

5-3 A Rationale for Media Studies: “Quite a tricky question”

Introduction

Having established the background of the participants the interview moved to their views on the purpose of media studies – a rationale for studying the subject and its place within the English higher education sector. This is a complex topic and it is important to set the participant responses within historical and contemporary contexts as a means of relating them to each other and to the discourses that frame media studies. This analysis needs to be considered alongside Chapter Two, Section 2-3 as the discourses displayed here relate to and reflect the historical development of the subject. Responses from thirteen of the participants are presented as part of the analysis in this section.

Analysis

“This course does not claim to be a professional training designed to provide suitably skilled employees for the media industry. The present recruitment and training policies of the industry must limit the contribution this course can make and job opportunities are likely to remain limited. However, for those students who do find employment in this area, the course will provide wider perspectives and, hopefully, an enhanced sense of social responsibility” (Garnham, 1975, p.1)

“This course is designed to set high standards for professional achievement in specific media industry roles, and prepare you for the challenge and opportunity of a multi-skilled portfolio career.” (University of Westminster website, 2014)

These course descriptions are taken from published course information and describe essentially the same course. The first is taken from course information distributed by the course leader, Nick Garnham, to the first cohort of students entering the BA Media Studies programme at the Polytechnic of Central London; the first undergraduate Media Studies course in the UK. Thirty-nine years later

this course and institution has evolved into BA Contemporary Media Practice at the University of Westminster. The second quote is taken from the web-based publicity materials that describe the course for prospective students. Comparing the descriptions from 1975 and 2014 demonstrates some aspects of the evolution of university promotional material over that period and can be seen as a manifestation of the scenario outlined by Andrew McGettigan as an outcome of the coalition government's reform of higher education following the 2010 general election:

“As universities and colleges are forced to operate in commercial terrain, it is basic business imperatives that come to the fore. Our habits of thought about higher education are no longer appropriate for this new terrain.” (McGettigan, 2013, p.ix)

“In effect, the majority of universities will need to become more akin to commercial operations, charging for services. Faced with competition from profit-distributing entities with rich backers, it is not clear whether maintaining charitable status will be viable in the long-run for most.” (McGettigan, 2013, p.5)

This emphasis on promoting student recruitment in order to compete with other institutions was not a revolutionary change post-2010 but it did give rise to significantly increased spending on marketing and recruitment with seventy institutions responding to a *Times Higher Education* freedom of information request reporting a collective spend on student marketing of £36 million in 2012-13, an increase of 14.7 per cent on the 2011-12 spend and an increase of thirty-three per cent on the 2010-11 spend (Sandler-Clarke, 2014).

“The market for high calibre applicants is becoming increasingly competitive, necessitating ever more sophisticated means of promoting and securing interest, and at all times we must be able to make ‘the right impression.’” (University of Manchester policy document, 2009)

Responding to the discourse of ‘*competition*’, universities seek an advantage by appealing to prospective students’ desire to enter a successful career on graduation and to make explicit links between the course on offer and the employment and career opportunities that may follow it.

“There are many reasons for going to university, including – naturally – a love of the subject to be studied, and the opportunity to experience a different way of life. Higher education is much more than a production line for work-ready graduates.

Nevertheless, there is no denying that people see higher education as a stepping stone to a good job. In 2010, 73% of the students who took part in the Sodexo University Lifestyle Survey said they went to university to improve their job opportunities.” (Lord Baker of Dorking in Lowden *et al.*, 2011, p.iii)

In this preface to a report on employers’ perceptions of the employability of new graduates, Lord Baker recognises a broad rationale for degree-level study although perhaps in a rather perfunctory, tokenistic way. He then asserts “*nevertheless*” and draws on compelling statistical evidence for the link between student recruitment and graduate employment outcomes.

A most striking example of this discourse as represented by the public dissemination of information by a university is the following image (Figure 5-1):



Figure 5-1 (University of Bedfordshire, 2013)

This eye-catching image was used by the University of Bedfordshire to promote a series of lectures to be given by alumni with current students as the intended audience. This image is intended to evoke the very widely used (Lewis (2014) has published an extensive collection of examples) and adapted 'ascent of man' image that originated as the frontispiece (Figure 5-2) to Thomas Huxley's *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature* (Huxley, 1863) in which Huxley argues that Darwin's theory of evolution applies equally to humans as it does to other forms of life:

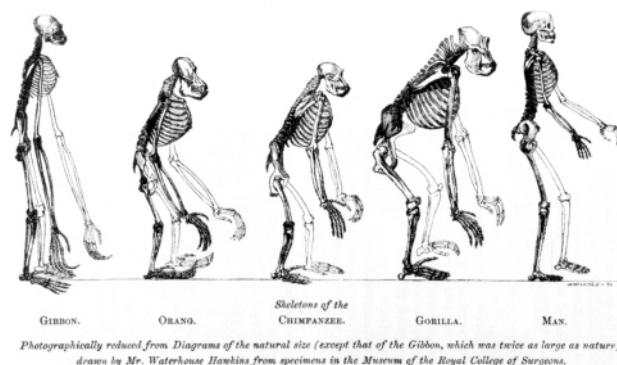


Figure 5-2 – Frontispiece to *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature*

From this original frontispiece, the image has been appropriated and developed to represent concepts such as ‘*progress*’, ‘*advancement*’, ‘*development*’ and ‘*evolution*’ innumerable times (Lewis, 2014). The choice of this image as a promotional tool for an alumni lecture series by the University of Bedfordshire is therefore a powerful indication of the way the institution depicts student advancement and successful outcomes. In figure 5-1 the original component photographs that have been composited into a poster have been manipulated so that the initial crouching figure is followed by four upright depictions of the student that increase in size incrementally— the student grows physically with each iteration. There are also elements of clothing that change across the images as the student ‘*progresses*’ towards a dark, corporate suit and, in the final image, the briefcase disappears to leave a confident figure striding into the future. The final image we are left with is of a white male corporate employee as the graduate outcome ideal, leaving little scope for the diversity and complexities of students, higher education and the rationale for studying a degree course. For media studies students specifically, this probably does not represent their idea of a creative practitioner in the media industries and does little to challenge a perception of the mainstream media as dominated by white, middle-class, males.

Engaging with this discourse, the prompt to discuss the rationale for media studies surprised a number of participants and certainly did not result in clichéd answers. Some participants took some time, ‘thinking aloud’ to formulate their response:

[sigh] (...) gosh that’s a- quite a tricky question. (.....) Well there’s a demand... (Participant 15)

Notably, Participant 07 took some time, at first replying with questions rather than answers:

That's a very, really interesting question, yeah it is, you know, why do we m- so many of them? Do we need them, w- what are we supposed to produce, are we supposed to produce technicians, are we supposed to produce film makers, programme makers, are we supposed to produce people that appreciate media more and it depends on whether you concentrate, you know, on the theoretical studies more than practical?... (Participant 07)

The first of these 'question' responses by Participant 07 makes reference to a view of media studies that implies a supply and demand view of the provision – “*Why do we m- so many of them?*”, echoing Participant 15 (“*Well there's a demand*”). This points to the idea that large numbers of media studies graduates are undesirable or that these graduates are produced to meet a specific demand and that supply should be limited. The participant then goes on to expand on this by speculating on what this demand might be – “*what are we supposed to produce?...*”. This implies that the participant feels that there is some externally derived answer to this and that he sees himself as a passive receiver of this view rather than actively involved in defining a rationale for media studies. The subsequent responses then set up one of the recurrent themes in this study with a dichotomy; is it the purpose of media studies courses to produce media industry professionals (“*technicians*”, “*film makers*”, “*programme makers*”) or some broader personal and societal purpose (“*people that appreciate media more*”)?

The response from Participant 07 can be considered in the light of his background and current role. He is based in a post-92 university although his

department has a long tradition as an art school with media courses delivered alongside courses in fine art, illustration, fashion etc.

Some participants see *producing industry professionals/enabling personal development* as a false dichotomy with there being no reason for a course not to deliver both but it is a recurrent theme in the responses:

In journalism, people used to be trained on newspapers; they used to be trained in-house; there were apprenticeships, indentures: those are very rare now because the companies say they cannot afford to run them. So effectively, that has to be delivered somewhere else. The other part of it is that a lot of the people who go into media courses are not going to go into the media, [...] and as such, it's about developing the individual, developing the individual's knowledge, understanding within an area and they are really transferrable skills. (Participant 01)

[laughter] Too many. Yeah, there are too many media students, eh. What do they do with themselves? (Participant 02)

We're not in the business of simply equipping people with a set of very specifiable skills. We're educating people's ability to think and alright, we're doing it in the context that makes them think about media content and how it comes to be but [...] we're also educating them to think, and that's what universities do, I think. That's the real mission. (Participant 04)

Responses from participants outside universities showed very similar perceptions to those inside. Participant 13 (a secondary school headteacher with experience of advising sixth-formers on applying to university) perceived media studies as:

If I was looking at it from what I sort of generally think (...) is a mixture of sociology (...) it's a mixture of English (...) probably some history (confused) in there as well. (...), you've probably got film (confused) (...). I'm just thinking about all the different subjects, that you sort of pouring it all together (...)it's very much cultural, c-communication studies, I would imagine it's a broad range of those topics (...) put together under the title media? (confused) (.....) It's not about studying adverts, it's- it's going to be all about the theories behind it. (Participant 13)

The participant has no direct experience of media studies (mathematics graduate, professional experience in the RAF and secondary school teaching) but still perceived media studies as inter-disciplinary (*“mixture of sociology ... English ... history ... film”*, *“pouring it all together”*) and covering areas of culture and communication. There is no mention of practical media production although the view that *“it's not about studying adverts”* is curious; it may be that the participant sees that as a rather superficial activity or that advertising is more likely to be part of a marketing course. A further possibility is that the study of adverts is seen as wholly contained within overt advertising courses in higher education. There is certainly a perception that media studies contains a significant amount of theoretical work though (*“it's going to be all about the theories behind it”*).

To illustrate the variation within the group of media academic staff participants it is worth considering the differences between the responses of Participants 06 and 15:

I can only speak about our course and what we aim to deliver with our course and that is to prepare students to enter the film and television industry with a distinct foundation in technical competence and production competence. (Participant 06)

...from the point of view from a Russell Group research-led university (...) we (...) have some of the leading academics in the field (...) who (...) are researching public communications and political communications and how the media (high tone) has an impact on society. (angry) (...) So (...) we have quite a lot to say (...) and a lot of knowledge about the effects of journalism in society and as part of being an academic I would say we have a responsibility to pass some of that knowledge on to future journalists. (Participant 15)

The starting point for these two participants is different although they both focus on the relevance and applicability of their course to the students that study it.

Participant 06 (Course leader in an art school within a post-92 university) succinctly describes the rationale for the course as preparing students for a specific sector of the media industries (*“prepare students to enter the film and television industry”*) and that this is achieved through the development of particular competences (*“a distinct foundation in technical competence and production competence”*). In contrast, Participant 15 (Course leader in a communications studies department within a Russell Group university) leads with the research activity in the subject (*“...are researching public communications and political communications”*, *“we have quite a lot to say (...) and a lot of knowledge”*) and relates that to the students at the end (*“we have a responsibility to pass some of that knowledge on to future journalists”*). However, whilst each participant starts from a different point they both see their students as future media industry professionals (*“...enter the film and television industry”* and *“on to future journalists”*) so these two individuals see the ultimate aim of the course as

similar but demonstrate their disparate institutional contexts in the way they articulate the rationale for their courses.

For other participants, the development of media literacy as a means of empowering individuals was at the forefront of their response:

I think it's important in a (...) in a modern society, a modern democracy if you like - that people have the language to be able to deconstruct programmes that they see, to be able to kind of make rational decisions, to be active audiences if you like. I think it's a very important subject in that sense. (Participant 09)

You know, I think, I think, as, I think media literacy should be taught alongside English and Maths. [laughter] I just think it's absolutely crucial and I think media I suppose, to me, stands alongside sociology and it stands alongside politics and it's like, if you want to make sense of the way in which our society works, we have to understand the way in which we communicate about our society and the vested interests that impact on the way in which we talk about our society, the way in which we make sense of our society. (Participant 16)

Because of its currency, its importance, it's societal importance, (...) I would argue (...) from my bit that it's psychological importance and it's... it's (...) psychosocial importance. (Participant 17)

First function is, in...in my view, something which is absolutely key to contemporary citizenship, which is media literacy, and just as studying English literature doesn't necessarily turn you into a poet...indeed, it may prevent [laughs] you from becoming a poet...so, studying the media doesn't necessarily mean you're going to work in the media... (Participant 18)

These participants come from a variety of backgrounds which can be related to their views in this area. Participant 17 entered higher education following a long career as a journalist on national newspapers. After teaching in a variety of higher education institutions he is now a postgraduate research student at a small research-intensive university. Participants 16 and 18 both have experience of working in a range of higher education institutions but both have spent their

career in higher education with limited media industry experience. Their responses both include references to *media literacy*, a common though potentially contestable term that invites further investigation as it may capture a rationale for media studies that might be distinctive from or may be complementary to an industry training view of media studies. The views of these participants (16 and 18 explicitly and 17 by implication; “*societal importance*”) highlight a rationale for media studies that is based on a position that understanding the relationships between the media and society would be of universal benefit and that studying the media can only be of further benefit, providing something analogous to the US concept of a *liberal arts* education (Chrucky, 2003), an idea that has acquired some traction in the UK with the introduction of a BA Modern Liberal Arts course at the University of Winchester in 2010, which includes the study of film (University of Winchester, 2014). Kings College London offers a BA Liberal Arts course (also including film studies) and much of the curriculum of the New College of the Humanities (NCH) takes a liberal arts approach. Accepting its first undergraduate students in 2012, NCH is a private institution with a broad rationale:

“Study of the humanities provides personal enrichment, intellectual training, breadth of vision, and the well-informed, sharply questioning cast of mind needed for success in life in our complex and rapidly changing world.” (New College of the Humanities website, 2014a)

This view echoes the responses of Participants 16, 17 and 18 although the institutional context may be quite different with the private New College of the Humanities targeting high-tariff applicants in its promotional material (“*As a very general guide the College typically seeks AAA at A-level*”, New College of the Humanities, 2014b) where as participants 16, 17 and 18 represent a broad range

of public institutional backgrounds including large post-92 universities, small research-intensive universities and the Russell Group.

I... I've thought quite a lot about why we have media courses in UK universities. I think it's wrong, and I think the reason why we have them is because of what happened to universities. We would never have had media courses in universities had we had the old Poly system. You know, the media courses would have been in polytechnics. And if you look at how media courses are divided up, if you like, the pre-1992 universities, you know, the redbrick universities, and the old...the older universities, I mean, places like Oxford and Cambridge, of course, don't even deign to do media, it's beneath them. (Participant 19)

But then you come...along come the 1992 universities, and really, it is about moving polys into unis. And the media courses they begin to offer are much more about...less about ideas and the pushing of ideas, and more about, how do you shoot? How do you edit? What do you actually do? What's the ethos of working in the industry? And universities, post 1992 universities, which offer those kinds of courses, are in a difficult position, because on the one hand...and are schizophrenic, because on the one hand, they want to imitate industry, because they think the students...the employability agenda is very high, especially now that they've got £9,000 fees, but even before then, you know, their employability agenda was high. So it was like, what can we do to get students into jobs? But...so therefore, you want to try and, in your courses, you want to try and emulate what happens in industry, but these are universities. (Participant 19)

Participant 19 responds to the question of a rationale for media studies with reference to the institutional context and the development of UK higher education since 1992 and the designation of polytechnics as universities. This participant sees the removal of the distinction (at least in institutional title) as problematic and with an implied view of the distinctive roles of polytechnics and universities, sees difficulties in providing a clear rationale for media studies delivered in former polytechnics now designated as universities: *“post-1992 universities, which offer those kinds of courses, are in a difficult position, because on the one hand...and are schizophrenic, because on the one hand, they want to imitate*

industry” and “*you want to try and emulate what happens in industry, but these are universities*”. The implication of this is that the participant retains a view that the rationale for courses in polytechnics was based around the requirements of specific industries whilst university courses were not. So she describes media studies as problematic once it is delivered within an institution designated as a university with media studies naturally seen as forming part of a polytechnic/post-92 university provision. There is an emphasis on post-92 provision providing employable graduates to the media industries and on pre-92 universities pursuing a broader personal development rationale closer to the responses provided by Participants 16, 17 and 18. Whilst the 1992 reforms are now over twenty years old the perception of both pre and post-92 institutions and the courses they run is still influenced by their historical position with regard to that divide. If it ever was possible to neatly partition higher education institutions into these categories then that divide has now blurred and transient mission group membership has led to increasingly fractured alliances and groupings. However, at least for this participant, the distinction between former polytechnics and pre-92 universities underpins perceptions of the role of media studies. This is further complicated by the rationale cited for earlier expansions in higher education provision which also embraced the provision of industry-relevant courses. Media studies is seen as a ‘*new university*’ course with a focus on employability in the media industries even though, as shown by the breadth of responses by participants in this study, media studies is delivered in a wide variety of institutional contexts and with a rationale that often embraces both a functional approach to the media industries and employment and as a broader

vehicle for personal intellectual development and what Johnson and Morris (2010) term '*critical citizenship*', building on the ideas of Freire (1972, 1976) and others.

Summary and Conclusions

The participant responses when asked to formulate a rationale for media studies contain all the discourse elements identified in Chapter Two. At the core of this is a public policy-led instrumental discourse of '*media training*' and an oppositional academic discourse of '*media education*'. The analysis here shows that this '*media education*' discourse remains a force within the academy and the power relationship between the two is finely balanced. A striking feature of the participant responses in this area is the uniformity across the variation in provision. A superficial expectation might be that the lecturer in a mixed-economy further/higher education college delivering a foundation degree would be more aligned with the '*media training*' discourse whilst the lecturer in a Russell Group university would be more aligned with the '*media education*' discourse. However, the data here does not support that, possibly because the participants' backgrounds show that they have experience of other settings. Participant 09 studied at the University of Sussex prior to entering a career in FE/HE teaching and so has experience of a pre-92 university. The responses of Participants 09 and 15 are both part of a '*media education*' discourse showing that this is deeply embedded in the media academy and that government and industry-led initiatives have done little to shift the axis of the subject from the historical roots of Whannel (1964), Alvarado *et al.* (1987), Masterman (1985) and others.