rather strange that what could be regarded as a success story – the huge and rapid expansion of media education in universities – has somehow been turned, through loud, reactionary complaint and some internal division, into a narrative that hovers between tragedy and farce. There are many significant issues that have not been addressed here, such as the often deficient level of resourcing of media education and the frequent lack of clarity and consistency in its foundational philosophy and hence in its curriculum. But the immediate task is to reverse the current drift in which Media Studies registers too frequently as misleadingly marketed undergraduate teaching ‘fodder’ and the butt of right-wing populist newspaper columnist jokes.

I have suggested that the numerical success of media education as measured by staff and students has not been matched on measures of academic esteem. To a significant degree, the problems caused by the envy of disciplines with declining university enrolments and the contempt of latter-day Leavisites have been compounded by the collusion of media educators in the questionable mass selling of media degree programmes as passports to occupations that are both scarce and open to graduates in other disciplines. These difficulties have been exacerbated by a continuing, partially disabling theory–practice split that, despite some claims that it has been consigned to history, is still deeply embedded in media education discourse. The theory–practice synthesis that I have commended is candid about graduate levels of occupational competence and job prospects; expansive in its reach towards a generalist education from which many more students could benefit; exacting in its expectation of high-level research and scholarship; and astute in its interactions with media professionals by communicating the value of the work done in the field of Media Studies. The combination of vocational realism and intellectual ambition proposed here might help frame some new, uplifting tales and encourage the kind of media pedagogy and research that was such an inviting prospect when the field was in its exhilarating infancy.

Acknowledgement

*This article is developed from a presentation to the 'Bridging the Great Divide: Linking Theory and Practice in Media Education' day school at the Centre for International Media Analysis (CIMA), University of Luton, UK held on 9 May 2003. I am grateful to Professor Garry Whannel for his invitation and to the participants for their constructive comments.

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