
***Current Perspectives in Media Education: Beyond the Manifesto*, edited by Pete Fraser and Jonathan Wardle (2013). Palgrave Macmillan, ISBN 978-1-137-300201**

One perspective on media education, in the UK at least, is apparent in threats to its status as a fit subject for the school curriculum. The current thrust is to weight the value of education as an object measurable in examination results and, at the time of writing, Ofqual – the body tasked with the regulation of qualifications – is underway with a consultation on the status of certain subjects inclusive of media studies (ofqual.gov.uk). This task was summarised in the headline of the online arm of the tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mail* thus: ‘Bonfire of “soft” GCSEs: Media studies, astronomy and tourism could be axed in bid to make qualification more rigorous’ (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2645486/Michael-Gove-set-axe-soft-GCSEs-including-media-studies-astronomy-tourism-bid-make-qualification-rigorous.html>). This perspective on the relative worth of media-related subjects is extended to questioning their value as fixtures of university study based on an instrumental sense that HE should ready students for the workplace. That media studies might pay attention to a cultural, economic and social phenomenon like Mickey Mouse is taken at face value to determine the character of that subject.

Such attacks are accounted for in the collection under review and which give a context for an often anxious tone as well as some of an occasional combative optimism about the need for media education. Readers of the *Media Education Research Journal (MERJ)* will, no doubt, concur with the insistence of its contributors that studying the media, at whatever level, rarely lacks rigour or provides an easy option for students. As this collection makes clear, the nature and focus of media education is immensely varied although increasingly vocal questions about the value of the field and its purpose cannot be easily ignored, particularly as they form part of a wider attack on arts and humanities and student-centered learning.

Some of the essays in this collection will be familiar to many readers in their original form from amongst the 50 or so who contributed to the online Manifesto for Media Education which was launched in 2011 (www.manifestoformediaeducation.co.uk). This project set out to elicit answers to the question of ‘what is the purpose of media education?’ Answers were often centred on an idea of media literacy, particularly in light of the kinds of challenges posed by the trends to convergence occasioned by new media, notably the blurring boundaries of producer and consumer. Responses represented here cover a broad range of ideas, encompassing those that emerge from a tradition seeking to demystify

media forms and representations and those that seek a practical empowerment via the development of production skills as well as those that merge such perspectives and activities. An ongoing theme considers whether media-based learning should be engaged with concepts or a focus on knowledge and skills acquisition. One thing that is certainly demystified in the self-reflexive approach of much on offer here are the misrepresentations of media-related courses and those who teach them. For instance, in her chapter on the education of media educators, Kate Domaille reflects on the numbers of UK school students studying in these areas. With less than 10 per cent of the national cohort, she suggests that this shows that this is a minority area of study and that comparative grade rates undermine claims of a soft option.

The pithiness of the original online manifesto pieces is sometimes lost in extended essay form, questioning the need for a published and less accessible and usable collection. Certainly, an engaging quality of the online site is the evidence of a wider community of readers and pedagogues. Nonetheless, the passion, commitment and integrity of those who contributed to this project is apparent, across a balance of focused case studies as well as more sweeping gestures. It is refreshing to find such a range of experiences and perspectives collected together. Alongside insights from HE and familiar names such as David Buckingham or Henry Jenkins are empirical accounts of classroom teaching from those involved in primary and secondary schooling. Likewise, the insights extend beyond media studies courses, as in the case of Helen Keegan, to encompass the introduction of new media work into courses for MSc students. The weight of these essays is focussed on the UK although there are voices from Australia, the US and Canada where Stuart R. Poyntz's piece on public space and media education is particularly interesting, underlining the democratic value of forms of media education. In light of this Anglophone experience, one wonders at the state of this field elsewhere in the world.

There is a strong sense of the historical amongst these pieces – which means that some ground is trod repeatedly, albeit instructively. The first four chapters for instance offer overviews of 30 years of policy and practice, with Jenny Grahame for one offering an affecting insider account of teaching production begun in 1981. However, this historical purview gives some sense to the waxing of the field and fears for its waning – whether as a result of forces marshalled against it or perceived fears about the various failures of its 'mission'. The final essay here demonstrates the pessimism of the intellect evident across many of the essays as well as that optimism of the will that is characteristic of committed pedagogues. Julian McDougall suggests that 'As a radical pedagogy project, media education has failed' (176). While delivering students into media employment, there has been no challenge to its institutions. Furthermore, he suggests that the very

construction of a subject area has reinforced a sense of the power of media. McDougall offers a challenging last word then by positing a deconstruction of media education, and imagining pedagogy after the subject.

In light of McDougall's pronouncements and thoughts about power for instance, there is a need I think to interrogate the nature of the politics alluded to across these essays. There's a sense of what Johnny one is *against* ("What you got? Neo-liberalism, instrumentalism?"), but there needs to be a better idea of what one is *for* beyond a critical pedagogy that at worst appears as a reactive and familiar form of 'inoculation' against aspects of the modern of which one disapproves. In relation there is an often-disembodied sense of media forms and economy in these essays. This last point can be illustrated with reference to Poyntz's note of the pressure on youth media organisations to align their work 'with labour market expectations' (p.96). Of course, there is much to be concerned about in an instrumental approach to education *for* the workplace as well as being critical of the demands, compromises and excesses of commercial objectives, but what seems curiously absent across this collection is a critical understanding of commercial media beyond their construction as an Other of a proper media education or a faith in a model of public service and idealised sense of the citizenship produced by a *proper* education. In light of concerns about where the field is located intellectually, there might also be some point in taking complaints about media education more seriously in order to consider that sometimes, and in some places, related pedagogy might not offer all that its vociferous proponents claim for it.

These points should not be taken to undermine the value of this book in capturing a particular moment and limited if varied set of perspectives. It would be interesting to hear what those *outside* of media education make of this collection although an egregious figure such as Michael Gove, until recently the UK Secretary of State for Education, is positively immune to evidence that does not accord with his ideological convictions, particularly the testimony of experienced professionals. Certainly, if the hostile voices ranged against media education are often found amongst the various media – notably the right-wing press – it is perhaps there that a need for an education about media education is needed more than anywhere else. This collection offers an education about the philosophies and practices of some of its practitioners and those outside may not care for what they find: which is not a bad thing. Finally, one group of *insiders* whose responses would be valuable to hear about in response to this collection are students themselves. Why do they elect to take media studies qualifications? What do they want from philosophical or production-based work? How do *they* feel when traduced by politicians and those in the media? Ultimately, what kind of equipment is provided by a media education of the kind described here?

Reviewer – Paul Long, Birmingham City University, UK

***Understanding the Media* (3rd Edition), Eoin Devereux (2014). Sage, 9781446248805**



Laughey's Canon

Editor's note: This review is part of our series in which a current media teacher re-examines a 'classic' text in honour of *MERJ* editorial board member Dan Laughey and his provocative 'Back to Basics' article in *MERJ* 2:2.

Understanding the Media is a busy textbook for media undergraduates, first published in 2003, and now in its third edition. The book now comes with a companion website which is stocked full with an impressive array of online readings (from the SAGE catalogue, naturally) and resources for instructors. Perhaps the most useful element though is the 'toolkit'; an array of questions and tasks, directly referenced by each chapter in the book. For example, students are asked to keep a diary, and then reflect on it, to design a poster presentation, etc. In this way, as they go through the book, the logic is that they will be gently taken toward nasty words like 'methodology' until the secret work of applied media research is revealed to them at the end. The case studies here are extensive and up to date (e.g. football and subscription television).

In the book proper, eight icons are used to flag-up 'key thinkers', further case studies, as well as pause points to 'Stop & Think!'. Only one of the key thinkers is a woman (Naomi Klein) which neatly illustrates a chapter headed 'Media Re-presentations in an Unequal World' perhaps. That aside, the book employs a nice address, and talks directly to the student – although perhaps there are a bit too many 'you might...' do this, and 'you could...' do that. The introduction encourages students to ask 'awkward questions' and then explains how the book is to be used.

Each chapter has an overview, and flags up the 'key concepts' it will take you through. The 'Do it!' prompt directs students to the toolkit on the website, and while it can be difficult to not make this look contrived, it never feels patchy in *Understanding the Media* – largely because Eoin Devereux has taken the web resources seriously.

Power and the use/mis-use of it (and where it resides) is of central concern, but the book does manage to take in David Gauntlett's 'Media Studies 2.0' proposition in a fairly balanced-way. Devereux is more interested in the students making up their own minds,

rather than telling what they ought to know, hence all the prompts and pause-points.

Chapters on globalisation and ownership feature *Big Brother* and Rupert Murdoch. The ideology chapter perhaps tries to cram a little too much in: Marx, Gramsci, Althusser, Chomsky and Foucault all vie for our attention. The aforementioned 'Re-presentations' chapter does have an excellent case study on the word 'Chav', its journey to a signature term for working class youth, and a chapter on audiences finally reveals the raw mechanisms for media research. The final 'New Media' chapter is perhaps the most revised part of this edition, and includes a comprehensive account of the Arab Spring, and how it was represented across an array of different media.

Rather than the standard summary conclusion, *Understanding the Media* ends by directly asking students to do their own media research, and gives them a real sense of what that might look like.

If a student started at the beginning, and worked methodically and chronologically through this book, dipping out to the toolkit when prompted, there is no doubt in my mind that they would gain an awful lot of understanding, and would be well-set for their undergraduate studies. The problem is perhaps that students do not read books in that way anymore – if they ever did – and undertaking all of the tasks, as well as presumably their undergraduate essays and fieldwork, is not going to be a mean feat. However, it is no surprise that *Understanding the Media* has become a classic student textbook, and I feel this is down to the author's understanding of his students, his careful preparation of case studies and the wealth of supplementary material he makes available online.

Reviewer – Richard Berger. CEMP, Bournemouth University, UK

Software Takes Command, Lev Manovich (2013). Bloomsbury, ISBN 9781623567453

Lev Manovich made a major contribution in 2003 with the first comprehensive study of the poetics of new media. When I read his assertion that the most frequently watched animation in the world was the 'page loading' icon on Internet Explorer, it felt like someone was looking at 'new media' quite differently: at the cultural media dimensions of digital environments, in the same way one might study a film, an advert or a magazine.

That book was also an ambitious history of these media: one with an argument, plotting a powerful trajectory that ought to change how we think about digital experiences, texts and culture. The origins of computing, he claimed, were in the Jacquard looms of French and Flemish weavers in the later eighteenth century; they influenced Babbage's 'computational engine', itself the precursor of Turing's Universal Computing Machine, by

when computing had become adapted to crunching the kind of data that manifests only as numbers. It's taken another several digital generations for computing to return to the loom, as a machine for weaving together other kinds of data – images, moving images, sounds, text, geo-locations; a break that Manovich traces to XEROX PARC's development of the Graphical User Interface in the 1970s, and in this book, to Alan Kay's Dynabook – a prototype media-making computer.

In this his latest book, the late 1970s is again an important moment for Manovich. This is when Alan Kay and Adele Goldberg announce that the computers that were emerging were doing more than putting old media side by side in new and interesting combinations; instead they called computers new single 'metamediums', transforming how data and representations of the world are brought to us, and how we co-create those representations. The computer has become (again) a 'cultural machine', producing hybrid facsimiles of the world, evolved in significant stages beyond data crunching and analysis. As Kay and Goldberg put it: 'A computer is a medium that can dynamically simulate the details of any other medium, and include media that cannot exist physically.'

So what is at the heart of this new metamedium, and why should that be of interest to media educators? The title of Manovich's book says it: software is now the engine behind all other media, transcoded into transferable bits of data, so that moving and still images, sounds, words, geo locations can be synthesised into single entities, in Apps, games, websites – new media forms. Computers are no longer hardware, but software; and software, he claims, has effectively replaced all other single, once-autonomous media...

Here's one example of the 'softwarisation' of media: the development of the 'plug-in' demonstrates how software make new media 'infinitely extendable', with filters for digital photography, for example, or the different types of paint tools, fonts and instruments that we take for granted in our everyday software applications. A paintbrush, in the old days, couldn't be thinned, thickened, refined, coarsened; you had to swap it for a different one. But in paint programmes you can extend the tools you use in scale and function across an almost infinite range, and all within the same programme.

Plug-ins are both 'media specific' tools, and 'media independent' operations. Manovich's key strength is in his close analysis and cataloguing of the functionality of software media, and in charting its historical development. For while all software media are fundamentally data, different 'legacy media' use different data structures: images, for example, are organized into 2D grids of pixels, or 3D line and shape vectors, underpinned by mathematical equations. You navigate all 2D images, in whatever software programme, using pixel-data; and all 3D image environments using vector-based data structures. But increasingly media platforms allow the co-existence of both forms of data, along with

others. Google Earth for example, hybridises pixel-based images, with 3D views, geo-location tagging, written text and sound. It is able to do this because a category of 'media independent' operations have evolved, many of them based on legacy media operations: cut and paste; search and find; zoom. Manovich points out the curiosity of 'scroll forward/ backward' arrows, derived from video playback, being used in pdf documents and web-browsers; or cut and paste, derived from text, being used to edit music. And of the universal application of 'view control' mechanisms, across all new media platforms, enabling us to look at documents, pictures, websites, first person shooter games, from a range of different perspectives and scales.

Hybrids, and hybrid metaphors derived from evolutionary biology, form the spine of Manovich's history of these developments. The hybrid that is the 'metamedium' of software is an evolutionary stage beyond 'multi-media', in which legacy media like photographs, writing and speech would be designed alongside each other on a webpage or CD-ROM. 'The universal adoption of software throughout global culture industries is at least as important as the invention of print, photography, or the cinema,' he claims.

Why should this matter for media education? Manovich is clear that media study is too far behind the softwarisation of media. The study of media production still follows the old media divisions, not the software authoring and systems that they share. And in policy, and education, we're still talking about 'media literacy' as though it's a singular concept, but without studying the thing that makes it so: the software that has made media into a many tentacled hybrid form. The study of software thus needs a history, and a poetics of its internal systems of organisation, and then, maybe, Manovich permitting, its own rhetorics.

The second reason why media educators should take note of the take-over of media by hybrid software is in the title of Alan Kay's 1997 Turing Lecture: 'The Computer Revolution Hasn't Happened Yet'. Kay's original vision for his 'computing metamedium', in his Dynabook prototype, was that it would hand over the means of creation and re-creation to consumers. This true democratisation of media has still yet to happen, and it only will, if teachers are in its vanguard.

Reviewer – Mark Reid, BFI/DARE, UK