5-6 Media Industries: "These are the skills that we require"

Introduction

This analysis considers the participant responses that relate to the media industries and their interaction with media studies. This theme builds on the question of a rationale for media studies (Chapter 5, Section 5-3) and is important as it allows a comparison between the public discourses of vocationalism and employability to be compared with academic discourses, providing some insight into the ways in which the participants manage those tensions and the ways they are played out in the interactions between higher education institutions and the media industries. Responses from five participants have been used as the basis for this analysis.

A key theme here is the extent to which media studies courses should equip students for specific, current media industry roles delivering specific media industry practices. This question is quickly accessed through a consideration of an element of the public policy discourse; the use of the term '*employer*', a term that can be seen as privileging the graduate careers that do follow this pattern and is perhaps reminiscent of a time when higher education participation rates were significantly lower and the 'milkround' was still a common practice for bringing together relatively small numbers of graduating students and 'blue chip' graduate employers (Branine, 2008).

The term employer is still widely used across government and higher education reports and policies (for example, Lowden *et al.* (2011) and Little *et al*. (2003)) but can be, in the case of media studies graduates, a misnomer as it carries the

discursive implication of an employer/employee relationship and a conventional graduate career path that offers stability and progression. This is not the typical pattern of employment in the creative industries:

"Graduates working in creative occupations holding a degree from a Russell group university actually increase their chances of being self-employed or being in a part-time or voluntary/unpaid job. This highlights that the creative sector is structurally different than the rest of the economy – with more project- based work and part-time freelance opportunities – and even graduates from the most prestigious HEIs have these kind of jobs (often holding more than one job)." (Faggian *et al.*, 2013, p.196)

The work of Faggian *et al.* shows that not only is voluntary/unpaid, part-time, short-term, contracting and freelance employment a dominant feature of the creative industries but it also appears to be an acceptable and sustainable model of working as it is more prevalent amongst graduates from highly selective Russell Group universities who are assumed to have a broader range of post-graduation opportunities.

This disconnect between the conventional discourse of graduate employment and the creative industries when combined with the existential concerns of media studies leads to a set of participant responses that provide some further insight into the social practices that constitute the interactions between the academy and industry, for media studies.

Analysis

Participant 01 has had an extensive career as a broadcast journalist and has then become a university lecturer relatively recently. She points to media courses as partially meeting the training needs of the industry following cost-cutting and a move away from conventional career patterns towards a casualisation of labour.

> You have the media courses which are effectively taking the place, and improving upon actually, in many cases, the industry training that is no longer being delivered. 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. Sometimes that's delivered in FE, as opposed to HE, erm, but by delivering it at HE, I think there is a broader product that's delivered and I think the students benefit far more from it as long as they are getting a level of experience built into it so there is a reality to what they're doing. (Participant 01)

A transition from specific industry-based training to a broader provision involving the accreditation of courses delivered by the further and higher education sectors has been documented by the National Council for the Training of Journalists (2014) and Broadcast Journalism Training Council (2014) for the journalism segment of the industry and by Creative Skillset (2014) for other segments of the creative industries.

Participant 15 focuses on the tension in satisfying the requirements of the professional accrediting body (Broadcast Journalism Training Council - BJTC) within the context of a confident, autonomous, research-intensive department in a Russell Group university. The implications of her response (below) are that she sees her institution as distinctive from the mainstream of institutions offering BJTC accredited courses ("*being in a Russell Group university… …because of the breadth of different institutions which they accredit*"). She also accesses the discourse of an '*education/training*' dichotomy when highlighting the difficulties applying accreditation requirements to both undergraduate and postgraduate courses which further highlights her distancing from industry accreditation; training as a journalist is not education.

> There is a tension (…) between (…) being in a Russell Group university and, and the BJTC guidelines because of the breadth of different institutions which they accredit. And they're trying to apply the same set of guidelines to those as they are to us, so (…) they try to apply the same guidelines to postgraduate (…) c- one year course where you might e-expect to be (…) trained (…) basically as a journalist rather than educated. (Participant 15)

Media graduate, Participant 14, is also critical of one of the other major professional accreditation bodies, *Creative Skillset*:

> I don't like Skillset (angry) (…)because of my opinion of, you know, of the balance of (…) of a theoretical and contextual [slight laugh] underpinning to practical work and this is none of that. (…) You know, it is (…) what do we need? [sigh] We need camera operators, w- well we'll have courses for camera operators. (…) And then next week it's something else. (Participant 14)

His concerns are again focussed on the tensions of the '*education/training*' discourse, seeing the industry body as focussing too much on short-term practical skills at the expense of the "*theoretical*" and "*contextual*". However the senior academic, Participant 04, does not see the two approaches as mutually exclusive and does not see a problem in also equipping students with industry-relevant skills although he sees these as quite broad and transferable across the media industries:

> On the other hand, we are clearly dealing with a set of technologies that do specifically equip students with skills which are transferable skills in the context of the media industry and it would be silly to [sighs] ignore that entirely. (Participant 04)

Having recently completed the design of a revised journalism course, Participant 01 has formed some clear views on the relationship between the academy and industry:

> Well, perhaps HE should be teaching industry as much as industry should be teaching HE. So it should be a better collaboration, much

> more effective on both parts and I think sometimes industry has an odd view of what HE is and HE has a very dismissive view of what industry is. And I think the two of them have got to bang their heads together, get together and just collaborate, which they don't do properly at all. (Participant 01)

She has a negative view of the current state of the collaboration between the two and laments the lack of communication. She goes on to be particularly disparaging of the role of employers in the formal course development and approval process, seeing it as purely tokenistic:

> …the token employer who is being wheeled out has probably never even spoken to the academic. Erm, and to me that's just farcical and that doesn't do any good for anybody's reputation. (Participant 01)

The time-limited currency of industry-specific skills is highlighted by Participant 04. This is pitched as a reason for being wary of employer's short-term demands that are focused on meeting immediate skills gaps.

> I also say, "Look, students, if you come here, in four or five years time, you'll be applying for jobs that don't exist at the moment". (Participant 04)

He illustrates this by pointing to the apparently paradoxical growth in journalism courses and student numbers at a time when the conventional journalism industry is perceived to be in decline:

> But of course, there are gaps between what's going on in the media world and people's thoughts. I mean, look at the way that journalism has been expanding at exactly the period when everybody is talking about print dying, [laughter] and papers all over the world are massively cutting back on staff. (Participant 04)

Participant 05 (media graduate and researcher at Channel 4) provides the most student-relevant contribution to the realities of studying the media and then

graduating to a career in the media industries. His first contribution is to apologetically suggest that as media production companies will not employ production crew until they are at least twenty-one for car driving and insurance reasons, the rationale for studying an undergraduate media degree is that it is the best way of occupying the time between eighteen and twenty-one:

> A lot of production firms won't hire someone until they're twenty-one because of their driving [laughter]. So it helped me pass the time until I was twenty-one! [laughter]. No that's horrible, that's horrible. That's totally mean. (Participant 05)

He then goes on to give an account of the process of applying for internships and being under-prepared in terms of the nature of industry roles:

> I felt that I was a bit clueless, and I remember applying for like a production management internship, and I got through to the last round which I was really happy about, out of hundreds of people. And they told me about the job, and I was like… and I remember I must've just sort of given it away [laughter], this is not what I want, and I must've just given it away at the interview [laughter]. (Participant 05)

This then leads to a stark portrait of the realties of the media industries for new graduates and points to the lack of appropriate preparation within the course (or extra-curricular):

> It's very easy for a lot of young people to be exploited when they go in, like you sort of see sometimes people expected to do like a fourteen hour day, or fifteen hours, and that's on less than minimum wage, I think that that's just something else, maybe just a seminar or something, about not being exploited, but that's something that could be quite useful. (Participant 05)

This concern returns the narrative to discussion of a rationale for media studies. A study of the media may have moved on from Leavis (1933) and an '*inoculation*' against '*bad*' culture to an inoculation against '*bad*' employment practices;

exploitation. This can form a rationale for the consideration of the political economy of the media industries on the basis that an understanding of media industry practices enables a graduate to detect and try to avoid exploitation after graduation.

Summary and Conclusions

Hesmondhalgh (2014) has analysed the relationship between media industries research and education and draws a distinction between '*administrative*' and '*critical*' communications research that is useful as an over-arching analysis of the participant responses here. Hesmondhalgh characterises '*administrative*' research as normally taking place outside universities and being:

"futurological, predicting trends and providing perspectives that might inform the strategy of firms. It is often commissioned or bought by media companies from hundreds of marketing and forecasting firms. And it is usually extremely expensive and closed to public access." (ibid. p.22)

He then contrasts this with '*critical*' media industry research:

"of concentration and conglomeration, of international inequality, of poor and unequal labor conditions, of organizational dynamics that lead to content that fails adequately to provide public knowledge or rich aesthetic experiences." (ibid.)

Hesmondhalgh attributes this distinction to Lazarsfeld and points to its value in a consideration of the relationship between the media industries and media education:

"Generations of media educators, who have understandably wanted their students to be questioning rather than compliant subjects, used the distinction as a means to explain the value of critique." (ibid.)

This highlighting of critical research matches the discourses evidenced by the participants. The media academics placed considerable value on collaboration with the media industries but prioritise the maintenance of a critical distance and see collaboration as two-way. They portray the delivery of a specific set of skills imposed by accrediting bodies as potentially adding superficial competitive advantage in student recruitment but at a cost to the academic integrity of the course that may not be worth paying. The responses of the media graduate, Participant 05, shows some of the ways in which media studies can engage with the industry but retain some critical distance.

These discursive practices can be seen as oppositional discourses in tension with discourse deployed by the media industries and the media academy aimed at '*getting things done*' their way. Whilst these media academics wish to extend collaborative working with the media industries, that want it to be a peer-to-peer relationship rather than provider/consumer.