

# David Buckingham: Media Education should not only deal with the digital world, but demand something different

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**Abstract:** British researcher David Buckingham gave an interview to *Revista Comunicação & Educação*, via a virtual conference, recently in Brazil. Buckingham analyzes issues of the communication and education interface, the theoretical references shared with cultural studies, and primarily, the understanding that it is necessary to overcome the instrumental bias of the media in favor of a comprehensive understanding of digital capitalism. In the interview, Buckingham answers questions related to teacher training in the field of digital technologies, the development of pedagogical strategies to deal with digital

**Resumo:** David Buckingham concedeu entrevista exclusiva à *Revista Comunicação & Educação*. Realizado remotamente, o diálogo tem o intuito de elucidar aspectos práticos e teóricos que marcam a obra do autor. Buckingham analisa questões da interface comunicação e educação, as referências teóricas compartilhadas com os estudos culturais e, sobretudo, o entendimento de que é necessário superar o viés instrumental da mídia em favor de uma compreensão abrangente sobre o capitalismo digital. Na entrevista, o pesquisador responde questões relacionadas à formação docente no campo das tecnologias digitais, ao desenvolvimento de estratégias

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*capitalism at school and, above all, the concept of media education.*

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*pedagógicas para lidar com o capitalismo digital no âmbito escolar e, especialmente, ao conceito de educação midiática.*

*Palavras-chave:* educação midiática; infâncias; juventudes; capitalismo digital; tecnologias.

*Communication & Education* (C&E) conducted an interview with David Buckingham, emeritus professor at the Loughborough University and visiting Professor at the King's College, University of London, UK. Buckingham also directed the Center for the Study of Children, Youth, and Media at the University of London, being internationally recognized for his work with children, youth, technologies, and media education. The professor is also author and/or co-author of over 25 books and recently published *The Media Education Manifesto*, in which he proposes a new analytical perspective in face of contemporary challenges: "Understanding the media today requires us to recognize the complexity of the modern forms of 'digital capitalism'. And if we really want citizens to be media literate, we need comprehensive, systematic, and sustained programs of media education as a basic entitlement for all young people", he says.

On September 14th, the C&E interviewed David Buckingham while the professor attended a virtual conference held by Colégio Santa Cruz, in São Paulo. We may find several articles and publications of Buckingham on his blog<sup>1</sup>.



1. David Buckingham's blog address: [www.davidbuckingham.net](http://www.davidbuckingham.net)

***Comunicação & Educação:*** A key concept in your work is the idea that digital media is not simply a technological instrument, but also a form of culture. In Latin America, such perspective is shared through the theory of mediations, based on authors such as Martín-Barbero, Mário Kaplún, and Orozco Gómez. Which theoretical path did you take to reach this understanding and what does it represent for media education practices?

**David Buckingham:** Perhaps we should start right at the beginning, by asking: what is education for? I think most people would agree that the aim of education is to prepare children for adult life – to help them understand the world they are growing into, and to become active participants (or citizens) within it. This implies that education needs to be oriented towards the future – although, of course, that does not mean that it cannot or should not also learn from the past.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and now in the 21<sup>st</sup>, the world has become increasingly saturated with media of various kinds. Media have long been central to the operations of the economy, to politics and public life, and to the arts; and now, with the advent of digital media, they are also playing a vital role in our personal relationships with friends and family. Almost everything is mediated in some way. If we want to prepare children for this world, we need to be teaching them about media.

Of course, children understand a good deal about this media culture simply through experiencing it and participating in it. They develop creativity and communication skills; they learn how to ‘read’ and ‘write’ in these media; and they learn to discriminate and make judgments. Children bring into the classroom extensive funds of knowledge and understanding that derive from these out-of-school experiences; and this knowledge is often underestimated or ignored by teachers.

However, there is also a danger that we romanticize young people, as ‘digital natives’ who apparently already know everything. When it comes to media, there is a good deal that children are unlikely to learn simply through experience. They need to understand how these media work, not just technologically, but also as forms of language or meaning-making; they need to understand the political, social, and economic dimensions of media; and they need to develop more systematic, critical judgments about the media they are using and consuming. These are things they should learn in school.

So there needs to be an encounter here, between the culture of the school – and the kinds of knowledge that are valued there – and the cultures that children experience outside the school. It is vital that teachers should recognize and work with children’s everyday lived culture. Yet, education should also provide them with experiences, knowledge, and competencies that they might not otherwise develop outside school.

Schools have always worked with media of various kinds – with film and television and computers, but also with books and other printed media. But in teaching, we tend to use media as instrumental tools – or what we used to call ‘audio-visual aids’. We often use them to bring aspects of the outside world into the classroom, but we often fail to ask fundamental questions about how these media represent the world, and how and why they were produced.

Meanwhile, there has often been a big divide between how young people engage with media outside school and what happens in the classroom. Outside school, they are using digital media not only to learn, but also for entertainment, pleasure, and communication in school these media are often used merely for retrieving information, ‘drilling and skilling’, and for mechanical forms of instruction. Children might learn file management, PowerPoint, and basic coding, but they rarely engage with the rich visual and moving image forms that they encounter every day outside school.

So, in using this idea of ‘digital culture’, I am arguing that we need to bridge this divide between everyday experience and school knowledge. Rather than regarding media merely as a set of technological devices, we need to engage with the knowledge and skills children develop in using media outside school and build upon them.

***C&E:* The use of media as an instrument is clear. However, could you please expand on the theoretical question surrounding media education? How Cultural Studies influence the development of media education theoretical framework?**

**DB:** I can see I did not quite answer the point in your last question, about my ‘theoretical path’! Perhaps that is because, for me, education is not so much about developing an abstract theory and then applying it; it’s more about praxis, about a dynamic relationship between theory and practice.

But if UK media educators do have a ‘theoretical path’, then Cultural Studies is surely a vital part of it. Unfortunately, Cultural Studies have become many things to many people, so that it is now almost impossible to define it. For myself, I look to the tradition that began with the encounter between the disciplines of English Literature and Sociology in the late 1950s, in Britain. This was a very interesting historical period, where you can see the radical social and cultural changes that came to fruition in the 1960s just beginning to appear, mostly in quite uncertain and tentative ways.

Yet, in the early works of the ‘grandfathers’ of Cultural Studies – like Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall – you can see a shared commitment to a broader definition of culture than the one that came before. Culture for them was no longer just a matter of a body of approved texts – a canon of Great Literature and Great Art. On the contrary, culture was about people’s lived experiences: it was not something exalted and separate, but something embedded within everyday life, something quite ‘ordinary’.

And, of course, for all these writers, this was about social class: it was about recognizing the validity of working-class culture, not just the culture of the elite. So, there was a political intention at the heart of Cultural Studies: it was part of a wider process of democratization, a ‘Long Revolution’, as Williams called it.

This paved the way for serious analysis of popular culture, and of media – although even at that time, many other influences pointed in the same direction. There are some serious questions we might ask, sixty years on, about what has become of Cultural Studies in the universities. In many respects, it has become just another academic discipline, another kind of ‘business as usual’. But if you look back to Raymond Williams – as I have been doing in my blog recently – you can see a central emphasis on democratic popular education in schools. Unfortunately, subsequent generations of Cultural Studies scholars have not been particularly interested in this educational dimension.

At this time, you can also see the ‘theoretical framework’ starting to emerge. Williams, for example, was trained as a literary critic; but in his early work, you can see him beginning to develop a much broader analysis of culture – not just analyzing literary texts, but also systematically exploring how those texts were produced, circulated, and read. Culture came to be understood as a social, economic, and political phenomenon, not simply a matter of aesthetics: so, you find scholars beginning to consider, for example, the economics of the publishing industry, the role of the popular press, the development of cultural policy, and so on. In the intervening period – especially in the 60s and 70s, – you find other theoretical influences and methods appearing; but the dynamic, multi-dimensional nature of Cultural Studies is evident right from this early work. And it is this approach that begins to find its way into schools in the 1970s, as the subject of Media Studies emerges.

It should be emphasised that Cultural Studies, in its origins, was not just about popular culture: it was about a much broader range of cultural phenomena, and about ‘high’ culture as well. Once Media Studies became established as a separate subject (in schools and, in various different guises, in universities), there was a tendency to divide off the cultural field. In English teaching, we look at books, and mostly at a particular category of books that are legitimated as ‘Literature’. In Media Studies, we look at everything else: film, television, newspapers, computer games, the internet, and so on. There is no real logic to this: we should be asking the same critical questions about books as we do about other media. What we need is a more coherent and inclusive approach to teaching about culture and communication more broadly – and this, I think, is another good reason for returning to the origins of Cultural Studies.

**C&E: When dealing with media education in the United Kingdom, you indicate a new paradigm, dating from the late 1980s and early 1990s, which would embrace media languages, representations, institutions, and audiences as its key concepts. Could you briefly point out the status of media education as a work field?**

**DB:** I have been making the argument for media education for a very long time, and I am afraid it has always been an uphill struggle. The status of media education is inevitably tied up with broader political struggles over education as a whole. In promoting media education, we have to think pragmatically – about what we can possibly achieve in this political situation, as well as what we might want in an ideal world. And it is often a matter of two steps forward, then one step back although for the last ten years it has felt more like one step forward, two steps back.

In the 1970s, when Media Studies began to develop as a distinct subject in secondary schools, teachers had a considerable degree of autonomy to develop their own curriculum – and that autonomy has subsequently been very undermined. The ‘key concepts’ model has a long history, but it was formalized in the 1980s in response to broader changes in the examination system. Looking back, the 1980s and 1990s was a period of significant progress for media education. We had a new National Curriculum, really for the first time; and while media education was just a small part of the subject of English, specialized courses in Media Studies were also becoming increasingly popular. In a way, this was a moment where media education became institutionalized.

It would take a long time to explain what has happened in the intervening years. But now, after ten years of conservative-led governments, the debate about education has come to be dominated by a kind of backward-looking populism that really has little place for media education. Politicians often talk about the dangers of ‘fake news’ and so forth, they are not interested in students learning to be critical of media. There is a dominant view that, if the media are trash, then media education is obviously trash as well.

So, in the last few years, media have been effectively excluded from the curriculum for English (that is, mother tongue language and literature). English teachers have been told that ‘digital texts’ are not allowed – which, if you think about it for a moment, is simply crazy. The specialist subject Media Studies has also been under attack, although it has survived, albeit not in the form many of us might wish. If you want to read more about the awful details, I have written about this a good deal on my blog.

It’s important to be aware that Media Studies is an optional course that students can follow in the top four years of high school (and not in every school). In recent years, the government has prioritized traditional subjects, especially STEM subjects (science and maths); and Media Studies, like other humanities, social science, and arts subjects, has been steadily marginalized. Less than

10% of students take a specialist Media Studies course, and the numbers who choose it are now falling. Media Studies has been a victim of neoconservative educational policies, although it is by no means alone in this.

So, answering your question, I would say that the ‘key concepts’ model is still very much the consensus approach among Media Studies teachers. In my view, it is a coherent and comprehensive approach, which enables us to take account of new developments in the wider media environment: so even though it was developed in the 1980s, it has been easy enough to apply it to social media, for example.

However, the status of Media Studies as a specialist subject, and of media education as a wider field, is not looking good. The broader arguments I have been making here are quite out-of-step with the current direction of education policy. I can argue endlessly that we need to prepare young people for a media-saturated world; I can propose that we need a more coherent, integrated approach to teaching about culture and communication; I can even be quite pragmatic and argue that media education can address the problems of disinformation, or online safety, or cyberbullying, or whatever is the latest topic of concern. But, at the moment, I very much doubt that our education policy makers are listening.

***C&E: The disappearance of curricular subjects has featured in the scientific field as a relevant debate. To deal with the multifaceted contemporary phenomena, some authors are betting on interdisciplinary approaches. In this sense, do you think that having specialized educators in media education at school is necessary? And how can media education be treated in higher education courses offering basic teacher training?***

**DB:** Well, you might assume from what I just said that interdisciplinarity is really not at all on the agenda in Britain! On the contrary, we are moving backwards, to a very traditional subject-centred curriculum that looks much more like the 19<sup>th</sup> century than the 21<sup>st</sup>. Obviously, I would see media (or rather culture and communication) as a very good example of these complex contemporary phenomena, which definitely need to be explored from many different angles, using a range of different concepts and methods. But unfortunately that is not the direction we are currently taking.

I am often asked this question about whether we need specialist media teachers, or whether media education should be the responsibility of every teacher. My response is always that we need both. We do need media education to be a specialist subject (that is, Media Studies) in high school, but we also need it to be a dimension of other subjects, right from the early years. Back in the 1980s, many media educators were arguing quite strongly for ‘media across the curriculum’ – the idea that, just as all teachers are teachers of language, so all teachers should also be teachers of media.

There are two main reasons for this. The first relates to my earlier point about students' out-of-school knowledge: for example, when you are teaching History or Geography, or even Science, much of the knowledge that students bring to the classroom will be derived from media. It may well be that much of what they think they know is wrong but good teaching means that you have to begin by engaging with what your students already know.

The second reason for this cross-curricular approach is that, in practice, all teachers use media in their teaching: they use TV programs, books, computer software, and so on. And, as I have argued, they need to be asking critical questions about these media, rather than using them as instrumental tools, or unquestioned sources of information.

'Media across the curriculum' is perhaps something of an ideal. What we discovered back in the 1980s was that teachers' subject loyalties were still very strong. 'Language across the curriculum' was a powerful movement: lots of schools were required to develop and implement policies in this area. But in practice, something that was seen to be everybody's responsibility quickly became nobody's responsibility. Teachers would pay lip-service to the idea, but in the end, it was the English teachers who were actually doing the work. And of course, teachers are constantly being urged to take on new responsibilities, and it is quite understandable that they often resist. If you really want to make this interdisciplinarity happen in schools, you need much more time, training, and support that is often available.

So, my answer here is 'both/and' and not 'either/or'. If we are going to have a systematic, coherent approach to teaching media, and if we want that to happen right across the curriculum, we still need to have specialist trained teachers – who, apart from anything else, can help to train their colleagues and support innovation where it is happening.

This leads to the second part of your question: if we expect all teachers to engage with media education, then of course we need to train them to do so. But in the UK, and I suspect in Brazil as well, there is very little opportunity to do this in basic teacher training. Here again, there is often a lot of pressure to take responsibility for new topics and issues: things are just added to the teacher education curriculum, and it seems that nothing is ever taken away! And of course, you also need the trainers, the academics, with the relevant expertise to teach the courses. So, it's easy to see why progress might be fairly slow.

Personally, I feel that specialist media educators require a great deal of training. You would not allow teachers to teach History if they had never studied the subject. The same is true here. Media teachers need to know a great deal about a whole range of different media forms; they need to know about the media industries; understand academic theories and methods for media analysis, and keep abreast of current developments, including within their student's



media universe. This requires in-depth initial training, as well as continuing professional development. If we really want to take it seriously, we need to do more than just pay lip service to the idea.

**C&E:** In your book *The Media Education Manifesto*, you expatiate on the idea that digital media offer a form of ‘empowerment’, especially within the school context. Could you explain how you understand the role of media education before digital capitalism and the challenges posed by algorithms, fake news, and personal data extraction from social networks? With the growth of platforms such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon, what role does media education play in promoting consciousness and critical citizenship?

**DB:** In the last few years, there has been a significant change in the general tenor of debate about digital media. In the early days, people would wax lyrical about the wonders of technology; but now all we hear are horror stories about its harmful effects. Historically, we can see similar shifts with older media, like television and film. When the technology appears, it seems to hold fantastic promise; yet very quickly, we are told that it is taking us all to hell.

In the case of the internet, there is an interesting history, which is documented in Fred Turner’s book *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*. Turner traces how early ideas about the internet emerged from the hippy counter-culture of the early 1970s. These pioneers regarded the internet as a force for creativity, learning and participatory democracy: it would bring power to the people. The emergence of ‘Web 2.0’ at the turn of the century brought renewed enthusiasm for these kinds of utopian ideas. Yet, since that time, the internet and social media have become means of surveillance and commercial marketing on an unprecedented scale.

The same is true in education. The early advocates of digital technology told us that it would democratize the classroom and lead to a new age of creative, student-centred learning. Here too, the reality has been very different: technology has become a means of surveillance, and a means of extending the corporate privatization of public education. The liberation that we were promised seems ever further away.

In my view, both positive and negative views suffer from a kind of technological determinism. They attribute an overweening power to technology, irrespective of how and why it is used. Technology will not empower us, despite what the marketers claim; but neither will it necessarily enslave us, unless we allow it to do so. Unfortunately, technology is increasingly being used in education as a means of exercising political and economic power – of controlling teachers and students, of gathering data, and of turning education into a means of making money. This is something we all need to resist.

These days, much of the discussion about young people and digital media tends to focus on the issue of safety – on pornography and paedophiles, privacy, hate speech, cyberbullying, and so on. The internet is seen as a primary cause of addiction, narcissism, and poor mental health. And the teacher is positioned here as a kind of moral saviour or protector. Yet, media educators know from experience that this protectionist stance is rarely very effective: students often see it as patronizing and moralistic, and they resist it.

In my *Manifesto*, I argue that we need to take a broader view. We need to focus not on the symptoms of these problems, but on the more fundamental causes. Teachers and students need to understand the wider system of ‘digital capitalism’ (or what some call ‘surveillance capitalism’ or ‘platform capitalism’) – and then they can make informed choices on their own behalf.

This is not an easy task. We are dealing with technology that is ubiquitous, and increasingly embedded in our daily lives. Yet many of the ways in which it works are invisible to us: for example, many of us do not understand how algorithms operate, and how systems of search and recommendation function. We do not understand the economic dimensions of the internet, and how data are bought and sold. This makes it a more complex and pervasive form of power, for example as compared with older media, like newspapers or television. We imagine that we are controlling it, and that we are getting a service for free, but that is not what is happening.

However, I think we can use the ‘key concepts’ of media education to help us question this, and to explore how it works. As with older media, this approach will help students to analyse and reflect upon how they use these technologies in their everyday lives; it will enable them to question the reliability and credibility of the material they see; and it will encourage them to understand the broader social, political, and economic forces that are at play. These new media present new challenges; but they are also an inextricable part of the broader media culture, which includes ‘old’ media as well. Some people have called for yet another new subject called ‘digital literacy’; but it makes no sense at all to separate off digital media from other kinds of media, or from culture and communications more broadly.

Ultimately, I would agree that this is a matter of ‘conscious and critical citizenship’, as you put it; although I also fear that citizenship is a rather broad term. In these neoliberal times, it does seem particularly important to assert that we are not merely individual consumers, but also citizens in the public sphere. ‘Citizenship’ is a normative idea, which implies a system of participatory democracy, in which people have voice and agency. I am afraid this is quite a long way from the populist politics that now holds sway, not least in the UK and in Brazil.

Media education might be one way of promoting this kind of citizenship, but I do not think it is enough on its own. We can try to create 'media literate', critical users of media; but we also need fundamental reform of our media system. The big media companies that you mention need to be held responsible for their actions; they should be much more transparent and accountable; and they cannot be allowed to operate as quasi-monopolies. At the very least, they should be made to pay their taxes! All of this requires regulation by government; yet many governments seem unwilling to exercise this, not least because many of them have benefitted from the covert use of technology.

As another manifesto-writer once said, it is not enough to interpret the world: we also have to change it. Media education should not just enable us to cope with this new digital world: it should also encourage us to imagine and to demand something different!