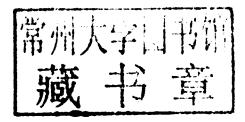# AFTER THE MEDIA

CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

PETER BENNETT | ALEX KENDALL | JULIAN McDOUGALL

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Culture and Identity in the 21st Century

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AFTER THE MEDIA

This provocative text considers the state of media and cultural studies today after the demolition of the media as a meaningful idea, and engages with the alternative 'ways of seeing' culture.

Media Studies, particularly within schools, has until recently been concerned with mass media and the effects of 'the media' in society and on people. As new media technology has blurred the boundaries between the audience and the media, the value of this area of education is undermined. Whilst some have called for a drastic re-think (Media Studies 2.0), others have called for caution, arguing that the power dynamics of ownership and gatekeeping are left intact.

This book uses cultural and technological change as a context for a more forensic exploration of the traditional dependence on the idea of 'the media' as one homogenous unit. It suggests that it would be liberating for students, teachers and academics to depart from such a model and shift the focus to people and how they create culture in this contemporary 'mediascape'.

The authors work through the classic conceptual framework of media studies considering a wide variety of topics, including:

- genre
- narrative
- audience
- representation
- identity
- ideology
- power.

For each concept, using a rich range of texts and events, this book wrestles with the pressing question of how media education should deal with these areas 'after the media'.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

And what remains when disbelief has gone?

(Philip Larkin, 'Church going')

All of this left me feeling more than a little deflated. Media didn't seem that important to the students.

(Ruddock, 2007: 159)

In this book we offer an extended deconstruction of what we call *subject media* – the institutionalised framing of the study of popular culture – and we argue that new media and technology do not provide in themselves a paradigm shift that necessitates new kinds of pedagogy. Instead we suggest that in fragmenting the idea of 'the media' as a construct, an object of study or an employment sector, these new digital media have simply opened our eyes to the always-already dubious nature of that idea. So we take Gauntlett's (2008) assertion that media studies has been too concerned with 'the media', paying scarce attention to people, and we extend that idea in relation to the broader orthodoxy of media education.

In each chapter we will interrogate a key concept from the discipline, as we see it evolving into a 'vertical discourse' (Bernstein, 1990). Each of these framing ideas – power, genre, representation, ideology, identity, audience and narrative – is deconstructed and in each case, put back together again in such a way as to continue without recourse to the idea of 'the media'.

The major object of our attention is media education – and for the most part this means media studies – in the United Kingdom. However, in the 'schooled' version of media learning it is manifestly the case that the international community has been informed, if not overtly influenced, by practice in the United Kingdom, and this being the case, there is less 'local difference' to reduce the global relevance of our work than we might expect. Equally we are confident that the socio-cultural framing

of *subject media* reaches out across sectors and modalities so that any assumptions of exemption – in 'the academy', in cross-curricular or informal variants of media education – are, if not spurious then at least vulnerable to challenge.

While the key assumptions of *subject media* as formulated in the UK context are embedded globally, there are local nuances. New Zealand, Canada and the United States operate with more freedom from the discourse of derision which has stained 'poor old Media Studies' (McDougall, 2009) in the United Kingdom, but the protectionist impulse is more robust in these territories. Lin (2009) accounts for the relationship between the United Kingdom and East Asian media education in two ways – the adoption of UK and, more broadly, Western discourses in new media education programmes in Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, Korea and Singapore, and the modifications to these discourses – a 'glocal' framing of/for *subject media*:

> Sometimes, various discourses are adopted strategically. The citizenship discourse with a negative assumption from the protectionist discourses of media is an example of a hybrid discourse. As late-comers to media education, advocates in Asia are aware of the dangers of solely applying the protectionist discourse. They strategically adopt the negative effect as rationale for promoting media education while adding the flavour of the active 'civic engagement' rhetoric. The hybrid discourse carries contradictions in itself.
>
> *(Lin, 2009: 40)*

As we will argue at length, we observe, even within such hybridity, the preservation of an unhelpful set of precepts for media education which we call *subject media*. These consist of the construction of 'the media' as a 'Big Other' (Zizek, 1999) to be at once looked at 'critically' and desired as a destination (for employment); the sovereign nature of the text – inherited from the socio-cultural framing of English teaching and the confining of empirical engagement with people (in their situated weaving of media activity into their everyday lives and the performance of identities) and the maintenance of a modernist conception of representation that ultimately serves to undermine the 'emancipatory' spirit of the (ideal) subject. The incomplete project we must press on with requires the removal of 'the media' from the equation.

Three authors bring their ideas to this book from different starting points. As such we offer a collection of analyses, symbiotic but happily contesting some key assumptions and sometimes one another's. Between us we have taught in compulsory, further and higher education, from the youngest stage of secondary education to doctoral supervision, and our experience in the United Kingdom spans English, media and cultural studies as well as teacher training, extensive research, the editing of a journal publishing pedagogic research and senior awarding-body roles for media studies, communication and culture. As such much of this work comes from the heart of the subject – it is not an 'attack' from the outside. Rather we attempt an analysis of the *imagined identity* of media studies in

the context of techno-cultural affordances. Previously we have published our research in the 'in-between spaces' that concern these environments, but here we bring together our work, framed by a central shared belief – that 'the media' is a problematic idea, that its privileged status in the teaching and study of popular culture shares many of the alienating characteristics of the 'schooled' version of English, and that many of the possibilities of post-structuralist pedagogy are enabled further by changes in technology, culture and literacy at the close of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The content is a convergence of research outcomes, pedagogic strategies and dialogic work with texts of various kinds. Our agenda is to raise a set of important and challenging questions for everyone concerned with media education and its current and deeply problematic variant – 'media literacy'. Defining precisely whom this will interest, enthuse and deter is as awkward as the notion of a 'target audience' for a 'media text'. Although we are focusing largely on contemporary media studies in schools and colleges in the United Kingdom, we want to resist the idea of a 'target audience' for these discussions. This book will be of interest to reflexive teachers, as an argument to be challenged by. It will provoke a response from academics and researchers in the fields we explore. And it will be, in many cases, 'of use' for both communities to work with their students. As such it is 'in between' a textbook and a purely academic intervention.

At the start of the twentieth century, the media disappeared from the Western world

Foucault's genealogy (1971), here adapted, infamously resists imposing judgement. It only traces discourse, power and knowledge, in this case in relation to the exercising of power by discourses of medical (with regard to leprosy) and mental abnormality and marginalisation. In this book we want to reverse the gesture and actively seek to exile, and in so doing impose a judgement upon, the very idea of 'the media' from the way we study culture. The idea of 'the media' has obscured the study of culture. Thus, just as the postmodern is an element of the modern, so is 'after the media' a necessary and liberating part of media studies, we will argue.

This book develops further an emerging field of 'post-media cultural studies' strategies for students/academics/researchers (and these are not exclusive categories) engaged in cultural analysis in the early stages of the twenty-first century. The central argument is that the hybrid media landscape, in which traditional power is exercised alongside 'prosumer' distribution of culture, allows for an easier 'application' of various critical theories associated with such hybridity and bricolage – post-structuralism, postmodernism and their attendant 'remixing' of feminism and literacy studies. However, our title does not represent the latest instalment in the temporal proclamations of various '2.0' or '3.0' would-be paradigm shifts. (See Chapter 7 for a discussion of the contested term Media 2.0.) Nor does it lend itself to the 'end of everything' discourse or the 'before and after'

version of postmodernity. Instead we seek to more productively rework the orthodoxy of media studies and its conceptual framework. Rather than merely replacing the conceptual discourse with new modes – ludology, frivolity, playback, parody – each chapter will engage with the aforementioned 'hybrid zeitgeist'.

Cultural studies in the United Kingdom, so the history goes, entered the academic discourse as a politically motivated strategy for theorising everyday life and mobilising social change. Media studies has been partly imagined in the same way, but its status as a horizontal discourse has undermined any coherent structure, especially since it has been colonised – in schools at least – by English, almost entirely on the terms of the longer-established discipline. In universities, the privileging of textuality is a site of more contest, but the 'cultural studies project' is no better served since the 'disciplinary logic of University based teaching' (Carrington, 2006: 278) has led to the development of medium-specific silos which are now outdated but were always too narrow (Berger and McDougall, 2010). Recently, Gauntlett (2008) has argued that media studies is, bluntly, too interested in the media and not sufficiently concerned with people. While we do not want to further develop here potentially parodic ideas about 'Media 2.0', we do agree with that charge and so, in its simplest explanation, our argument is that media studies will do well to return to the project of theorising everyday life (and the part of our lives that cultural products of various kinds connect with) by 'forgetting the media'.

This project is framed, then, by the argument that the institutionalised practices of teaching about popular culture must be understood as a technology for the naturalisation of specific reading and writing practices, particular ways of making meaning and understanding the world which are far from neutral. This range of practices we call *subject media* (McDougall, 2004; 2006), and we wish to engage with the cultural politics of media studies through this 'way of seeing'. Peim (2000) dealt with the cultural politics of *subject English* and its extraordinarily suspect and self-regarding imposition of the idea of literature, and in so doing set up media studies as its other – a more radical cousin:

> Theories of popular culture and audience-oriented work in Media Studies … propose alternative models of communications theory, and challenge the centrality of literature in educational practices …. From a Media Studies perspective, not only is canonical literature oddly exclusive, limited and indeterminate (nobody knows how to draw its boundaries), but its cultural politics are deeply questionable. From a Media Studies perspective, the general category of literature is extremely restricted. The apparently free category of personal response is, in fact, much more constrained than has been represented … English has incorporated Media Studies into itself entirely on its own terms, without revising its cherished beliefs and practices about text and language according to the alternative perspective that Media Studies powerfully offers.
>
> *(Peim, 2000: 173)*

Has this potential been realised? We argue that media studies has obscured, that the 'project' of making popular culture a legitimate object of study has – since the misinterpreted encoding/decoding model from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies coupled itself to the 'textual' obsessions of English – started from the wrong place, and that the problem has been our belief in the idea of 'the media' and its separation from ourselves, just as the category of literature imposes an alienating model of reading.

> It is doubtful whether those who taught within adult and workers' education colleges during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s and whose intellectual work was directly connected to political engagement and social change, would recognise what constitutes cultural studies today.
>
> *(Carrington, 2006: 292)*

Carrington's suggestion does not herald any desire for a return to the more explicitly counter-ideological ferment of 'pre-media' cultural studies, with its attendant derision of critical theory, seen as relativist and apolitical in its apparent fetishising of difference and subsequent ignorance of the structural politico-economic, or the 'mass' in communication. However, we can trace, in the genealogy of cultural studies, a reduction of the field of culture, through the prism of ideology, to first communications and then mass media, with an unhelpful tripartite separation of production from textuality and from reception. The theorising of 'everyday life', we will argue, has been undermined not by critical theories of culture but by cultural study of 'the media'.

Writing in the first edition of the *Media Education Research Journal (MERJ)*, Richard Berger (in Berger and McDougall, 2010) condemns the way that 'the academy' has clung to alienating and inward-looking forms of 'media theory', despite the obviously dialogic nature of culture being made more visible by the internet:

> Undergraduates, who had studied Media before gaining a place at university, were perpetually confused by the clash of medium-specific teaching and the silos they were now expected to occupy. Instead, 'Media Theory' as it was now called seemed to be replicating the activities of the academics of Lagada in *Gulliver's Travels*; instead of trying to extract sunbeams from cucumbers, Media theorists were busy inventing increasingly impenetrable terminology and making vast assumptions about audiences and texts.
>
> *(Berger and McDougall, 2010)*

MERJ states as its objective the bringing together of practitioners and researchers across sectors, and it is certainly true that higher education academics have distanced themselves from the broader project of 'media literacy' and even added their voices to the discourse of derision circulating around media studies, in the United Kingdom at least. And yet the majority of their students are institutionalised

by the encounter with *subject media*. The precepts (intended or not) spoken by media education about 'the media' and its assumed audiences form a framing within which discourses reside, and such discourses (ways of speaking and writing about texts in particular) need to be deconstructed and 'denaturalised' in order for us to understand how they are socio-culturally located – in other words how they are not natural, or simply formed through an emancipatory project, but how they are politically and culturally loaded in order to preserve a range of shifting and permeable illusions about legitimate knowledge and the nature of 'media literacy'.

In *Screen Education: From Film Appreciation to Media Studies*, Bolas (2009) offers a forensic history of the struggle to gain legitimate curriculum space for the study of film and later more generally 'the media'. In so doing Bolas never questions the project – whereby 'film and media education began to get general acceptance in education' (2009: 21), describing throughout the institutional and private struggles experienced by teachers earnestly striving to 'find space' with which to teach children 'about film' and 'about the media'. Of course, this history is framed from the outset by the institutional framing of such social practices around literature, and as such the study merely reinforces existing power relations and situates 'media studies' within such a view of history.

Putting Bolas's work in dialogue with the recent debate over the idea of 'Media Studies 2.0' (Merrin, 2008, Gauntlett, 2009), the community of educators and students this book seeks to interest can certainly be generalised as self-regarding (ourselves included very clearly). But the origin of this perennial navel gazing has emerged from the shifting sands of the 'virtual revolution'. In this book we offer an alternative reading to Bolas, to argue that 'the media' as an object of study is a questionable construct and that media educators have been guilty of a 'grand narrative' – the quest to convince themselves of the importance of such an object of study. As many have said before us, what people do with culture, how they interact with identities, how they engage with the public sphere unevenly, increasingly with the use of digital tools for 'being with others' – these are of import to academics and students. The media? We do not suggest that the media have ceased to exist, that by 'after' the media we mean a temporal change – a moment, a wall coming down. Instead we call upon Lyotard's version of the postmodern to frame our suggestions – that 'the media' as an object of study is always-already compromised by the regarding of its own idea.

Memorandum

Media education remains in a state of confusion. The division of academic and 'vocational' approaches is still attacked by long-standing discourses of derision – on the one hand for being at once overly intellectual in proportion to its subject matter and at the same time 'lightweight', or for what Elliot (2000) discusses as the irony of the economy-regarding curriculum – that jobs in the media are preserved for those who take the least vocational route to them. Either way, the idea of the media is reproduced both by courses which seek to prepare students to work there

and by those that seek to equip them with the skills to critically 'read' their output. One lesser-spoken origin of the confusion is, however, the subject's closer proximity to Leavis and Hoggart than its 'ideal subject' identity presents. 'The media', as more than a technical grammatical plural, is constructed out of a need to preserve a status outside of them, to maintain them as other, to be looked upon with the pedagogic gaze through judgements which – in the case of *subject media* – are conservative in their preservation of the idea that there exist 'the media' to be critical about. The media exist no more than literature exists. Both are constructions, demarcated for particular forms of pedagogic attention, but neither are read critically by students, in Gee's sense (2003).

'The media', then, still occupy the minds of students, but as a stable object of study the media have always been elusive, and yet for decades a deeply conservative practice has been masquerading as inclusive, progressive education. We mean 'after the media' in precisely the same way as Lyotard (1992) explains the paradox of the postmodern condition – as a state of mind, as an ethics, not as a temporal shift. In other words, when we talk about 'after the media' we do not suggest that the media have ceased to exist or that they have been replaced by the 'prosumer'. But just as Lyotard argues that the conditions of possibility of the later part of the twentieth century facilitated new ways of thinking about politics, identity, history and language, and that these ways of thinking would be other to the assumptions of modernity, so we argue in this book that the conditions of contemporary cultural exchange (including but not restricted to the possibilities of seemingly more democratic exchange of media content) allow us to think about culture and identity in new ways, and to resist the reduction of such thinking to the normative discourse of 'mass media'. Equally the sovereign nature of the insulated text is challenged by this way of thinking of culture 'after the media'.

To what extent is the internet an 'inconvenient truth' for media studies? At the level of the public sphere, insulation is tangible. Gillmor's (2004) 'we the media' claims are set against the idea that being a witness with a camera phone does not make you a journalist in the context of the status of funded journalism in a democracy. The vertical discourse, with its horizontal inflections from Sociology, can hold. But what of the millions of productively meaningless comedic exchanges – pets doing amusing things, for example? Media texts? If not, how can the discipline impose its surveillance? If so, how to mark 'the object' with its concepts? Currently the state of confusion treats such 'memes' as objects of study at the 'macro' – prosumers, participation, frivolity – but is afraid of the 'micro' – what does a singular, meaningless event represent, how can it work with theories of mass communication?

And so we seek to reformulate the study of culture and identity without recourse to any notion of 'the media' as a stable construct. In so doing we challenge the 'key concepts' of *subject media* – the institutional, and we argue deeply conservative, framing of the social practices brought together in the formal study of media in schools, colleges and – in many cases but not all – universities. And we suggest pedagogic strategies for a critical theory of culture and identity after the

media that we hope might inform learning, teaching and research. Even the key concepts of our own reformulations are 'under erasure', potentially making way for 'the irruptive emergence of a new "concept", a concept that can no longer be and never could be, included in the previous regime' (Derrida, 1981).

We do not wish to further develop the idea of 'Media Studies 2.0', highly influential though that intervention has been on our thinking. The parodic construction of the debate, between the 'everything is changing' thesis of Media 2.0 and the reactionary responses to it, represent what Lyotard calls a 'differend', an impasse between two language games where there is no possibility of understanding one without recourse to the idioms of the other. The differend between Lyotard's postmodern condition and Habermas's 'ideal speech situation' provides a useful framework for dealing with what Jenkins (2006) describes as 'convergence culture' – people taking media into their own hands, with more or less positive consequences, or 'the competing and contradictory ideas about participation that are shaping this new media culture' (2006: 23). An academic discipline must always be looking at 'competing and contradictory ideas', of course, so the notion of these shifts in participation need not necessitate a paradigm shift in themselves. But we will argue throughout this book that the very idea of 'the media' becomes awkward in the context of all this 'being' in culture.

Cultural theory, when performed (Hills, 2005), 'does things' to what it observes. This performative understanding of theory is often set up as undermining, but as Hill argues, this is a limiting view:

> Performativity is, in fact, not at all the same thing as failed objectivity, whether via jargonizing or losing touch with the real. While constative discourse innocently describes the world, performative discourse tends to be stigmatised for the way in which it performs in the world, sometimes seeming unreal or 'stagey'.
>
> *(Hills, 2005: 174)*

What does cultural theory do, what does it perform? Hills suggests that cultural theorists perform an act of intellectual distance, not through elitist objectivity but via an amplification of 'passionate engagement' with texts that transcends fan culture and at the same time orthodox 'textual analysis'; that cultural theory makes political its observations, and that it situates culture – what matters and how it comes to matter – as a site of struggle, but that it need not concern itself with any claims to be purely abstracted from the 'others' it must always-already partly consist of. It merely 'does' an act of transforming such others through engagement with critical theory.

How, then, might theory passionately and politically engage with culture and identity after the media? The examples Jenkins spends time with in his book *Convergence Culture* are interesting to think through in relation to the Habermas–Lyotard struggle alluded to above. Jenkins describes 'knowledge communities' and 'textual poachers' – consumers, critics, fans coming together and falling away from

one another, generally online, in acts of interpretation. Resisting the 'Media 2.0' discourse, he maps a world of hybridity – old and new media converging alongside old and new ways of reading and writing (in their broadest sense). On the one hand his work is very easy to appropriate for media studies since he provides a wealth of examples and sets them in the context of various claims and counterclaims – thus doing theory to them – and this can be understood, discussed and then 'retheorised' by students easily enough within the orthodox idioms of undergraduate study. And yet it is difficult to pin down any sense of 'the media' from this account, which is really more concerned with politics, forms of writing and ideas about folk culture. Our argument is much broader than merely claiming Jenkins as somehow demonstrating a change that the subject must respond to – that much is obvious. Rather we are suggesting that we could 'go back' to all forms of scholarly engagement with media texts, from the advent of the printing press to the birth of cinema to the broadcast of the Coronation, and 'do theory' on the folk culture engagement with these things in the same way as we can more straightforwardly assess with regard to online gaming or YouTube 'mash-ups'.

For Habermas, Lyotard's paralogy (reformulating constantly new rules in the game of postmodern micropolitics) leads inevitably to an apolitical relativism. For Lyotard, the way that Habermas asserts the 'ideal speech situation' as the aspiration of consensus maintains the 'grand narrative' view of history and struggle. Jenkins's desire to think through conflicting ideas about participation in and through 'convergence culture', then, can be viewed either way. An utterance such as 'when people take media into their own hands, the results can be wonderfully creative; they can also be bad news for all involved' (2006: 17) can be read as equally 'adept' for either intervention – the assertion of 'bad news' assumes a collective sense of ethics with which we can judge digital exchanges, in keeping with Habermas's 'unfinished project' of modernity.

All of Jenkins's 'case studies' – the 'digital watercooler' as collective intelligence, audience backlash against *American Idol* mobilised by an online 'Vote for the Worst' campaign, digital transmedia layering as an element of mass media diegesis; the uneven relationship between the 'folk culture' of fans (now more explicit and 'knowable' in digital space) and 'big media' producers, peer learning in affinity spaces and the ways in which participatory culture reworks political campaigning – these all reaffirm the notion of the public mediasphere. At no point does Jenkins want to set up the 'textual poacher' as more than an agent in a proximal relation to 'the media' as an entity that exists. Our intervention will also resist such telos. Rather, we suggest that in maintaining the ideal of the media as a plausible collective term, 'convergence culture' reinforces the insulation between 'it' and its other (us), in keeping with Lyotard's 'initial forgetting'. Perhaps we might have been tempted to follow Baudrillard and name this book *'forget the media'*? Either way, our project here is to undermine the idea of the separation of 'the media' from everyone and everything else. And yet in describing such convergence as 'a kind of kludge – a jerry rigged relationship' Jenkins suggests a paradigm shift to a new order of uncertainty over public–private sphere culture. We will claim this

for our Lyotardian reading of (after) 'the media' but 'remix' it to view this state of differential and fluid relations as 'more of the same'. The shift is merely that convergence has enabled such fragmentation to be visible – a new way of thinking or, as for Lyotard, a purposeful 'waste of time' (1992: 47).

> The 'post-' of 'postmodern' does not signify a movement of comeback, flashback or feedback, that is, not a movement of repetition but a procedure in 'ana-': a procedure of analysis, anamnesis, anagogy and anamorphosis which elaborates an 'initial forgetting'.
>
> *(Lyotard, 1992: 93)*

Crucially, for us, Lyotard's postmodernity describes an optimism for the project of modernity to continue unabated by its constraining preconceptions, as opposed to a temporal 'after' – the 'end' of the project – and in this sense, shares Habermas's perception of modernity as an 'incomplete project' (1990). So too we envisage the 'project' of engaging critically with culture as optimistically charged with continuing, liberated from its interest in 'the media' – a (perhaps unintentionally) positivist belief structure – in texts, industries, audiences, and in its ability to deconstruct the representation of things, people, ideas in those texts. But the split with Habermas arises from Lyotard's refutation of the notion of consensus as a human aspiration, arguing that such a reduction to a 'meeting point' in culture is an act of terror, the denial of difference. If, then, media studies has become a grand narrative, the emergence of 'convergence culture' has not yet been its undoing.

Taking the 'Media Studies 2.0' debate as a *differend*, we can identify the key idioms of each language game. While Merrin and Gauntlett are wrongly accused of claiming that power has shifted entirely to the 'prosumer' (in fact both are closer to Jenkins's view of hybridity between old and new), the notion of a 'making and doing culture' sets up a parodic sense of how things were, or at least what media studies was interested in, against a set of ideas for how 'transforming audiences' might be dealt with instead, whether this was the intention or not, as this response by Gauntlett to a criticism by Paul Taylor illustrates reflexively:

> The superior examples are all those activists and organisations that have used online collaborative and participatory tools to raise awareness of many vital issues, and to organise political action. Someone like Taylor can always say, as he does, that these 'have met with limited success' but – crikey! – everything has to start somewhere, and there are numerous well documented cases where online campaigns have made an impact, and brought people together to engage in real-world action. Measured against the task of bringing about the demise of global capitalism, their success has indeed been 'limited', but perhaps this is setting the bar rather high. Academics writing articles for specialist journals have also 'met with limited success' in this department.
>
> *(Gauntlett, 2009: 154)*