

Going Critical: On the Problems and the Necessity of Media Criticism

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This article was published in a German translation in the book *Medienkritik im digitalen Zeitalter* [Media Criticism in the Digital Age], edited by Horst Niesyto and Heinz Moser, published by Co-Paed (Munich) in 2018.

Most media educators would probably agree that they are seeking to promote critical thinking about media. But what is 'critical thinking' in this context? How might we distinguish between 'critical' and 'uncritical' thinking? And what is the relationship between critical thinking and other aspects of media education, especially that of creative media production? In this article, I offer some general reflections on these issues by looking back at my personal formation as a media educator. I trace changing ideas about critical thinking that have emerged in media education in the UK since the 1970s, and consider how these ideas reflected the political and cultural context of their times.

At least in the field of education, it would be hard to find anybody who would disagree with the importance of critical thinking. Almost by definition, education aims to make people critical. No educator would want to argue for the importance of *uncritical* thinking. The distinction between critical and uncritical is rather like the distinction between intelligent and stupid, or rational and irrational.

The problem, however, is that we all have our own view of what counts as truly critical. The term 'critical' is often used rhetorically: being critical is a matter of insiders versus outsiders, us versus them. For the most part, we consider people who don't agree with us as uncritical; while those who agree are critical, as we assume that we are ourselves. In this sense, the expression 'critical thinking' is almost a tautology.

In the context of media education, there are a few other ways in which the term is commonly used. In everyday language, the term 'critical' often implies a *negative* judgment. If we are too positive – too full of praise or enthusiasm – we are often deemed to be uncritical. And in the case of media, it is sometimes assumed that we can be seduced or deluded by the emotional appeal of the text – and thereby tricked into abandoning our critical faculties. Avoiding such delusions can lead to a position where the strength of our negative judgments serves as a kind of rhetorical proof of the superior quality of our own critical thinking.

Within academic media research, a version of this can be found in the distinction between *critical* and '*administrative*' research. This is a distinction that goes back to the Frankfurt School, and the point at which these Marxist critics of 'mass culture' encountered the tradition of North American communications research. Here, the distinction became one between those

who claimed to stand outside the capitalist media system, challenging and rejecting it, and those who did the work of the system, and who followed the imperatives of industry or government. In this context, the term critical (as in 'critical theory') is essentially a kind of code word for Marxism: critical thinking is Marxist thinking, while uncritical thinking is any thinking that somehow colludes with capitalism.

In the field of education, this leads on to the notion of *critical pedagogy*. The political motivations of critical pedagogy are perhaps rather more diverse, and less doctrinally Marxist, than those of critical theory; although in both cases, there is an emphasis on critical thinking as a means towards political empowerment. Once again, critical pedagogy is defined by its opposite, by what it is not: *uncritical pedagogy* is all about enslavement and conformity, while critical pedagogy is claimed to provide a means of liberating students from ideology or false consciousness. As I shall indicate, these kinds of ideas were especially popular among media educators in the 1970s, although they have continued to be influential since that time.

Finally, within media education more specifically, a distinction is often made between *critical analysis and creative production*. Media education often combines these two elements, although there is frequently a tension between them. As we shall see, some advocates of a critical approach have condemned creative media production, especially where it is seen as a means of preparing students for employment in the media industries: creative production, they argue, often results in an unthinking (that is, uncritical) imitation of mainstream media. On the other hand, advocates of a primarily creative approach – especially in the wake of new digital media – have accused media criticism of being unduly rationalistic, and even patronizing.

As this implies, the term 'critical' is extremely difficult to define. What would *count* as an appropriately critical approach to media teaching, and what one might take as evidence of students' critical thinking, depend very much on one's basic political and educational assumptions. We might all agree on the need for a critical perspective, and we might fondly imagine that we are all looking for the same things, but the reality is often rather more diverse and complicated.

As I attempt to show in the following sections of this article, these ideas are also subject to considerable change over time. The story I want to tell is partly a personal one, about my own evolution as a media educator in the context of the UK. However, I hope it does indicate some of the broader political and educational changes over this period – and in particular, some of the changing ideas about 'critical thinking'.

The 1970s: Teaching in the Vanguard

I began working as a media educator in the late 1970s. I had studied English Literature at university, and then trained to be an English teacher; but I had gradually become dissatisfied with what I saw as the narrowness and cultural

elitism of a traditional literary education. On my postgraduate teacher training course, I encountered the work of early Cultural Studies authors such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, and I began to discover an alternative. Cultural Studies – along with ideas from semiotics, Marxism, structuralism and post-structuralism – were becoming particularly influential in studying media, and in media education. And so, while teaching media to disadvantaged children in an inner-city comprehensive school, I also began studying in the evenings for a Master's degree in film and television.

Media education has by no means been exclusively confined to disadvantaged young people – and indeed, Media Studies courses today are available in many elite private schools. However, the subject has its origins in a broader move to rethink the teaching of English (that is, mother tongue language teaching). As the UK moved away from a selective schooling system in the 1950s and 1960s, teachers had sought to adapt the curriculum to the needs of all students, including those who had previously been regarded as educational 'failures'. In the case of English teaching, this led to a much stronger recognition of the world outside the classroom, and of the everyday cultures of working-class students – which necessarily included the media and popular culture. In this sense, the early development of media education can be seen as part of a wider democratization of the school curriculum.

Like many media teachers at the time, I saw myself as part of a cultural and educational vanguard – even a kind of political movement. We were teaching young people, not just to critically analyze dominant forms of media, but also to challenge their power. In terms of my earlier discussion, our media criticism was very much focused on the *negatives*: it was about exposing the lies and distortions of mainstream media. Pleasure was something to be suspected and distrusted: with the exception of the subversive pleasures of the *avant garde*, pleasure represented a form of complicity with the 'dominant ideology'. This approach may seem outdated now, but it is one that in my view remains prevalent in many forms of so-called 'critical pedagogy'.

As this implies, we regarded 'theory' – or rather particular kinds of *critical* theory – as having the potential to bring about a kind of political empowerment. We weren't rushing into classrooms with our copies of Barthes, Althusser and Gramsci, although much of the debate in teachers' journals and meetings focused precisely on thinkers such as these. Our task was to make these theories accessible and relevant to our students – a task that was, to say the least, much more challenging for those of us who were teaching disadvantaged children in inner-city schools than it was for our colleagues in universities. Many of the teaching materials and strategies of the time sought to apply these ideas in forms of applied media analysis designed to expose and challenge false ideologies.

Alongside radical theory, we also believed in radical information. We set out to provide our students with knowledge that was often hidden from view – for example, information about the economic operations of the media industries, and their patterns of ownership and control. At the same time, we offered

students alternative representations, such as those that challenged sexism and racism within the media, and sought to provide more positive images.

As this implies, the emphasis here was very much on critical analysis. Creative production was certainly possible in schools, although much of it was distinctly low-tech, involving basic photography and scissors-and-glue. Video production (and especially editing) was beyond the reach of most schools at the time, and computers were only just beginning to appear in classrooms, largely as a means of teaching mathematics. Furthermore, according to some leading advocates of media education, creative work of this kind was a distraction: they argued that it would encourage students merely to reproduce dominant media forms and ideologies, rather than to challenge them.

From this perspective, then, theoretical understanding and critical analysis were seen as means of liberating students from media power. The key term was 'demystification'. Critical analysis would pull away the veils of deception and dispel the pleasurable illusions of media. It would enable students to see through media ideologies and to realise the truth. As such, the pedagogical emphasis was very much on rationality, and even on a kind of scientific approach.

Some very grand claims were made at this time about media education as a kind of political movement. They are a long way from the rather bland, functional approach to 'media literacy' that is evident in some quarters today. While such claims might seem easy to mock, they need to be seen in their historical context. Along with other radical and progressive approaches to teaching, media education was heavily influenced by the social movements which emerged in the wake of 1968. In the UK at least, there was an abiding sense among young radicals (and among many teachers) that we were living in a kind of pre-revolutionary moment. Despite our aspirations, that was not quite how things turned out...

Into the 1980s: the Limits of Critique

For me at least, the 1980s was a period of rethinking. The promise of ideological liberation offered by media education in the 1970s seemed to be quite at odds with my own experiences as a classroom teacher. Meanwhile, academic research about media was also moving beyond some of the theoretical certainties we had taken for granted, especially in arguments about media power. When I became a teacher educator in the mid-1980s, I resolved to do some more in-depth research, both about the realities of teaching and learning, and about the ways in which young people themselves understood and engaged with media.

In collaboration with groups of colleagues teaching in schools, I undertook some detailed 'action research' in classrooms. We found that many of the utopian claims of the previous decade were in need of revision. Working with transcripts of classroom discussion, we explored the 'language games' of the classroom. We found that critical media education could easily degenerate

into an exercise in 'guessing what's in the teacher's mind'. What passed for open-ended analysis was often dominated by the teacher's efforts to command assent to their own interpretation. We looked at how teachers would encourage students to come up with the 'right' answer, and say the politically correct things; and how students would then play along, or alternatively resist the teacher's expectations. We found that there was a considerable continuity between this kind of closed ideological analysis and earlier, more elitist forms of cultural criticism that media educators had supposedly moved beyond.

As I have implied, the 1970s version of media education seemed to depend upon a disavowal of pleasure, as somehow politically incorrect. It was acceptable for students – and sometimes teachers – to 'own up' or 'confess' to enjoying things; but the aim of critical analysis was to overcome these false pleasures and mark out the true path to enlightenment. The approach was highly rationalistic, but it also depended upon a relationship of power between teacher and student. Media education seemed to begin from the implicit assumption that the teacher was critical, and that the students were uncritical (or 'mystified'): the teacher's job was to make them critical. Despite some gestures towards a more student-centred approach, this was ultimately authoritarian. (And this particular power dynamic is one that, in my view, continues to inform much so-called critical pedagogy.)

However, we also found that encouraging students to engage in creative media production offered other possibilities. In my own experience as a teacher, it was in creative production that most of the more complex and unpredictable learning took place. As a researcher, I found that students' production activities involved much more than a mere imitation or reproduction of dominant media, as earlier media educators had alleged. Students enjoyed creative work much more than cut-and-dried exercises in critical analysis, not least because it provided opportunities to explore the pleasures of media. However, production also offered a space in which they could reflect on their own engagements with media: rather than using practice merely as a means of illustrating or applying theory, it could also serve as a means to develop theory, and even to challenge it.

As I have implied, some of the questioning and rethinking that took place, especially towards the end of the 1980s, was a result of teachers taking a closer look at the realities of classroom practice. However, it was also informed by other educational and political developments of the time. The election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 marked a significant turning point. It became apparent that the revolution wasn't going to happen any time soon, and in the decade that followed, many of the old certainties of left politics were subjected to some radical rethinking. The idea that the masses were suffering from some kind of media-induced false consciousness was increasingly seen as arrogant and unrealistic.

Broadly speaking, academic work on media had also shifted away from the scientific certainties of structuralism towards the more radical uncertainty of post-structuralism: meaning was no longer something to be uncovered by

objective analysis, but much more plural, diverse and difficult to pin down. These developments were not a direct influence on most classroom teachers, although the emerging focus on *audience research* within Media and Cultural Studies was arguably more influential. Research increasingly suggested that, far from being passive victims of ideological manipulation, audiences (including children and young people) were much more active and indeed critical than had previously been assumed. As this implied, media education could no longer begin from the assumption that students were merely 'mystified'.

The 1990s: Institutionalizing Media Education

By the early 1990s, media teaching was starting to make headway in the mainstream education system in the UK; and in the process, it was becoming more formalized. The work of the British Film Institute was particularly important in this respect: it published a set of 'curriculum statements' designed to feed into the curriculum reforms that were then under way, as well as creating a range of teacher education materials. The postgraduate students I was teaching were going into schools to teach Media Studies, which was a rapidly growing specialist course in many secondary schools – although developments at primary school level were slower to materialize.

The curriculum that was outlined in the BFI Statements, and in the syllabi that were being adopted in schools, was defined in terms of concepts, rather than a particular body of content or knowledge. This allowed teachers a degree of autonomy when it came to choosing particular objects of study; and it thereby enabled them to be more responsive to the needs and interests of their students. These concepts had been around since the 1970s – I was teaching a version of them myself at that time – but they had begun to crystallize by the mid-1980s. Various versions continue to co-exist, but most media educators are agreed on four 'key concepts': media language, representation, institutions and audiences.

It's important to emphasize that these concepts were not intended to act as certainties but as questions. They were not set in stone, but debatable and contested. The aim was not to command students' assent to a particular pre-defined position, but to enable them to ask their own questions, and to reflect on their own readings and experiences of media in a systematic and rigorous way. They were critical tools rather than articles of faith.

While the concepts implied a degree of rationality, the overall pedagogical approach was rather different from the ideological certainties of the 1970s. To begin with, there was a more central emphasis on *pleasure*. It had become imperative for teachers and students to explore their emotional responses and investments in media, not as something to be disavowed or overcome, but rather to be acknowledged and understood. There was a renewed focus on the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of media, seen not as some kind of cover for ideological deception, but as important in their own right.

A second shift was to do with recognizing students' existing knowledge of media. In this newly emerging approach, media education was no longer about transmitting the teacher's version of truth, and commanding students' assent. On the contrary, it was about recognizing that students are in many ways *already* critical – and that even very young children are making critical judgments about media all the time. While this is not to suggest that there are no limits to their knowledge and critical understanding, the aim here was to begin with what students know, rather than with assumptions about what they didn't know.

Thirdly, this concept-based approach applied not only to 'theory' (or critical analysis) but also to 'practice' (that is, creative media production). The BFI model, and the specialist Media Studies courses that were gaining ground in schools, placed a central emphasis on media production. Students were expected to create their own videos and other media artifacts – activities that were becoming much easier to manage with the emergence of new digital technologies. However, it was vital that students should also critically reflect upon their own creative work, for example in talk and writing. They should plan and subsequently evaluate their own work in relation to the key concepts, thinking about the relationship between intentions and outcomes, and about the constraints and dynamics of the production process itself. It was this process of reflection that would bring theory and practice closer together, and create a productive dynamic or dialectic between them.

It was argued by some at the time that media education was becoming institutionalized and losing its radical political edge. There's no doubt that media educators had to accommodate and adapt to the changing political imperatives of the time: with the emergence of a National Curriculum at the end of the 1980s, and as New Labour gathered speed into the 2000s, there was a growing level of government control of education, and an increasingly instrumental view of teaching and learning. With the erosion of teachers' professional autonomy, institutionalization appeared to be the only game in town...

Beyond 2000: New Challenges in a New Millennium

The new century presented a range of new opportunities and challenges for media educators. Digital technology and social media were radically transforming the media landscape. In terms of media education, they generated new objects and issues for study; but they also created new possibilities for the classroom, in terms of how teachers and students might access, create and share media. Some argued that, in this new environment, critical media education had become redundant, or at least hopelessly old-fashioned. The advent of 'Web 2.0' – and eventually 'Media 2.0' – led some to call for 'media education 2.0'.

The emergence of new digital media in the early 2000s was accompanied by a great wave of enthusiasm, not only on the part of business interests, but also among many academics, activists, and educators. These new media

would provide a means of liberation and empowerment – or so it was argued. So-called ‘participatory’ media would bring power to the people, overthrowing the dominance of old media corporations, and enabling a new media democracy to emerge. There was a kind of wishful thinking here that many media educators also found very attractive – although some of us with a more critical (or perhaps just depressive) disposition were rather more cautious from the outset.

Schools themselves became a key arena for the spread of digital media, as technology companies began to seek out new commercial markets, and as many politicians bought into the idea that technology would solve all the problems of education. In my experience, school managers today often seem to confuse the use of technology with media education – as though the presence of lots of computer equipment is in itself an indication of their commitment to media education. Likewise, policy-makers will often refer to ‘digital literacy’, as though the ability to use technology is somehow a sufficient educational aim, or as though it will automatically generate a critical approach.

Much of the focus in technology education today is on teaching coding or computer programming. The claim here is partly a vocational one – that training young people to code will equip them for jobs in the new digital economy. However, there is little evidence that this is the case: coding is a relatively low-level skill, and many of the jobs in this area are outsourced to developing countries in any case. Others argue that learning coding is a means of developing more general problem-solving skills – another claim that is not well supported by evidence from research. In many respects, the emphasis on teaching computer coding reduces technology education to a matter of instrumental or technical skill. While there have been growing calls for schools to address internet safety, there has been very little attention here to the need for a broader critical understanding of technology, and of its social, economic and political implications.

Meanwhile, for many media educators, technology has offered significant new opportunities to engage students in media production. While the wider education system has become much more regimented and standardized (at least in the UK), there has also been a countervailing emphasis on *creativity*. Like the term ‘critical’, ‘creativity’ is somewhat of a feel-good term: no educator is likely to argue that they would prefer children to be *uncreative*. However, the lack of precision about what creativity means and how it might be developed has led to a good deal of rather vague – and indeed rather sentimental – thinking. In media education, some have argued that the advent of ‘Media 2.0’ has made critical thinking superfluous: technology will, it appears, enable people to become creative, to express themselves, and to achieve liberation. From this perspective, creative media production becomes the beginning and end of media education: if we simply teach people to use the tools, there will be no need for critical analysis or reflection.

In my view, media educators have been somewhat wrong-footed by the rise of technology in schools. Some commentators have allowed themselves to be

carried away on a wave of creative euphoria, and lost sight of the continuing need for critical thinking. Digital and social media do provide exciting new opportunities for students to create and share media; but they also present new objects of study and pose new challenges that call for critical analysis. We are steadily moving towards a situation where the circulation of media is controlled by a very small number of global monopolies. 'Participatory' media operate according to a very different business model from that of older 'mass' media; but it is vital that we understand how this new data-driven economy works.

Contemporary concerns around social media – such as hate speech, online radicalization, the commercial use of personal data and the rise of 'fake news' – may appear quite new, but they relate to very well-established concerns on the part of media educators. While educational policy-makers are belatedly becoming aware of these issues, they are often seeking quick-fix solutions to them. Media educators know that the issues at stake here are complex, and that teaching young people to understand and engage with this new media environment is not going to be easy. But we also have a long history of dealing with such concerns, which should enable us to develop more rigorous and effective responses.

Conclusion: the Necessity of Critique

Across the period I have been discussing, there have been some significant changes in how critical thinking about media is understood, and how critical analysis is seen to relate to creative practice. In the 1980s, I was arguing against a narrow and prescriptive form of criticism, and emphasizing the possibilities of creative practice. In the last ten years, I have found myself in an almost opposite position. Now I am questioning what I see as a simple-minded celebration of creativity, and arguing for the importance of a critical analysis of the new media environment. The pendulum appears to have swung from one side to the other.

If anything, critique now seems even more urgent than it did before. The power of the new digital emperors – Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon – is much less overt and visible than the power of older 'mass media' corporations. These companies like to present themselves merely as neutral providers of technological services: they do not want to take responsibility for the content they provide. In the wake of concerns about hate speech and fake news, it is doubtful how long this argument can be sustained.

Media educators obviously need to address digital and social media, alongside 'old' media such as television and film. We need to take the opportunities these media provide for creative production and for sharing and distributing students' work. However, we also need to maintain and extend our critical approach. In my view, the 'key concepts' developed in the 1990s remain a highly relevant framework for critical thinking about media, and they can usefully be applied to digital and social media as well.

Thus, we should be asking questions about the various 'languages' of these media – the forms of grammar or rhetoric they employ. We should be looking at representation – at how different social groups are represented, and how they represent themselves, in these online spaces. We should be looking at the changing institutional structures and economic strategies of these new media companies. And we should be looking critically at how people engage with these media – albeit perhaps more as 'users' than 'audiences'. These four key concepts help us to address issues, and to raise questions, that might otherwise be forgotten in the wave of digital euphoria – or indeed in the exaggerated panics about online safety.

This kind of critical thinking is not about political correctness: it is not about commanding students' assent to our pre-defined position. On the contrary, it is all about debate and dialogue. The key concepts are prompts for interrogation, for asking questions not only of the media, but also of ourselves and of others. Critical thinking means avoiding the rush to judgment, recognizing the limitations of the claims we can make, and developing a healthy skepticism about some of the grand claims that are often made about media – and perhaps particularly about media power and media effects. And, as I have argued, this process also requires a dynamic relationship between practice and theory, between action and reflection, and between creativity and critique.

FURTHER READING

A detailed history of media education in the UK from the 1930s to the 1980s can be found in Terry Bolas, *Screen Education: From Film Appreciation to Media Studies* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2009). Some key historical documents, and outlines of the 'state of the art' in the early 1990s, can be found in Manuel Alvarado and Oliver Boyd-Barrett (eds.), *Media Education: An Introduction* (London: BFI Publishing, 1992). The present author's book *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003) takes the history forwards to the early 2000s. My longer critique of 'Media Education 2.0' can be found in Kirsten Drotner and Kim Schroder (eds.), *Digital Content Creation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010). My responses to more recent developments can be found on my blog at www.davidbuckingham.net.