Chapter Three

Conceptual Framework

"…the university, despite the nostalgic image of an elitist, inviolate ivory tower, has become a central location in contemporary societies for testing out the relations between the public, the market, and the state, and as such a kind of laboratory of the social." (Whelan et al, 2013, p.4)

This chapter considers ways of conceptualising higher education practices and grounds the study within a philosophical and theoretical framework. This is then developed in the next chapter into a rationale for the collection of research data and its subsequent analysis. The outcome is that the work is grounded in a position that regards the practices around media studies as socially constructed through discourses that can be characterised and analysed using an approach that was promoted by Foucault (2002a and 2002b) and others (for example, Saarinen, 2008). This position uses a consideration of discourse, knowledge and power to define and account for the practices that constitute media studies and subsequently leads to a methodological approach that underpins the use of semi-structured interviews as an appropriate data collection process within a study that is necessarily a self-referential examination of professional practice; a use of academic practices to study academic practices.

3-1 Media Studies: Social Construction and Social Practice

In common with much of the work in higher education studies, this study adopts a social constructionism approach to conceptualising '*media studies*' and the activities associated with it. The study is based on the assertion that the reality of media studies is socially constructed. Ian Hacking (2000) traces the origins of this approach to Berger and Luckmann's (1966) book, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* although the widespread application of this approach is, according to Hacking, more associated with the 1980s and 1990s. Also tracking the development of social constructionism, Dave Elder-Vass (2012, p.5) summarises the position:

"Social constructionisms derive their force from a further claim: that changing the ways in which people collectively think and/or communicate about the world *in itself* constitutes a change with significance for the social world."

It is this "*in itself*" connection between collective thought/communication and the reality of the social world that characterises this approach and gives it its distinctiveness.

Building on the social construction of reality, higher education can be considered as a collection of '*social practices*'. This term is theorised by (Reckwitz, 2002) and used here as defined by Tuomela (2007, p.5):

"A social practice in its core sense is taken to consist of recurrent collective social actions performed for a shared social reason, expressed in the collective attitude …underlying the social practice."

This characterisation of '*social practice*' can be applied to this study by regarding media studies in higher education as a cluster of these practices, particularly in the actions of academic staff who consider themselves part of the performance

of media studies "*collective social actions*" for "*shared social reasons*" that are expressed in the "*collective attitude*" that this study seeks to evidence.

This approach is consistent with the definition and example given by Norman Fairclough (2003, pp.23-24) where he argues that:

"Social practices can be thought of as ways of controlling the selection of certain structural possibilities and the exclusion of others, and the retention of these selections over time, in particular areas of social life."

Fairclough then goes on to cite the changing ways in which teaching and research practices relate to the practices of higher education management as a result of what he sees as a process of '*marketisation'* as an example. (ibid.)

In the introduction to their polemic, *Zombies in the Academy* (Whelan *et al.*, 2013, p.4) the authors identify universities as "…a kind of laboratory of the social", drawing on the work of Eli Thorkelson to draw out the richness and complexity of academic practice and to elevate it beyond a potentially deterministic view of the relationships between universities, "*the public, the market, and the state*" (ibid.) Thorkelson colourfully characterises it as follows:

"Sometimes I also think it's too easy to reduce universities to rather stale bureaucratic conceptions, to a boring metanarrative about the state and capital, for instance. So part of the project has to be to confront the gothic element of academic life, its moments of dejection and rejection and abjection, its fantastic, romantic qualities, its dynamics of lunacy and wasted effort, its moments of ignorance and forgetting. The academic world has structures of chaos as well as structures of order; it enchants as much as it disenchants; it's not only about the play of socioeconomic structure, but about the dramatic, poetic, affective play of everyday life." (Thorkelson, 2012)

It is this richness that this consideration of media studies seeks to engage with; social practices that constitute "*structures of chaos*" and "*structures of order*".

Mason (1996, p.27) foregrounds the requirement for studies such as this to adopt a clear and consistent ontological approach; "*are they based on similar, complementary or comparable assumptions about the nature of social entities and phenomena?*" Mason illustrates this point by emphasising the distinction between "*an ontological position which sees social life as a collection of social discourses*" and a "*position which sees individual personalities as empirical realities, and social life as a collection of these…*"

When confronting this dichotomy, the nature of higher education practice and its embodiment in the institutional context of a university would appear to be more naturally regarded as a collection of social discourses rather than an amalgam of individuals embodying an empirical reality. This is consistent with the view of Whelan *et al.* (2013, p.4) that universities are "*…a kind of laboratory of the social*" and is similar to the position adopted by Mayson and Schapper in their use of interviews to study research-led teaching;

> "We argue that the ways in which senior academics speak about research and teaching are not simply descriptions of the 'reality' of academic work. The language used to communicate this reality is practical in that it defines and structures organisational understandings and practices in order to legitimise dominant institutional views about organisational policies and structures." (Mayson & Schapper, 2010, p.471)

This approach to higher education practice as a social construct seems to sit well with the prevalence of practices within universities such as student feedback, peer-review, collegiality and collective responsibility for academic judgments. Whilst there is a '*celebrity academic*' or '*star researcher*' phenomenon within the wider public sphere, within universities the dominant practices are regarded as collective and tend to be more highly valued by the academy than highly

individualistic activities. Courses are designed by groups of academic staff, approved by a panel of internal and external academic staff and student representatives, and assessment judgments are made through a process of grading by two or more academic staff. Ultimately, degrees are awarded by an examination board making a recommendation to an academic board or a senate. There has been an identifiable shift towards a more managerial approach, the "*highly managerial corporate enterprises in which scholars are rather lowly employees*" identified by Collini (2012, p.22-23) but this always has to be seen to relate to a deliberative function normally constituted as the inevitable committee and is, perhaps nominally, subservient to it. In their exploration of the changing role of academic middle managers, Hellawell and Hancock (2001) draw on Bush's (1995) school-based definition of collegiality and argue that it can be applied within a higher education context. This definition states that collegiality:

> "assume(s) that organisations determine policy and make decisions through a process of discussion leading to consensus. Power is shared among some or all members of the organisation who are thought to have a mutual understanding about the objectives of the institution." (Bush, 1995, p.52)

This definition is significant as it captures a number of assumptions about the way higher education operates institutionally; consensus, power-sharing and a shared view of the institution's objectives, for example. Hellawell and Hancock go on to explore the relationship between the value institutions place on collegiality and the perceptions of some of the academic staff using a similar embedded semi-structured interview methodology to that deployed in this study. Their study focuses on academic middle managers in a single 'new' UK university whilst this study looks at the specifics of media studies across a range of UK universities.

3-2 Media Studies: Discourses

The term '*discourse*' is widely used across a broad range of theoretical and methodological approaches and within a number of subject disciplines and with a number of overlapping meanings. Much of Foucault's work on discourse served to expand the term beyond its more traditional use in structural linguistics where it has been used to generalise the term 'conversation' and expand it to a broader set of contexts and modes. Fairclough sums up his approach to Foucauldian discourse seeing:

"Discourses as ways of representing aspects of the world – the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the 'mental world', of thoughts, feelings, beliefs and so forth, and the social world. Particular aspects of the world may be represented differently, so we are generally in the position of having to consider the relationship between different discourses." (Fairclough, 2003, p.124)

McHoul and Grace (2002) situate Foucault's work in relation to two major intellectual traditions of the time, structuralism and hermeneutics (as a branch of phenomenology). They argue that Foucault did not accept the existence of a real and deep structure to ideas and texts and he also rejected a phenomenological approach of considering all reality to be constructed from human consciousness.

Foucault's initial approach to this area is well illustrated by the often-quoted introduction to *The Order of Things (*Foucault, 2002c*)*. His point is not about the nature of thought within the culture represented by the encyclopaedia but to point out the impact of our own systems of thought on us, rendering the quoted taxonomy largely incomprehensible within our ways of thinking. When immersed in a particular epistemological and ontological framework, that framework can

effectively disappear and the prevalent ways of thinking and communicating can seem to be the only ways of thinking and communicating.

"This book arose out of a passage in Borges…This passage quotes a 'certain Chinese encyclopaedia' in which it is written that 'animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broke the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies'. In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*." (ibid, p.xvi)

In this study, this concept is used to consider the practices around media studies as captured through the discourses that evidence ways of thinking. In particular, the evidence presented here is related to a specific time period in the development of the subject and UK higher education in general, spanning a period of significant externally-initiated change where practical matters of funding are seen by some as having an ideological significance. McHoul and Grace recognise a temporal element to Foucault's approach and this needs to be followed through in the analysis of the data.

"His investigations are conceptual, and the main concepts he approaches in his work – discourse, power and the subject (among others) – seem to us to be geared towards what he called an 'ontology of the present'. That is, Foucault is asking a very basic philosophical question: who are we? Or perhaps: who are we *today*?" (McHoul, Grace, 2005, p. viii)

For this study, Trowler's (2001, p.186) account of discourse as a way of understanding higher education is taken as applicable here. Trowler takes a middle course between a narrow definition focused purely on discourse as "*a stretch of spoken or written language or language in use*" and a much broader use where discourse is almost synonymous with '*ideology*' or '*culture*'. Trowler's

position between these approaches is to regard discourse as denoting language "*as social practice*" but also "*conditioned by social structures*". Here, Trowler is using structure in a way suggested by Giddens (1984); "*properties lending coherence and relative permanence to social practices in different times and locales*" (Trowler, 2001, p.186).

Foucault, reflecting on his own work on discourse, recognised that he used the term in a number of ways and that he needed to situate it:

"I believe I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements." (Foucault, 2002b, p.90)

It is this final usage that most closely relates to the approach adopted here. The statements made within the semi-structured interviews by both the participants and the interviewer are viewed as accounted for by an underlying set of regulating practices that constitute media studies in the academy.

3-3 Media Studies: Power

A distinguishing feature of Foucault's work on discourse is his concern with power relationships. Drawing on Foucault's (1978) work on criminal justice systems, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, McHoul and Grace (2005) distinguish his conceptualisation of '*power*' from a view that it is a socio-political effect that is '*owned*' by the '*powerful*' and wielded over the *'powerless'*. They point to Foucauldian power as a balance of power relations that are reflected and enacted through discourses. This view is taken up by Randell-Moon:

"For Foucault, power is never simply an oppressive force, but rather a system of self-directed control and discipline whose very effectiveness lies in its ability to

encourage individual subjects to reproduce technologies of control and rule… …This self-directed control eliminates the need for external physical or institutional coercion, since subjects carry out this coercion on themselves. For this reason, Foucault does not treat power as a repressive or oppressive force but as constitutive and productive" (Randell-Moon *et al.*, 2013, p.63)

This subtle notion is a more useful characterisation of power than that portrayed in the critique of increasing *managerialism* in higher education institutions that characterises much of what is becoming termed *Critical University Studies*. Whilst power, in the sense of who might possess and wield it, might appear to reside in association with hierarchical job titles that include terms such as *director*, *manager*, *head* and *chief executive,* and be an attribute or resource that people possess to varying degrees, the specific nature of academic practices complicates this considerably and it is more appropriate to use Foucault's approach as expressed by Kendall, Wickham and Hunt:

"Power relations serve to make the connections, …, between the visible and the sayable…" (Kendall and Wickham, 2003, p. 48)

"…power is the process of 'keeping things going', it is not a 'thing', in the way fuel or electricity is." (Hunt and Wickham, 1994, pp. 80-1)

In this thesis participant responses demonstrate the ways in which people *'keep things going'*.