Chapter One

Introduction

"I definitely agree that people doing media studies or other such degrees that have NO bearing on the economy SHOULD pay higher rates to study! On the other hand, I think these high fees should mean that people doing essential degrees can have theirs subsidised in some way. The government should NOT be paying for people to study art!" (Daily Mail, 12 October 2010)

This reader/writer of the *Daily Mail Online* dramatically and succinctly captures much of the essence of this study. This '*below the line'* comment is an example of an element of a media text that might be studied as part of a media studies course. Yet this specific text is also a response and contribution to a high profile public debate and associated media coverage around seemingly significant changes to English higher education. Media studies is cited as a paradigmatic example in support of their argument.

The aim of this study is to analyse undergraduate media studies in England, necessarily from the inside as the researcher is a media studies academic, and document the social practices that constitute the subject in the light of its historic and contemporary challenges and the influence of changing public higher education discourses over the period of the fieldwork, 2012-13. This provides insight into the nature of the power relationships that underpin the practices of

media studies and where they are in opposition, the tensions between them. The study focuses on undergraduate provision rather than postgraduate programmes as these activities form a significantly smaller part of media studies and operate within different funding regimes and with a distinct demographic profile with more non-EU students undertaking postgraduate study (HESA, 2014). Including these areas would expand the study beyond what is feasible within the constraints of time, resources and thesis length.

In summary, this study brings together elements of the emerging field of *Critical University Studies* (Williams, 2012a) together with a Foucauldian conceptual and methodological approach to analyse the current professional social practices that constitute undergraduate media studies within English higher education institutions.

This introductory chapter focuses on:

1-1 A survey of the prevalent national policy context for higher education over the period within the scope of the study (2010-2014).

1-2 A discussion of the term '*media studies*' and the establishment of a working definition for the purposes of this study.

1-3 The relevance of media studies as a 'bellwether' over this period.

1-4 A short overview of the development of the English higher education context for media studies.

1-5 A review of the nature and scale of undergraduate media studies provision in England to set the scope for the study.

1-6 An overview of the adopted conceptual and methodological framework.

1-7 The development of specific research questions.

1-1 National Policy Context

This study focuses solely on undergraduate media studies in England. Whilst many aspects of higher education are similar across both the UK and wider international contexts, the increasing impact of UK devolution has resulted in quite different national policy contexts across Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England, particularly in relation to student finance. As the development of English higher education policy has been the most radical and politically controversial, this still leaves scope for a meaningful but clearly defined study.

The fieldwork for this study took place between November 2011 and November 2013, a period that coincided with the mid-years of the parliament elected in May 2010 led by a Coalition government. One of the earliest significant political issues for the Coalition after taking office in May 2010 was the debate and subsequent policy introductions around the funding of students in higher education. With the Browne Review (2010) commissioned by the out-going Labour government in spring 2010, the Liberal-Democrats chose to publically distance themselves from the speculated increase in the student contribution by making a manifesto commitment (Liberal-Democrats, 2010) to oppose any rise in fees and to phase them out completely. This was accompanied by a high-profile campaign culminating in senior Liberal-Democrats (Nick Clegg, Sir Menzies Campbell and Vince Cable) and about 400 other Liberal-Democrat candidates signing a National Union of Students pledge (National Union of Students, 2010) that they would oppose any increase in tuition fees.

With the May 2010 general election resulting in a hung parliament the Liberal-Democrats entered discussions with the Conservative party and formed a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government on 11 May 2010 with Nick Clegg as Deputy Prime Minister and Vince Cable as Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills with overall responsibility for universities. The Conservative David Willetts was appointed Minister of State for Universities and Science. In these unusual circumstances both parties dropped some manifesto commitments and published the result of the post-election negotiations as *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government* (HM Government, 2010). This agreement committed the new coalition to wait for the Browne review to report and to allow Liberal-Democrat MPs to abstain from any parliamentary vote on the raising of tuition fees.

When the Browne Review was published on 12 October 2010 it sparked a frenetic public debate as the first real test of the coalition's coherence. Browne recommended the removal of the cap on tuition fees, up-front loans for students to cover the fees, repayment of loans once the graduate income was greater than £21,000 per year and abolition of up-front fees for part-time students. The government's proposals published on 3 November 2010 (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010) incorporated many of Browne's recommendations but included a rise in undergraduate tuition fees up to a maximum of £9000 per annum, subject to meeting fair access criteria.

Whilst these proposals represented a significant change for students and higher education providers, they need to be considered against the backdrop of the

Comprehensive Spending Review (HM Treasury, 2010) also published in November 2010. When implemented by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2011) they resulted in, for all practical purposes, the removal from universities of grant funding for the teaching of most subjects (McGettigan, 2013). The proposed increase in fees would offset the loss of recurrent teaching grant income. This major change in the funding of higher education was therefore not a part of the '*cuts*' discourse surrounding the mainstream acceptance of the desirability of reducing public expenditure. Rather it was a subtler, more ideological, shift of the funding burden from general taxation to students with a clear financial relationship between students, their course and university rather than a shared commitment by the taxpayer (and therefore society as a whole) and the student (McGettigan, 2013). The changes to the university funding regime did not contribute to '*deficit reduction*' in the short-term as public money is used to pay the upfront fees. This will only be partially recovered once the students have graduated and are earning sufficient to start repayment of their loans. This issue is explored in depth in Chapter 7, Section 7-4.

The foregrounding of the funding issue, the resulting brief resurgence in student activism and increased media interest have all served to bring into question the role of universities in UK society and the nature and value of an undergraduate education. Whilst the funding of universities was at least shared between the state and the student then universities retained some obligation to contribute to

the broader society (Collini, 2012). Once funding is almost solely derived from students then universities may narrow their focus to recruiting, retaining and satisfying students. Whilst the state will still be involved in financially underwriting the student loan system, the rhetoric surrounding the move to higher fees focuses on a shift of the cost of a university education from the state to the student. This leads to a discourse of '*student as customer*' and an assumption that, through competition between higher education providers, such relationships will lead to higher quality education at a lower price. The argument is that once students are paying almost all the cost of their studies, they will look more closely at the costs and benefits, be more questioning of the quality of their experience at university and will make an instrumental evaluation of the financial cost of a course against the likely financial benefits of a resulting graduate career (Williams, 2012b).

This leaves the nature and purpose of an undergraduate education open to significant questioning. The framing for this debate has been around the vocational and hence financial value of a degree to the graduate, their employer and the economy (for example, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010 and 2014). Whilst this emphasis has been growing alongside neo-liberal economics over some years (see, for example, McGettigan, 2013), the stark changes in the balance of funding may escalate the economic value of a degree as a major factor in the decision making of both students and the surrounding stakeholders such as teachers, parents/carers, careers advisors and employers, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This instrumental

approach to higher education privileges those subjects with a self-evident vocational outcome: law, medicine, education, social work, those with a direct relationship to business and those that address perceived skills shortages in the economy: science, mathematics, technology, engineering. The most notably absent subjects from these lists are the humanities. The discounting of the contribution these subjects can make to society beyond the utilitarian and a failure to fully recognise the transferable skills developed in these courses has seen a forecasted decline in humanities provision, particularly in post-92 universities (Morgan, 2011) with the future of media studies uncertain. The impact of this is likely to be variable across the background of students. Potentially, only students from relatively privileged backgrounds will have access to the ideas that inform and underpin the ways in which society operates as post-92 universities typically have a more diverse student body in terms of socio-economic and ethnic background.

1-2 A working definition of the term 'media studies'

To ensure that this study has a defined scope it is important to be clear about the range of higher education provision that is being considered as '*media studies*'. The term is itself problematic and an element of the discourses under investigation and to use the term at all can be seen as implying an ideological position— it is not a neutral phrase and there are no clear boundaries and definitions that allow courses, lecturers and students to be neatly positioned 'inside' or 'outside' the scope of '*media studies*'.

A number of authors have discussed definitions of '*media studies*' and the associated politics (for example, Caughie and Frith, 1990; Durant, 1991; Cottle, 2003; Couldry, 2009). The rationale for '*media studies*' is considered further through the literature review and an analysis of the primary interview data from the study participants but, for the purposes of scoping and limiting this study, the term '*media studies*' is used to represent the study of a broad range of mass media artefacts, phenomena, institutions and audiences using interdisciplinary approaches that combine disciplines such as history, politics, sociology, psychology and critical theory. This study does not exclude areas such as journalism, radio, television and film studies from the broader term '*media studies*'. It is also used here to be inclusive of a wide range of pedagogic approaches including analytical and theoretical courses as well as courses that focus on the techniques of media production. There are technical and engineering courses that focus on the technologies of media production but these are excluded from this definition of media studies.

There is a blurred boundary between '*media studies*' and '*art and design*' and this is considered as part of the analysis but '*art and design*' is considered to be distinct from '*media studies*' in terms of both pedagogy and curriculum content. Teaching and learning in '*art and design*' is more commonly focused on art studio practice and practice-led assessment and the curriculum is often more concerned with fine art, aesthetics, contextual studies and commercial design in all its forms.

1-3 Media Studies as a 'bellwether'

It is within this context that '*media studies*' resides. With its origins in critical theory and a multidisciplinary concentration on a sector of society and the economy rather than a narrow academic discipline, it could be seen as a post-92 solution to the problem of allowing students access to ideas from the humanities whilst still delivering overt vocationalism. However media studies is sometimes portrayed in the media through a discourse of '*declining academic standards*', '*dumbing-down*', '*over-recruitment*' and poor graduate employment opportunities, labelled by David Buckingham (2014, p.7) as the "*discourse of derision*".

It is within this political context that the provision of media courses takes place. Whilst the Quality Assurance Agency benchmark statements (QAA, 2008) provide a starting point for curriculum design, the multidisciplinary nature of the subject, varying student backgrounds, different institutional contexts and varying approaches to industry practice and employability lead to quite radically different course designs within different universities. It is this richness and diversity that provides the substance to this research study. From public discourses there appear to be significant tensions amongst the stakeholders that are not always fully resolved. These tensions are manifested in public discursive practices, for example, '*creative industries*', '*employability*', '*vocational*', '*student as customer*', '*a degree for watching television*', '*out there in the real world*', '*theory and practice*', '*student experience*', '*tick boxes*' etc. Underlying these relationships are ideological positions and relative power and therefore when viewed as the expression of

power through language it becomes the study of discourses, a position that is explored in greater depth in Chapter Three.

The study consisted of an analysis of both publically available documentary evidence and the transcripts from semi-structured interviews with nineteen participants, selected because of their relevance to the discursive practices of media studies. Through these interviews participants were encouraged to share their perspective on the ways these issues impact on professional practices and these were analysed alongside relevant public higher education discourse evidence and the associated academic literature.

The data from these interviews were then analysed to ascertain the significant themes with the aim of identifying emerging discourses of media studies, higher education and their interactions. This then leads to conclusions that point to a balance of Foucauldian power through oppositional discourses that do not conform to a premise that recent reforms of higher education have had a wholly negative impact on the academy. This contrasts with a discourse of *'apocalypse'* that characterises *Critical University Studies (*Williams, 2012a).

1-4 The UK Higher Education Context for Media Studies

A long-view history of the development of higher education within the UK can appear to show a general trend towards expansion with a break out from its medieval origins characterised by expanding numbers of institutions, students, teachers and researchers, often in waves as a response to governmental initiatives and fuelled by an expansion of secondary education which increased the expectations and aspirations of an increasing number of matriculating pupils (Stevens, 2005). Never afraid to restructure, sub-divide, categorise and colonise, the higher education sector has always spawned new ways of classifying knowledge using terms such as *field*, *discipline* and *subject* (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Sometimes these reflect developments in epistemology or research breakthroughs but they can also be driven by the fashions and economic concerns of the times and the history of the institutional development of the departments involved. In a discussion designed to show that academic disciplines across the sciences and humanities show greater similarity than difference Collini (2012, p.62) observes that;

> "All kinds of distinctions can be drawn among various disciplines in terms of method, subject-matter, outcomes, and so on, but these distinctions do not all map neatly on to one another so as to fall into two mutually exclusive groups. And all disciplines involve, ultimately, a similar drive towards open-ended understanding, so, for that reason, all disciplines have a stake in the well-being of the university."

This partitioning of knowledge, skills, methods and subject-matter into disciplines and their embodiment in institutional structures and programmes of education is arbitrary and the boundaries are easily contested. Having created these artificial

divides, the academy can then make a virtue of bridging them through the explicit promotion of interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary working.

As each new wave of expansion or consolidation occurs together with an associated shift in academic disciplines there is often a revisiting of the most fundamental of questions around higher education; what is it?; what is it for?; who is it for?; and whatever higher education is, how should it be embodied institutionally, what is a university?

Not only do these questions reappear at regular intervals but so do many of the possible answers. A striking feature of the history of UK higher education is that many of the current debates around the nature of higher education are not new but are revisiting similar questions and are resulting in similar answers to those that emerged from earlier periods of change. For example,

> "And it must be recognised that in our own times, progress - and particularly the maintenance of a competitive position - depends to a much greater extent than ever before on skills demanding special training. A good general education, valuable though it may be, is frequently less than we need to solve many of our most pressing problems." (Robbins, 1963, p.6)

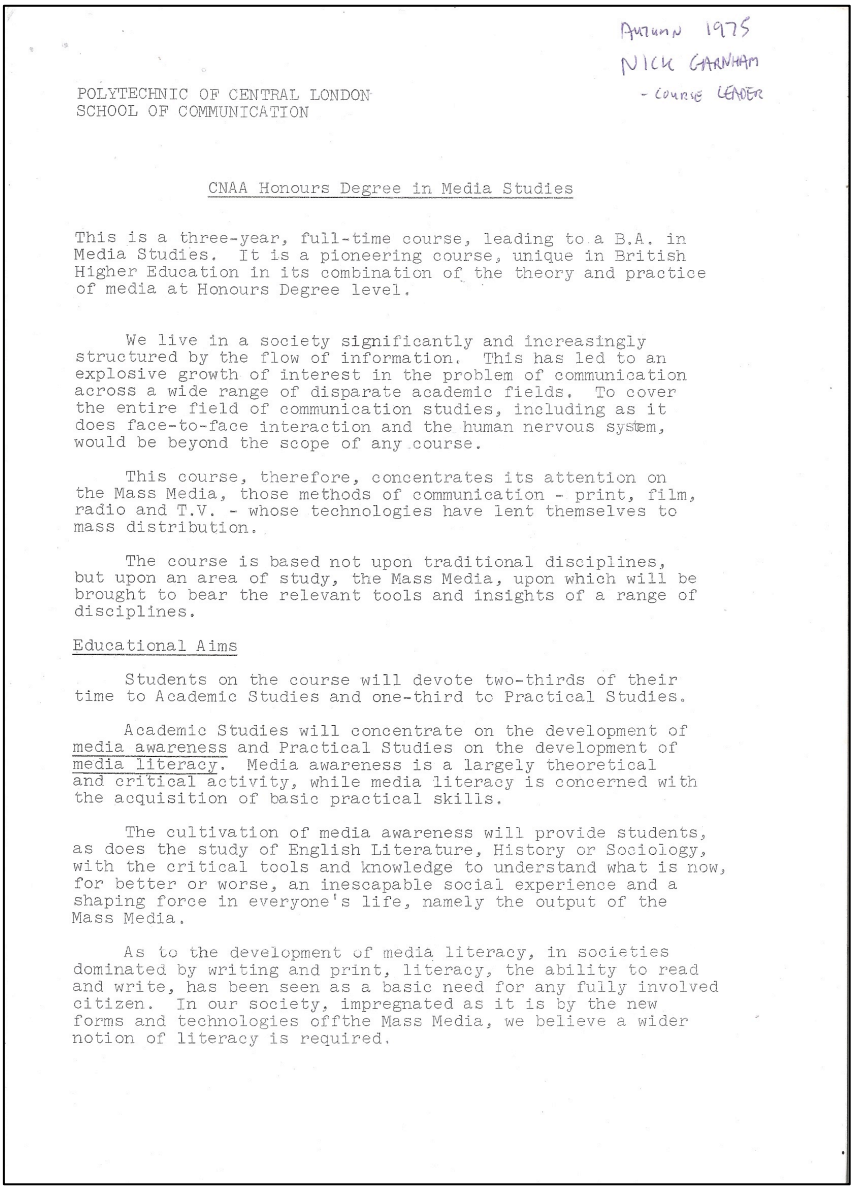
Although this quote is from the Robbins Report of 1963, the sentiments expressed could be seen as representative of many of the subsequent reviews of higher education up to the present.

Recurrent questions include the role of higher education in relation to the personal development of students, social cohesion and citizenship and the

relationship between higher education and economic needs. As these questions arise and are debated within the public sphere by succeeding generations it becomes clear that if there ever was a pure, romantic, golden age of universities where knowledge and understanding has been pursued for its own sake and freely and benevolently passed to successive generations of students, eager to expand their thinking and contribute to society, then it was only experienced by a very few privileged people. At the outset of his account of the politics of higher education in the UK, Stevens notes John Ruskin's observation that "revivals are of things that never existed" (Stevens, 2005, p.6).

Taking a long view, the history of English higher education can be considered synonymous with the history of Oxford and Cambridge. Scottish higher education developed fairly independently from its origins at St. Andrews, Edinburgh and Glasgow. In the last 200 years higher education has fragmented and expanded into the diverse and complex range of institutions and practices that constitute the current provision. Since the mid-nineteenth century, new universities have been created with the aim of reaching additional kinds of students, either socially or geographically, with new and economically significant subject areas. Some members of the current Russell Group trace their origins back to the growth of regional industrial centres, such as Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester, that characterised the industrial revolution. Russell Group institutions such as Warwick, Exeter and Southampton are products of later waves of expansion in higher education as various colleges grew and obtained a charter and degree awarding powers. Whilst many older universities have made

research excellence and the high quality teaching of selective undergraduate intakes the focus of their mission, more recent additions to the university sector have sometimes focussed on other niches such as education for business and the professions and the teaching of more diverse intakes.



Autumn 1975
NICK GARNHAM
- course LEADER

POLYTECHNIC OF CENTRAL LONDON
SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION

CNAA Honours Degree in Media Studies

This is a three-year, full-time course, leading to a B.A. in Media Studies. It is a pioneering course, unique in British Higher Education in its combination of the theory and practice of media at Honours Degree level.

We live in a society significantly and increasingly structured by the flow of information. This has led to an explosive growth of interest in the problem of communication across a wide range of disparate academic fields. To cover the entire field of communication studies, including as it does face-to-face interaction and the human nervous system, would be beyond the scope of any course.

This course, therefore, concentrates its attention on the Mass Media, those methods of communication - print, film, radio and T.V. - whose technologies have lent themselves to mass distribution.

The course is based not upon traditional disciplines, but upon an area of study, the Mass Media, upon which will be brought to bear the relevant tools and insights of a range of disciplines.

Educational Aims

Students on the course will devote two-thirds of their time to Academic Studies and one-third to Practical Studies.

Academic Studies will concentrate on the development of media awareness and Practical Studies on the development of media literacy. Media awareness is a largely theoretical and critical activity, while media literacy is concerned with the acquisition of basic practical skills.

The cultivation of media awareness will provide students, as does the study of English Literature, History or Sociology, with the critical tools and knowledge to understand what is now, for better or worse, an inescapable social experience and a shaping force in everyone's life, namely the output of the Mass Media.

As to the development of media literacy, in societies dominated by writing and print, literacy, the ability to read and write, has been seen as a basic need for any fully involved citizen. In our society, impregnated as it is by the new forms and technologies offthe Mass Media, we believe a wider notion of literacy is required.

Figure 1-1 – Original Course Description for Students – BA(Hons) Media Studies, Polytechnic of Central London, 1975 (Garnham, 1975)

It is within this context that media education has emerged and developed from the 1970s to the present day. The BA(Hons) Media Studies course launched in the autumn of 1975 by the School of Communication at the Polytechnic of Central London (now the University of Westminster) and awarded by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) is widely acknowledged as the first recognisable UK undergraduate Media Studies degree. Led by Nick Garnham, this new degree informed potential students that:

"The course is based not upon traditional disciplines, but upon an area of study, the Mass Media, upon which will be brought to bear the relevant tools and insights of a range of disciplines" (Garnham,1975)

and;

"The cultivation of media awareness will provide students, as does the study of English Literature, History or Sociology, with the critical tools and knowledge to understand what is now, for better or worse, an inescapable social experience and a shaping force in everyone's life, namely the output of the Mass Media" (ibid.)

1.5 The nature and scale of undergraduate media studies provision

Building on the definition of '*media studies*' (see above), the scale and character of the provision needs to be established to ensure that the discourse data obtained from the participants is a legitimate indicator of the breadth of practices that constitute English undergraduate media studies. The backgrounds of the participants can be mapped against the provision to legitimise their contributions.

Reflecting the relative age of the subject as an area of academic study, the diversity of the media industries and the multidisciplinary approaches that underpin them, undergraduate media courses across the UK vary considerably.

Aspects of the mass media are studied within institutions from all the main university mission groups, HE in FE colleges, private-sector providers, large universities and small specialist institutions. The subject matter can cover all elements of the mass media: film, television, newspapers, books, magazines, radio, social media, virtual and augmented reality and mobile media. Some courses are highly specialised and focused on a particular area of the media or a particular industry role. Other courses provide a general survey of the media and draw out the similarities and underlying principles that apply across all media forms. There are also variations in pedagogic approach. Some courses emphasise the theoretical and analytical aspects of media studies whilst others lead with professional media practice. Others combine the two, using theory to inform practice and vice versa. Organisationally, media courses are often located within departments that specialise in the media but they can also be found co-located with or subsumed within areas such as English, social sciences, humanities, business or technology.

Although media course provision is rich and diverse, there are patterns that emerge. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reports overall student numbers within broad groupings (JACS – Joint Academic Coding System) with some breakdown into more specific areas. The process by which courses are allocated to JACS codes is somewhat arbitrary but it does provide a way of looking at the distribution of courses and students across UK higher education. For the year 2011-12 (the first year covered by the fieldwork aspect of this study), HESA report (2014) that there were 39,910 full-time first-degree

students studying courses in *Mass Communications and Documentation*. This is from a total UK population of 1,312,115 students giving around three per cent within this category – media studies has high public visibility but actually represents a quite small proportion of total higher education provision, particularly in relation to the economic significance of the creative industries within the overall UK economy (£71.4 billion, 5.2 per cent Gross Value Added in 2012 (DCMS, 2014)). *Mass Communications and Documentation* includes subjects such as information services but is dominated by courses in media studies (25,310 students) and journalism (10,100 students). Some media courses, particularly if they have a practice focus, may be categorised as *Creative Arts and Design* by HESA. There were 139,165 students in this area in 2011-12 (HESA, 2014), mostly in design studies, drama and fine art although 18,405 were studying cinematics or photography courses. By contrast, the largest subject cluster in UK universities is *Business and Administrative Studies* with 180,995 students - 13.8 per cent of the total. The University and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS, 2011) listed a total of 177 UK institutions offering undergraduate higher education courses in media areas for students wishing to start a course in September 2013. Of these, twenty were at institutions based in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland and so are excluded from the scope of this study.

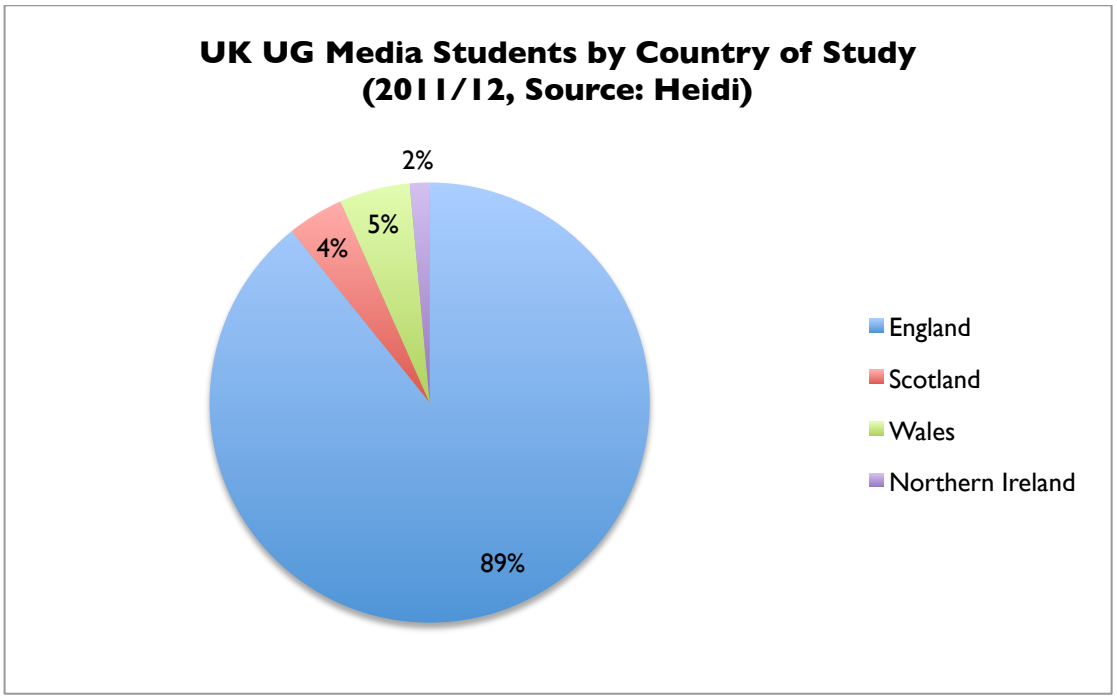


Figure 1-2 – UK Undergraduate Media Students by Country of Study (2011-12, Source: Higher Education Information Database for Institutions (HEIDI))

Figure 1-2 uses data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2014). HESA provides detailed student data to institutions through the Higher Education Information Database for Institutions (HEIDI) system. This data includes the number of students studying *Mass Communications and Documentation* (JACS Code P) at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels at each institution. What emerges is a picture of the range of institutions delivering media courses and the concentrations of student numbers. In particular, this chart shows the distribution of student numbers across the countries of the UK. Excluding Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland from this study following the divergence of higher education policy in these countries after devolution does simplify the study but it can still cover the provision accessed by almost ninety per cent of UK media students.

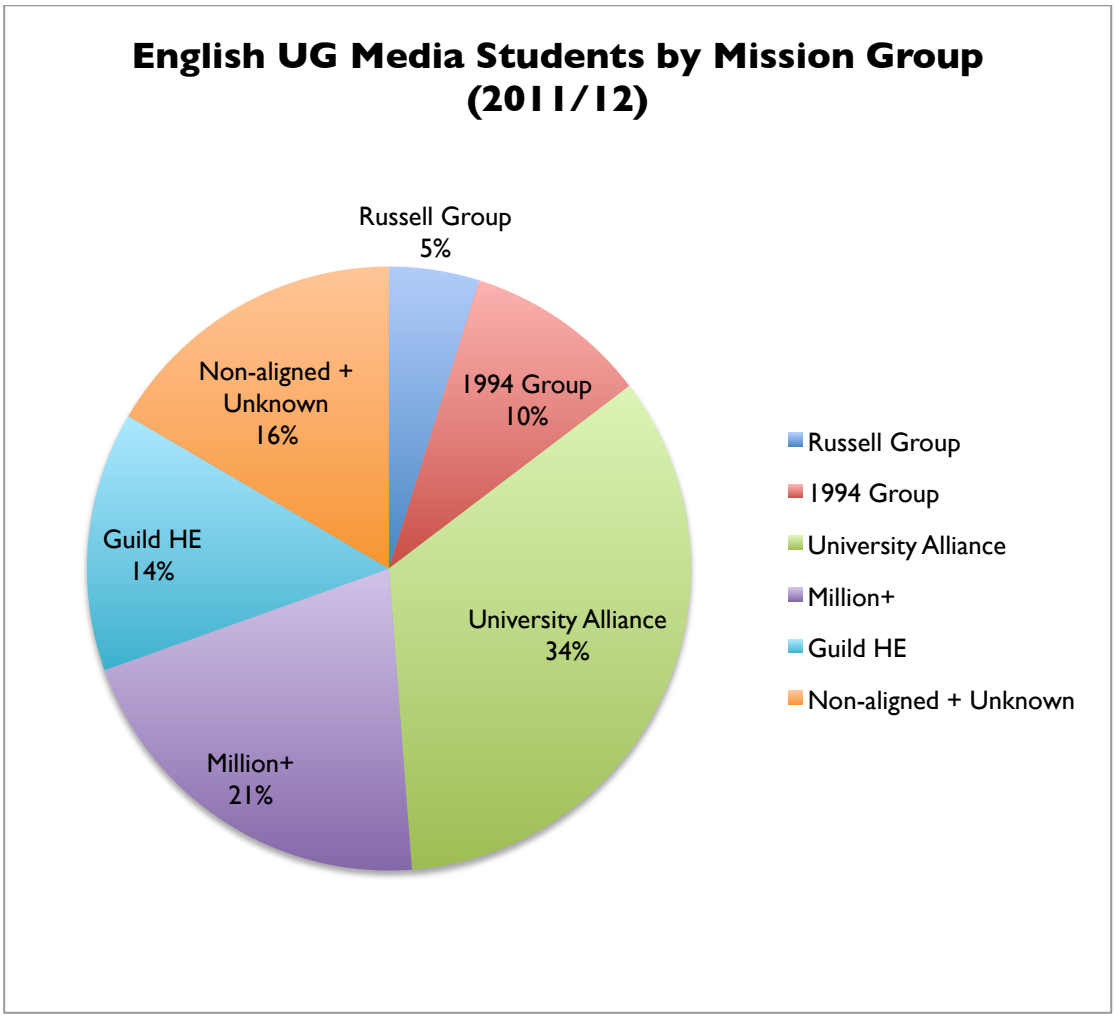


Figure 1-3 – English Undergraduate Media Students by University Mission Group (2011-12, Source: Higher Education Information Database for Institutions (HEIDI, HESA, 2014))

When considering media higher education provision in England the institutional context is likely to be significant and so there is value in considering the range of institutions offering media courses and how they may be categorised. A simple way is to look at the institutional membership of the various university mission group organisations. Whilst it is straightforward to identify mission group membership (or its absence), some caution is required as this process of self and peer identification is somewhat opaque and the reasons universities have for opting to join (and sometimes change) particular mission group are complex.

There are also a significant and increasing number of mainstream higher education providers who maintain a non-aligned position.

The mission group taxonomy has collapsed further following the period covered by the study fieldwork with the demise of the 1994 Group. However, as a way of thinking about the universities that deliver the bulk of English media higher education over the period covered by this study, a categorisation by mission group does have some value. Figure 1-3 demonstrates that over half of the students are studying in Million+ (2014) or University Alliance (2014) institutions. These are predominantly post-1992 universities with a heritage derived from the polytechnics and colleges of higher education. A further fourteen per cent of students are studying at institutions that are members of GuildHE (2013). In defining its brand, GuildHE notes that "*Many member institutions share key characteristics, specialist mission or subject focus, being smaller than the average university in the UK but some being major providers in professional subject areas*…" (ibid.). Whilst these institutions might be small, their specialist nature means that some have very large concentrations of media students, for example, Ravensbourne.

In contrast to the concentration of students in the Million+/University Alliance/GuildHE institutions, only fifteen per cent of undergraduate media students were in the research-intensive Russell or 1994 groups. There are a significant number of institutions that were not members of any mission group. The chart shows this as a combination of two groups. The institutions categorised as non-aligned are those that have publically reported themselves as

taking a non-aligned stance, rather than assuming non-alignment on the basis of an absence from the mission groups. The 'unknowns' are institutions that do not appear in any mission group membership but have not been publically reported as positively adopting a non-aligned position. Whilst it is useful to maintain this distinction in the data, for the purposes of this study it is reasonable to regard all these institutions as unaffiliated to any of the five mainstream mission groups. As might be expected, the non-aligned group is an eclectic collection of institutions but it does include some universities with significant populations of undergraduate media students such as the Universities of Derby (300) and Gloucestershire (230) and one of the most historically important providers, the University of Westminster with 650 undergraduate media students. However, the general pattern within the non-aligned institutions matches that observed across the mission groups; few pre-1992 universities have significant numbers of undergraduate media students.

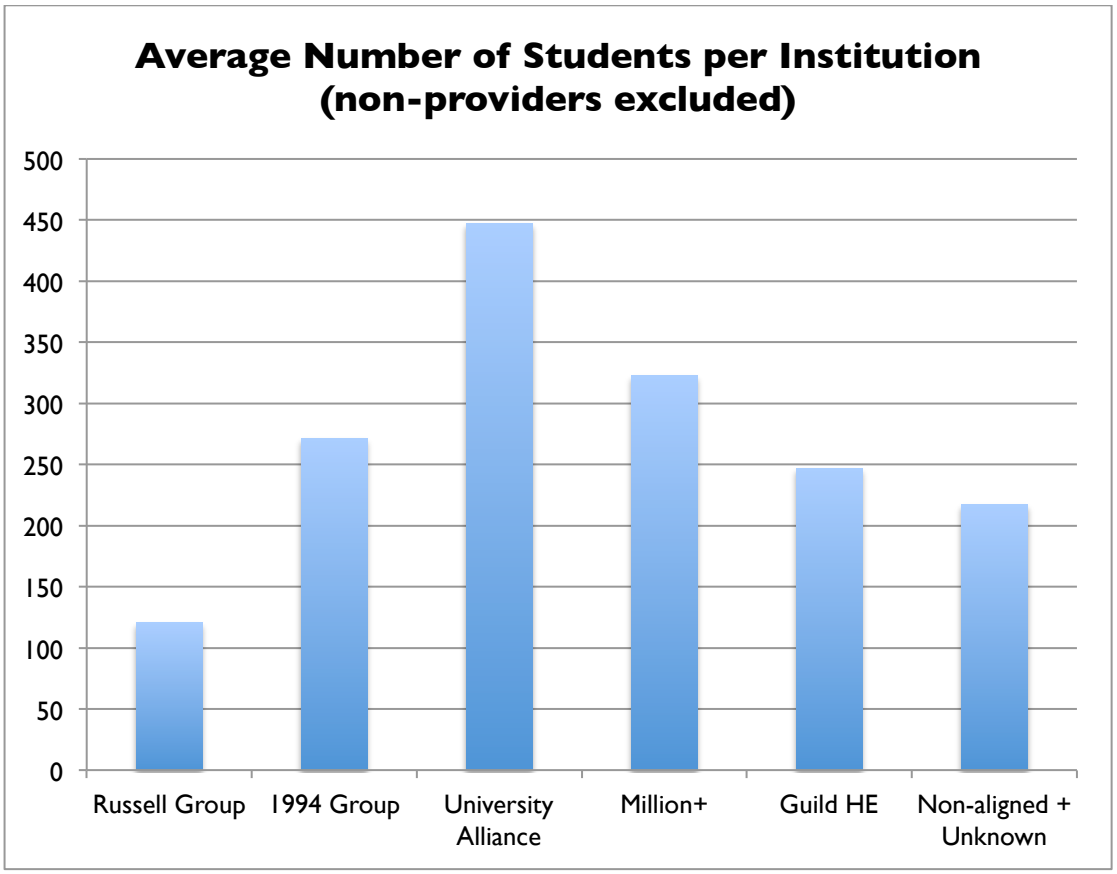


Figure 1-4 – Average Number of Media Studies students per institution by University Mission Group (2011-12, Source: Higher Education Information Database for Institutions (HEIDI) (HESA, 2014)

Having identified the distribution of student population across the mission groups it is then possible to consider the average size of the provision and how this varies across the mission groups. This can be regarded as a proxy measure of the overall level of institutional activity in the area and as a possible indication of the size of the department(s) involved. Figure 1-4 shows the mean number of undergraduate media students at institutions within the indicated mission groups. Institutions with no media provision have been excluded before calculating the mean. This further analysis is important as it shows that undergraduate media provision is quite concentrated rather than thinly and evenly distributed across all the institutions in a mission group. The chart shows that undergraduate media

education is concentrated in fairly large departments within the Million+/University Alliance/GuildHE mission groups. Where there was undergraduate provision in Russell Group and 1994 Group institutions, it tended to be in smaller departments.

Whilst the HEIDI data gives a good picture of the distribution of undergraduate media education it does not entirely reflect the way in which this provision is delivered. The UCAS website for applicants (UCAS, 2011) showed that there were 157 providers of undergraduate media courses in England. Of these, 68 were colleges rather than universities. This reflects the concentration of industry and business-focused two-year foundation degree qualifications in colleges.. Where colleges offer higher education qualifications (FHEQ level four and above) these are normally done in partnership with an institution that has degree-awarding powers (typically a university) or through a national awarding body such as Edexcel. On this basis, it can be argued that staff teaching media in colleges have less influence over course and curriculum development than their counterparts in universities. Nevertheless, they are clearly an important factor in the delivery of media higher education and so were included within the scope of this study.

Figure 1-5 – Media course titles vocabulary in England. *Media* and *Studies* excluded. This is a word cloud where the size of the word is in proportion to its frequency in the list of course titles. The position in the cloud is not significant. (Source: UCAS (2011) website, word cloud: wordle.org)

In addition to considering the institutional distribution of media courses it is also necessary to consider the breadth and variation of media courses. With the diverse nature of media industries and practices as the object of study and the range of underlying academic disciplines used to investigate the media, the provision is heterogeneous and so is difficult to characterise. This can be illustrated by considering the range of vocabulary used in course titles. Figure 1-5 is a visualisation of the words appearing in UK media courses listed for 2013-14 entry by UCAS. The words *media* and *studies* have been excluded as, unsurprisingly, they dominate course titles (although the number of courses called simply 'Media Studies' is very small (eleven of 1328 courses listed)). The visualisation uses the size of the word to indicate its frequency within the list of course titles. The larger the word appears in the visualisation, the higher its frequency. This analysis shows a number of features that demonstrate the

diversity of provision. A few words dominate the titles alongside *media* and *studies*. *Production* and *Creative* are very common, probably intending to communicate a focus on practical activities producing media artefacts. Interestingly, the word *Digital* is also very common. It may be that this term is intended to signify modernity and relevance although, given that media production technologies have been overwhelmingly digital for decades and very few courses specialise in analogue media (for example, celluloid-based photography and film courses are increasingly unusual and could be seen as a niche provision) it is often rather redundant. The terms *Film*, *Journalism* and *Communication(s)* indicate major areas within media studies and may be considered as significant sub-categories, largely derived from the ways in which media studies has developed historically. Film studies pre-dates media studies and is often considered a development of the application of critical theories from English Literature as cinema emerged as a dominant art form over the twentieth century, later drawing on ideas from areas such as Freudian and then Jungian and Post-Jungian psychoanalysis. Journalism also has its own traditions of education and training and its own history of transition from something seen as a craft skill to an area of undergraduate study and a graduate profession. Currently faced with significant challenges from the changing economics of the newspaper industry and existential angst (for example, Curran, 2010) over the emergence of social media and user-generated content, journalism courses are generally engaging with the broader issues of media studies whilst also addressing the need to prepare students for much more multi-disciplinary roles in the industry rather

than employment in the conventional roles of reporter, feature writer or sub-editor.

Communication(s) is also a significant term within course titles. Communication studies is another area of study that pre-dates media studies. This is generally a broader area of study that includes topics such as quantitative theories of communication with the work of Shannon and Weaver (1949) often featuring. This work largely originated in the USA and Communication Studies can be viewed as more American than European (for example, Fiske, 1990). A factor in the development of UK course titles is the need to appeal not just to UK home students but also to both non-UK EU students and non-EU students looking to study in the UK. These students form an important part of most university communities and are a significant revenue stream for many institutions. This means that course titles must be recognisable and attractive to potential students across the world if UK universities are to compete in a global higher education market. For example, courses designed with an international market in mind might be called *Mass Communications* rather than *Media Studies*.

More generally, the course title visualisation features an eclectic range of terms that appear less frequently. A study of the media is often combined with another subject. This can be partly attributed to some university undergraduate schemes that are based around credit accumulation and allow students to freely combine subjects to produce a potentially huge number of combinations. However it still illustrates how diverse media courses can be and how they can be combined with many other areas of academic study. In capturing and analysing the

discourses around media studies it is important to recognise the richness of the provision and to ensure that any evidencing of these discourses takes account of the varying nature of media courses across the sector.

1.6 Overview of Conceptual and Methodological Framework

The provision of media studies courses in higher education involves complex processes that are influenced by many factors that range from overt policy directives to subtler interactions. There are broad national and international drivers interacting with very specific local contexts. These drivers may often be in tension with seemingly little agreement regarding what constitutes a successful outcome. Any study of these processes needs to frame them and be clear about the assumptions that are being made.

For the purposes of this study, media studies is regarded as a cluster of social practices. Courses are influenced by, developed, designed and implemented by people playing specific formal or less-well defined informal roles. Within the culture of higher education, there is a presumption of collective responsibility for academic matters; policy committees, examination boards, approval panels and constructed course teams, for example. Analysing the operation of these social practices involves capturing the perceptions of the participants, their relationships with the collective entities and the communication between them. There are specific social norms that operate within academic communities and although these are changing and are more complex than the popular stereotypes of academics would suggest, there are distinct modes of interaction within

universities that influence the ways in which courses are constituted as social practices. By comparing and contrasting the perceptions of individuals with the evidence from public higher education and media studies discourses some insight into the nature of the processes emerges. The emphasis on analysing discourses does give rise to the interesting phenomenon of a common media studies technique being applied to a study of media education. However, with a focus on the social aspects of language and communication and an assumption that Foucauldian power relationships underpin the practices of media studies, it follows, based on the rationale established in Chapter Three, that a form of discourse analysis would be the most appropriate analytical tool.

1-7 Research Questions

This research study is based on the premise that English higher education has been undergoing a significant, if not unprecedented, level of change that has led to both internal and public sphere debates around the nature and purpose of higher education (Collini 2012, Whelan *et al.* 2013, McGettigan 2013). Further, the nature of media studies has put it at the heart of this seemingly contested space (Buckingham, 2014) and therefore a consideration of the purpose and practices of media studies may be indicative of the impact of these changes on UK higher education in general. The purpose of this study is to explore and characterise the social practices that constitute media studies as a means of questioning some of the narratives emerging under the banner *Critical University Studies* (Williams, 2012a).

On this basis, the initial research questions that this study seeks to address are:

1. How are media studies courses conceived in terms of public and academic discourses? What does this indicate about the purpose and value of media studies and how does this relate to the associated professional practices?
2. What do the discursive practices of media studies reveal of the power relationships operating across media studies? How do media studies participants manage oppositional discourses?
3. How do the outcomes of this study relate to the existing and emerging research literature? How does this project relate to the emerging work that is being labelled *Critical University Studies*?
4. To what extent are the conclusions of this study applicable to higher education beyond media studies and do they have useful implications for academic professional practice?