

The Strangulation of Media Studies

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In 2014, the UK government commenced a comprehensive reform of GCSE and A Level qualifications, which are offered to students in the upper years of secondary school. It appeared likely that some subjects would be deleted altogether from the curriculum, and there were fears that Media Studies would be among them. In the event, this did not come to pass: teaching of the revised qualifications in Media Studies will begin this September (2017). Nevertheless, the reforms will have significant implications for Media Studies teachers.

This paper presents a critique of these changes, arguing that they are misguided, ill-informed and likely to undermine the quality of media education. It begins by briefly sketching the broader context of these developments. It then moves on to discuss the process of reform, and the issues that were raised in attempting to redefine the core 'subject content' for Media Studies. Finally, it considers the drafting of the revised specifications that will be used to guide teaching and assessment, and offers a critical evaluation of the outcomes.

The UK government's *General Conditions of Recognition* for accrediting qualifications at GCSE and A-level were published in November 2014. They outline the broad principles of the proposed reforms: to increase the 'demand' (that is, the challenge or difficulty) of assessment tasks; to reduce or prevent potential overlaps between qualifications; to improve the reliability and manageability of assessment; and to ensure that assessment would reliably differentiate across the grade range. These broad principles are worth bearing in mind, not least because the outcomes of the process have been very different.

There were widespread rumours – including some published in reputable newspapers – that specific subjects were likely to be removed entirely from the curriculum as part of this process. Media Studies was among them. When it did not appear in the first or second tranches of qualifications up for review, some feared that Media Studies would simply be ignored and left to die. In the event, after a protracted process of negotiation, Media Studies has been saved; but there are significant questions about the value and coherence of what remains.

Part I. The Context

I.1 The Paradoxical Politics of Education

In order to understand what has been happening here, it's necessary to take a step back and briefly sketch the wider context. The recent history of educational policy-making in the UK is truly paradoxical: on the one hand, we have seen a massive extension of centralized control of education, on the part of successive governments; yet on the other, education has increasingly come to be driven by the rhetoric of the so-called 'free market'.

For more than three decades, education in Britain has been subjected to an incessant stream of government reforms. It has become the focus for a kind of symbolic politics, in which the progressive developments of the 1960s and 1970s (however limited they may have been) have been repeatedly pushed back. Reforms in assessment, in curriculum content, in classroom pedagogy, and in school management and inspection, have steadily reasserted centralized government control. Professional educators – whom the former Education Minister Michael Gove famously called ‘the blob’ – are, it seems, no longer to be trusted.

Yet meanwhile, there has been a continuing push towards a marketised, and apparently more diversified, system. We have seen the emergence of new kinds of schools, new categories of staff, and a range of new agencies providing educational services – some of which appear to be free to act with much less restriction by government.

The 1988 Education Act, which set many of these developments in motion, provides an instance of this paradox. On the one hand, it introduced the National Curriculum, reinforced by an extensive programme of testing and a significantly more draconian inspection regime. Seen by some as a supreme example of the command-and-control approach, it was an attempt to mandate not only what is to be taught, but also how it is taught. At the same time, the teaching profession itself came under increasing attack: ministers claimed that there were tens of thousands of incompetent teachers, and hundreds of failing schools.

However, what was perhaps less noticed at the time was that the 1988 Act also began the move towards a marketised system – that is, the use of ideas and approaches derived from the corporate world. The provision of education came to be understood in terms of supply and demand, in which buyers and sellers, or providers and customers, would come together to trade. The Act resulted in a significant reduction in the power of local education authorities, and hence in the democratic accountability of education. Parents and children were seemingly free to choose in a competitive marketplace of individual schools, informed by apparently objective data about how ‘good’ these schools were. This marketisation paved the way for the growing commercialization of education; and in the past twenty years, we have seen a massive increase in the role of commercial providers, not least in the management of schools, and in the outsourced provision of public services.

These contradictory tendencies often exist side by side, in the very same policy initiatives. For example, Labour’s National Literacy Strategy (introduced in the late 1990s) extended centralized control over the teaching of reading, but allowed a major role for the commercial purveyors of reading schemes. The transformation of schools into ‘academies’ appears to free them from local government control, but in fact such schools are now controlled directly by central government. Ofsted, the much-hated inspection regime, appears to follow central government diktat, but a great many Ofsted employees are private contractors, business people and commercial consultants.

In the case of qualifications, the providers are the examination boards (or awarding bodies). While these were traditionally run by universities, they have now effectively

become companies. At present, only one (Edexcel) is wholly commercial (it is owned by the education and media multinational Pearson), but all of them are competing for customers in the educational marketplace. Meanwhile, in line with what has become known as 'the new public management', much of the responsibility for regulating assessment is outsourced to a 'quango' (a quasi-autonomous non-governmental organization) known as Ofqual, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation. Ofqual presents itself as an independent regulator, but it is a non-ministerial department that acts to enforce government policy. Here too, the public and the private seem to co-exist in a kind of market relationship.

1.2 The Denigration of Media Studies

Media Studies has been taught as a specialist examination-level subject in British schools since the mid-1970s. It grew significantly during the 1990s and 2000s, although it began to decline somewhat during the current decade. From a peak of almost 70,000 candidates in 2008 for Media Studies GCSE, in 2016, according to the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) there were just over 51,000, including 5,500 taking GCSE Film Studies. At AS level, the entry in 2016 was just under 30,000 (down from a peak of 40,800 in 2011), with a further 9,000 taking Film Studies. At A level, the 2016 entry was around 21,000, again down significantly from the peak year of 2009 (27,000), with a further 7,000 completing Film Studies. This is well under 10% of the overall age cohort, although in 2016 it was still the thirteenth most popular subject at A Level. One might imagine that, by this point, Media Studies would have achieved a degree of respectability – not least given the continuing expansion of the subject at university level. However, this is far from the case. On the contrary, the subject is routinely derided, albeit for some quite contradictory reasons.

Thus, on the one hand, Media Studies is frequently denigrated for being insufficiently scholarly. It is (hilariously) described as a 'Mickey Mouse' subject, and remains a running joke for desperate stand-up comedians and newspaper columnists. Such views are clearly shared by government ministers: Michael Gove, for example, frequently contrasted 'soft' subjects like Media Studies with the 'hard' subjects of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) that are now being persistently favoured in the funding of education. Yet on the other hand, Media Studies is also derided on the grounds that it is insufficiently vocational: doing Media Studies, it is routinely argued, is never going to get you a job in the media – or indeed a job of any kind.

Such arguments betray an absolute ignorance of the facts. Most of the critics of Media Studies have absolutely no idea of what it entails, let alone what it might look like in a classroom. Advocates of Media Studies can rehearse the counter-arguments in our sleep. There is a history of academic study of media dating back almost ninety years: the UK is often seen to be a world leader in the field, and the subject is taught at most if not all the so-called 'top' universities. Meanwhile, a great many people working in the media have Media Studies degrees, and Media Studies graduates are more employable than those in many other subjects.

However, the criticisms of Media Studies are oddly persistent. Despite the fact that Media Studies has been around for a long time, we seem to have been remarkably ineffective in attempting to shift them. One might have expected that Media Studies would become established in the ways that other ‘new’ subjects have done – geography, psychology and sociology, for example, only really emerged as academic subjects in the past century. Yet Media Studies has been much less successful in gaining credibility.

There may be several explanations for this continuing hostility. Back in the day, some exponents of Media Studies liked to see their subject as dangerously political and subversive. They argued that those in authority – and those who work in the media – were somehow threatened by the idea of young people critically analyzing media. This was perhaps a rather self-important, vainglorious argument, although it might explain some of the suspicion. More significant is the idea that the content of Media Studies is somehow not *real knowledge* – that because it looks at things that are deemed to be trivial, it is by definition trivial as well. From this perspective, Media Studies is the very opposite of hard work; and the veneer of ‘theory’ that it assumes is merely pretentious.

These arguments lead to a situation where serious teaching about media continues to seem like a contradiction in terms. This is the case even where an apparent need for media education does appear on the political horizon. Politicians are happy to buy into anxieties about online pornography and paedophiles, or young people watching Isis recruiting videos, or ‘fake news’, but are somehow unable to stomach the idea that we might teach young people to be critical of media. They are keen to pour lots of media technology into schools, but they resist the idea that we might use it as anything other than an instrumental tool. Even when ‘media literacy’ was mandated in the 2003 Communications Act, it was quickly reduced to a narrow concern with internet safety and technical skills: serious academic study of media never became part of the picture.

1.3 The Perils of ‘Institutionalization’?

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, when Media Studies was genuinely a new subject for most schools, some media teachers were concerned about the dangers of ‘institutionalization’. Trying to accommodate to the requirements of the examination system, they argued, would be to neutralize the truly radical and challenging nature of the subject. Yet such ideas did not last long. The introduction of GCSE in the mid-1980s represented a great opportunity that media educators seized with both hands: it offered a status and legitimacy that the subject could never have achieved while it was confined to the lower-status qualification of the CSE (Certificate in Secondary Education). When A Levels followed in the early 1990s, the numbers of students taking the subject began to increase dramatically.

Institutionalization of this kind always involves struggles and compromises. There are bound to be dangers in attempting to fit a demanding and diverse body of knowledge into the requirements of assessment tasks, especially in the context of a timed written examination. A particular issue for Media Studies teachers in this respect has been the status of creative production: given that media production is predominantly

a collaborative group activity, there have to be methods to assess individual students' contributions. Yet until recently, the examination system has allowed teachers a considerable degree of control. Most of those responsible for designing the curriculum and assessment tasks are professional teachers, or former teachers; and it is teachers who assess their students' work, before their marking is moderated by other professionals.

However, in the current context, institutionalization has increasingly come to resemble a mad game. As we shall see, the reform of qualifications has required subject specialists to conform to some bizarre and illogical stipulations; to find their way through obstacle courses comprised of ludicrous bureaucratic requirements; and to second-guess and then respond to misrepresentations of their subject that are based on little more than prejudice and ignorance. What has resulted is an assessment system that is by no means more 'demanding' than the one it is replacing; and one whose contradictory requirements render it almost impossible to implement. Perhaps most importantly, it is a system that threatens to undermine the quality and coherence of the student experience. If Media Studies is to be 'saved' as a meaningful educational endeavour, teachers and students will need to find ways of working around the limitations and demands of an absurd and arbitrary assessment system.

Part 2. The Process

2.1 Defining Subject Content

The negotiations over the reform of Media Studies qualifications provided some striking insights into the actual making of educational policy – a process that seems quite far removed from official accounts of what should be happening. Despite the superficial appearance of bureaucratic rationality and objectivity, what occurred was a jumble of confusion, prejudice and ignorance – and, behind that, some very clear instances of political interference.

As with other subjects, the Department for Education (DfE) was required to publish 'subject content' documents for each revised qualification. It was the responsibility of the examination boards to work together to draft these documents, following a process of consultation with relevant stakeholders. The stakeholder meetings were convened by the British Film Institute, and held in early 2015: they included academics and teachers, alongside representatives of industry trade bodies, examination boards, and the DfE itself. It is important to note here that Media Studies was considered in parallel with Film Studies, with some overlap between the meetings for each subject. This paper will not consider Film Studies in any detail, although the potential overlaps between the two subjects were on the agenda from the outset (as indeed the *General Conditions of Recognition* required).

Following the meetings, a protracted process of drafting and redrafting began. One of the examination boards, the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC), was asked to take the administrative lead in this process, negotiating with the DfE and eventually with Ofqual. Although it does not generate profit for shareholders, WJEC is a company limited by guarantee (WJEC CBAC Ltd.). Like other examination

boards, it provides and assesses examinations across the range of subjects, and across England and Wales, as well as providing resources and training for teachers. In the past year, it has established what it calls a new 'brand', Eduqas, which will deliver the reformed qualifications in England. (The other boards that provide Media and Film Studies qualifications are AQA and OCR, the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance and Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations respectively.)

There was a nominal division of labour in operation here. Responsibility for defining content lay with the DfE, while Ofqual took responsibility for assessment. In practice, however, this distinction proved rather obscure: it was clear that the DfE – that is, central government rather than its arms-length agency – was calling the shots. Indeed, once the process of drafting and redrafting got under way, it was clear that much of the direction was coming from one person, the Minister for Schools, Nick Gibb.

2.2 The Man from the Ministry

Gibb is a protégé of the former Education Secretary, Michael Gove – a man whose unpopularity with the teaching profession is legendary. When Gove was moved out of the firing line to become Justice Minister late in the Coalition Government, Gibb briefly lost his ministerial position, but when the Conservatives were returned to office in 2015, he was reappointed to the DfE. Gove and Gibb have similar personal backgrounds. Unlike many of their Conservative colleagues, neither of them attended 'top' fee-paying public schools. Both come from relatively ordinary lower middle class families, and attended grammar schools. Without resorting to cheap psychology, it is possible that this might have given them a certain chip on their shoulders – and this might partly explain why, having missed out on public school, they now wish to transform the entire education system into an imaginary version of Eton.

Gibb takes a much lower profile than Gove, whose more recent involvement in the Brexit campaign and meetings with Donald Trump have won him a degree of notoriety. Gibb is probably best known as an advocate of synthetic phonics, the government's favoured approach to teaching reading, which has been imposed on schools despite a dearth of evidence about its effectiveness. For Gibb, and for Gove, approaches like synthetic phonics provide a rigorous alternative to the sloppy, undisciplined approach apparently preferred by ill-advised progressive teachers, who (it is alleged) simply don't want children to learn to read.

When it comes to the curriculum, Gibb, like Gove, is particularly informed by the work of the US 'educational philosopher' E.D. Hirsch Jr. All three are committed to the notion of what is called a 'knowledge-based' curriculum. In Hirsch's case, this has led him to publish a series of books that are essentially lists of facts that children need to know. These books, with titles like *What Your First (or Second, or Third) Grader Needs To Know*, have been adapted for the UK market, and published by Civitas, the right-wing think tank. What the books represent is a conception of the curriculum as a legacy from the past, fixed at a point in time (in this case, approximately 1908), rather than a view of the curriculum as a map or a set of tools for the future.

Thus, Gibb is wont to argue that what children need is knowledge – that is, *facts*, rather than ‘amorphous skills like “critical thinking”, evaluation, reflection, and so on’. He favours whole-class teaching and textbooks, lists of kings and queens, grammar and punctuation and *précis* exercises, and the STEM subjects. It is this approach to education that will apparently make Britain a world leader once again.

Gibb was unlikely to be a friend of Media Studies, for obvious reasons. It is entirely possible that he would have liked to abolish the subject entirely. While such a move might have been controversial in some quarters, it could well have had popular appeal, and would have been an easy goal early in a new government. In retrospect, it is interesting to speculate about why this didn’t happen. Qualifications in several other subjects were effectively scrapped – for example Anthropology and Creative Writing – or almost deleted and then reinstated after a public outcry, most notably Art History. Yet the cohorts of students in these instances were much smaller than those taking Media Studies. For the examination boards, ‘smaller’ subjects are much less lucrative than ‘larger’ ones: there are significant economies of scale, and this alone might make them more determined to hold on to them.

Even so, Gibb was very closely involved in the drafting process. The exam board representatives drawing up the document were told on occasion that ‘the Minister will read this over the weekend, and we’ll get back to you’. In several instances, the DfE officials appeared to be second-guessing what the Minister might want – ‘the Minister won’t like that’. On one such occasion, the exam boards strongly insisted on the need for the curriculum to be defined in terms of a set of ‘key concepts’ – concepts that have been used in this way since the 1980s at least. Yet they were informed, in a deathless line, that ‘the Minister doesn’t like concepts’.

As we shall see, there were several principles that seemed to underlie what the DfE officials represented as ‘the Minister’s concerns’. There was a continuing uneasiness about the notion of studying media industries – ‘NG won’t like this’, the DfE officials noted in their annotations to one of the drafts. It seemed as though learning about the economics of media production was somehow politically dangerous in itself. There was also a concern that the texts to be analysed in Media and Film Studies should be of ‘high quality’ – a concern that, as we shall see, had quite ludicrous consequences. Yet the abiding concern was with ‘knowledge’, and the need to teach specified texts that were deemed to be ‘demanding’ in themselves.

2.3 Shifting Goalposts

The drafting was an iterative process, with documents going through numerous drafts and being returned with annotations from several DfE officials. To say the least, not all these comments revealed much sympathy for Media Studies as a subject, nor indeed a great deal of knowledge or understanding of it. Much of the time, it seemed as though the civil servants (and perhaps the Minister himself?) were attempting to catch the writers out, imposing contradictory requirements and making impossible demands.

As the process went forward, the goalposts were repeatedly shifted. While some of the requirements were identified in the official documentation, many of them were not; and some were only introduced at later stages. Media Studies was by no means alone in this respect, although it seems to have encountered more obstacles than other similar subjects: the documents that eventually resulted are much longer and more detailed in terms of specifying content than most others. As the documents were repeatedly redrafted, they were graded according to a traffic light scheme: at one point, a given draft might be graded 'amber' and then (for reasons that were rarely clear) be moved back to 'amber/red' or forwards to 'amber/green'. At several points, it appeared that Media Studies was very likely to be refused permission to proceed along the road ahead.

The executive committee of the Media Education Association, the teachers' subject association, prepared to mobilize its membership in a public campaign (even drafting a letter for publication in *The Times*). Ultimately, the committee decided that it had no confidence in the examination board official who was leading the drafting. Indeed, it seemed that the document was becoming more and more incoherent with each consecutive draft. Eventually, the MEA informed the boards that it would not endorse the latest draft, and requested a face-to-face meeting with DfE officials. Surprisingly, this request was granted, and Media Studies was represented at the meeting by two leading professors, David Buckingham of Loughborough University and Natalie Fenton of Goldsmiths College, representing the MEA and MECCSA (the academic subject association) respectively.

At this meeting, Buckingham and Fenton proposed to the DfE that they would produce an entirely new draft of the subject content document. They felt that it would be better to go down fighting, with something that represented the subject fairly and accurately, than bend over backwards so far that the end result was so incoherent that no self-respecting teacher would want to do it anyway. The examination board officials proposed submitting this new version alongside theirs, but ultimately realised that this would be a mistake. So it was this rapidly written draft that was submitted, authored by two Media Studies professors, and endorsed by the two subject associations and by Skillset, the industry training body, and the BFI.

To some extent this intervention did the trick. Media Studies was saved – or at least not abolished entirely. However, this was by no means the end of the process. There was a good deal of further redrafting, as well as a further public consultation process, before the final Subject Content documents were published in early 2016. As noted above, these documents contained a considerable amount of detail, although in principle they were merely the framework on which each competing examination board would then construct their full specifications. In creating these specifications, the boards were bound to interpret the initial Subject Content documents in different ways; and at this stage, they were negotiating with Ofqual rather than the DfE, where other imperatives came into play. This stage of the process will be considered in due course, but at this point it's important to identify some of the overarching issues that had emerged by this point in the story.

Part 3. The Issues

3.1 ‘Demand’ and the Place of Theory

One of the key aims of the reforms was to increase the ‘demand’ of qualifications. In this sense, they might be seen as a response to widespread claims that contemporary education is becoming ‘dumbed down’. Subjects like Media Studies – along with arts and humanities subjects more broadly – have often been described as too ‘soft’, in contrast to the rigour of ‘hard’ subjects like Maths and Science.

However, measuring and comparing ‘demand’ – the level of challenge or difficulty of subjects – is by no means straightforward. For example, is Art difficult? For some it is as easy as breathing, but for others it is something they will always struggle to master. For some, Maths comes easy, while for others it will forever remain a closed book. We can compare examination results, but this tells us very little. For example, until recently the numbers of children achieving the required level in National SAT tests in literacy and numeracy has been steadily rising – although this has merely led some to argue that the tests are getting easier (rather than acknowledging that teachers are getting better at ‘teaching to the test’). The proportion of Grade As in Media Studies is significantly *lower* than in Maths or Physics, but does that mean that it is more difficult, or easier?

In line with the so-called ‘knowledge-based curriculum’, the government’s answer to this question seemed to be primarily in terms of specifying knowledge – defined largely in terms of facts. Skills, once a key term in curriculum reform, were much too vague; and apparently the Minister didn’t like concepts. Yet on the face of it, the idea that one would increase demand by specifying content seems quite contradictory. Specifying lists of facts to be learned would obviously result in teachers teaching to the test – and this would ultimately make things easier for students, rather than more difficult.

In the case of Media Studies, it was expected that ‘demand’ would be most apparent in the requirement for academic theory. It was the inclusion of difficult theory that would prevent Media Studies from being just another sop to the lazy underachiever. Of course, an explicit attention to theory is an essential element of Media Studies – arguably to a greater extent than is the case in its ‘parent’ discipline of English. Much of the intellectual challenge of Media Studies is to do with thinking through complex – and often unfamiliar – theoretical ideas in relation to familiar everyday examples. Yet it is important to look at what became of ‘theory’ in the process of these reforms.

In redrafting the Subject Content documents, the need to include theory was clearly identified. Particularly at A Level (which is, after all, a requirement for university entrance), Buckingham and Fenton identified a number of specific areas of Media Studies theory, and included examples of particular named theorists in each case. Thus, our draft specified: semiotics (e.g. Barthes); theories of ethnicity (e.g. Hall); political economy (e.g. Curran); and so on. In the published version, however, ‘for example’ became ‘including’ – ‘theories of semiotics, including Barthes’. In effect, what we had ended up with was a canonical list of compulsory theorists to be studied.

As the document passed through several different hands, an increasingly arbitrary and bizarre list of names appeared. As one MEA report suggested, it seemed as though somebody had Googled 'media theory' and simply copied down the results – although in fact it appears to have been even more haphazard than that.

The current list mandated in the Subject Content document for A Level includes no fewer than eighteen named theorists. It is, to say the least, a motley collection. It includes:

- classical or canonical names that most media academics would probably expect (Barthes, Hall, perhaps Levi-Strauss);
- writers who by any estimate would be much too difficult for most Master's students, let alone 17-year-olds at A Level (Baudrillard, Butler);
- theorists who might have been *de rigueur* in the 1970s, but now seem sadly outdated (Propp, Bandura, Gerbner);
- secondary texts that might well feature on a current undergraduate reading list, but don't develop much original theory (Livingstone and Lunt, Hesmondhalgh, van Zoonen);
- and some who might more accurately be described as 'commentators' rather than theorists (Gauntlett, Shirky).

There are many highly influential names that are missing here: most Media Studies academics would probably agree that Foucault, Habermas and Bourdieu are among the most significant theorists in the field, although none of them is included. There are other, more current writers and researchers who might also have been named. One could probably spend a long time debating the merits of including particular 'theorists'; but that is not the point.

The problem here is not with the idea that we should teach theory, or even that teachers should be referring to specific named theorists. However, there are significant questions, not only about who identifies those theorists, or which theorists are chosen, but more broadly about how we teach theory and what we think the point of doing so might be.

Ultimately, this list is likely to prove too demanding for most teachers: given the lack of training and resources for Media Studies teachers, it is unlikely that many will be familiar with these writers' work at first hand. In the event, most teachers will probably rely on the potted summaries to be found in undergraduate textbooks. Indeed, it is notable that one of the examination boards has included in its specifications a bullet-pointed list of three or four key ideas of each theorist. As these lists are (inevitably) circulated in classrooms, one wonders how far most teachers and students will ever look beyond them.

The academic field of Media Studies is changing all the time, as are its objects of study: a fixed canon of theorists will be difficult to update, and it removes the

flexibility that teachers need if they are to respond to new developments, and to the changing needs and experiences of their students. More importantly, this approach implicitly regards theory as a body of knowledge that is beyond question. The work of these eighteen theorists is not being seen as a set of ideas to test out, to work with, or to challenge, but as a fixed body of bullet-pointed facts to be learned by rote and then regurgitated in examinations. Yet this undermines the whole purpose of learning theory in the first place – and, ironically, could make it much less ‘demanding’.

3.2 Media and Film: Addressing the Overlaps

A second key aim of the reforms was to address (and, as far as possible, remove) potential overlaps between qualifications. While this might be seen to reflect an old-fashioned disciplinary Puritanism, it was largely based on the accusation that students are likely to cheat by presenting the same material for more than one examination.

In the case of Media Studies, the key potential overlap is with Film Studies. Film Studies in schools is of a similar vintage to Media Studies: specialist courses – notably at O Level rather than the less academic CSE – have been available since the 1970s. However, it is much smaller than Media Studies in terms of student numbers: with 5,500 at GCSE and 9,000 and 6,600 at AS and A2 in 2016. The two subjects have somewhat different academic histories, and this separation exists to some extent in universities as well.

However, this is a somewhat spurious separation. In an age of media convergence, it is very hard to separate film from other media. With the emergence of ‘box set’ television and the growing importance of short films, it is increasingly difficult to see where film ends and television (or video) begins. Many contemporary media properties or franchises cross a range of media (including books). Film has always been a key aspect of Media Studies in schools, and within the academy Film Studies scholars are now paying closer attention to the relations between film and other media. Arguably, Film Studies is now part of the wider field of Media Studies. Film Studies is more specialized than Media Studies, and as such there might be a case for Film Studies at A Level, although frankly that case seems less compelling at GCSE.

Through the drafting of the subject content documents, various solutions to this apparent problem of overlap were proposed. Most straightforwardly, several stakeholders proposed that students should not be allowed to take both courses, but this was rejected by the DfE. Separating the two on the basis of objects of study proved to be complicated. At one point it was being proposed that documentary film would be included in Media Studies, while Film Studies would focus on fictional film. In the end, for coursework, it was decided that students would not be permitted to produce whole short films or sequences from films in Media Studies, although they might be able to make other ‘moving image’ texts (such as advertisements or TV trailers).

There was much discussion as to whether the two subjects could be separated on a disciplinary or theoretical basis – a debate that almost inevitably looks back to the origins of subjects, rather than what they have become, or might become in future.

In fact, this is what seems to have resulted. The Subject Content documents for Film Studies place strong emphasis on a quasi-literary approach, based on close textual analysis. While there is some mention of representation, the more ‘sociological’ aspects of industry and audience are effectively marginalized. In attempting to establish the autonomy of the subject, it reverts to an old-fashioned text-based approach that is quite out of step with how academic Film Studies has developed over the past twenty or thirty years.

The concomitant risk for Media Studies was that it might end up as a kind of watered-down media sociology, without any close analysis of moving image texts, or any consideration of more aesthetic aspects. In fact, the Subject Content documents (and the specifications that are based upon them) do seem to have their cake and eat it in this respect. Film is listed as one of nine required media that should be studied (an issue to be discussed below) but it is excluded from the list of media that will be studied in depth. Film can be included as part of ‘cross-media’ topics, where it is one medium among others, but it cannot be the central or exclusive focus. The logic for marginalizing film, while explicitly including ‘box set’ television, music video and video games, seems bizarre. Media Studies teachers who are film enthusiasts (as many undoubtedly are) may well feel compelled to migrate to Film Studies; although in the longer term Film Studies may come to seem more out-of-step with students’ media experiences.

3.3 ‘Quality’ and the Selection of Texts

As noted above, one reason for the continuing denigration of Media Studies is the perception that it is merely concerned with trivia. Although this issue is not explicitly mentioned in the *General Conditions of Recognition*, it is implicit in the insistence on increasing ‘demand’. At a very early stage in the process, the Minister was said to be concerned about the prospect of students studying things like soap operas and Twitter. He expected that everything that students were to study should be of ‘high quality’.

In general, those drafting the subject content document for Film Studies had very little problem with this – although once again it might have encouraged them to hark back to an old-fashioned concept of the field, based on a quasi-literary canon of Great Films. The Film Studies document has a footnote as follows:

Films for study should be “critically recognised, culturally and historically significant”: critically acclaimed through awards and nominations at major film awards (Oscars, BAFTAs) and major film festivals (Cannes, Berlin, Venice and Sundance); critically celebrated by the academy of film scholars and serious critics in the British Film Institute’s and American Film Institute’s ten yearly polls of the best films and the annual surveys carried out by British Film Institute since 2007; and culturally and historically significant as featured in standard academic accounts of the medium. Awarding organisation film choices will be accompanied by a rationale to justify their inclusion against these criteria.

While this is a potentially inclusive statement (many films are nominated at ‘major’ film festivals), it also reveals the arbitrary nature of canon formation, giving BAFTA or the Academy Awards (for example) the power to define what will be studied.

Unlike Film Studies or English Literature, Media Studies has never operated with a canon of approved texts: its selection of texts has been driven by broader theoretical concerns, and not by any assumptions about their inherent quality. Indeed, applying such an approach would quickly lead to absurdity. At one stage in the drafting of the documents, DfE officials seriously proposed that students would only be permitted to study 'award-winning' journalism, with an explicit suggestion that Watergate (a political scandal from the early 1970s) be used as a case study. Quite how this approach might be extended to websites or video games, for example, was never considered. This insistence on 'quality' entirely misses the point of Media Studies, whose aim is surely to consider the full range of media, and to study popular culture as well as high culture. It raises the obvious question of what 'quality' is, and who defines it. (Apparently, the Minister is a fan of *Downton Abbey*, so perhaps there is an answer there...).

Again, it is important to emphasise that there is no problem at all with Media Studies exploring 'quality' media, whichever awards or polls are seen to define this. However, we would also expect Media students to study and to question the processes by which 'quality' is defined in the first place: how is it that certain films (or TV shows or video games) are identified as being of high quality while others are not, and what kinds of social institutions are involved in this process?

Certainly, students should be encountering media texts or phenomena that are unfamiliar for them, and therefore possibly difficult or challenging to interpret. One aim of Media Studies is to expose students to a wide variety of media, not simply material they already know and are comfortable with. Thus, there are requirements in the Subject Content documents that students should study media from different cultural contexts and different historical periods. This can only be a good thing. However, this is rather different from imposing an arbitrary and taken-for-granted notion of 'quality' to determine what will be studied in the first place.

Ultimately, the Subject Content documents for Media Studies fudged this issue, referring instead to the need to study texts that possess 'social, cultural and historical significance'. They do not provide any further definition or criteria for assessing such 'significance'. In practice, as we shall see, the specifications for both Media and Film Studies seem to have interpreted these requirements very broadly: the examination boards were required to submit a 'rationale for inclusion' of chosen texts to Ofqual, although apparently this is not for publication. However, as we shall see, the Media Studies specifications have been required to prescribe 'set texts' that all students will study, which has never been the case in the past. These texts may have been selected partly with an eye to 'significance', or even 'quality', although the rationale in this respect is not explicit. Nevertheless, there are broader concerns (to be discussed below) to do with how this level of prescription will restrict the kinds of learning that are on offer to students – and ironically, once again, limit the 'demand' that the subject can make on them.

3.4 Coursework and Creative Production

As noted above, the Subject Content documents were published by the Department for Education. Responsibility for assessment was (at least in theory) a matter for Ofqual. However, the documents did identify some principles that would eventually guide assessment, and some 'skills' as well as areas of 'knowledge and understanding'. Significantly, the documents do require students to have experience of *creating* media as well as *analyzing* media. This inevitably raised the question of how such creative skills were to be assessed, and the thorny issue of practical coursework (or 'non-examination assessment', NEA).

Media Studies is partly a practical, creative subject. There may be a different balance between theory (or critical analysis) and practice (or creative production) across different qualifications, but in most university courses and especially in schools, the aim is very much to combine the two. Historically there has been a strong commitment to a dialectical relationship between them: using creative practice not just to illustrate theory, but as a way of thinking through and developing theoretical understanding. And ultimately, it is impossible to see how this creative, practical element of the subject can be assessed without using coursework – especially given the complexity of the technology that is likely to be involved.

The obvious analogies here are with Art or Drama, but there are also parallels with subjects like Design and Technology, which cannot be adequately assessed using a written timed test. A further complexity in the case of Media Studies is that most media production is a collaborative group activity, in which participants may take on a diverse range of responsibilities. The examination system requires students to be assessed individually, but in the past Media Studies teachers, and indeed exam boards, have found reasonably effective ways of assessing individual contributions to group projects.

These issues will be considered in more detail below, but it is important to note that the government's aim from the outset was to reduce coursework, if not eliminate it completely. This was implicitly justified in terms of the aim in the *General Conditions of Recognition* to improve the 'reliability and manageability of assessment'. For the DfE, coursework was not reliable, by definition. Here too, there was a widespread assumption that students would cheat, or indeed that teachers might do so, if given the chance. Thus, the boards were repeatedly asked what they would do to prevent students from simply using the coursework submitted by other students in previous years – an occurrence that is, by all accounts, exceptionally rare.

It was clear from the start that a reduction in coursework was on the cards. Before the reforms, most specifications allocated 50% of marks for coursework (which often included extended writing as well as media production). Stakeholders were generally keen to retain at least 40%: this argument came partly from the industry training body Skillset, but it was also supported by university teachers, whose degree-level courses frequently contain a substantial proportion of production coursework. Probably assuming it was the best that they were likely to get from the DfE, two of the three boards involved quickly agreed to a reduction to 30%.

The university stakeholders also argued that assessment at degree level is partly (and often largely) about extended essay writing, based on independent research. If A Level was to prepare students for higher education, they would need to have experience of this; yet here again, this element was effectively deleted in favour of timed tests. The university representatives were dismissed in the civil servants' notes as 'the wrong kind of stakeholders'.

The account thus far has focused primarily on the Subject Content documents. These provide, in their words, 'the framework within which the awarding organisation creates the detail of the specification' – although in fact they contain a considerable amount of detail already, and provide relatively little room to move. In the following section, the paper goes on to offer some insights into the new specifications themselves, and the ways in which the government requirements were translated into particular forms of assessment.

Part 4. The Specifications

4.1 From Subject Content to Specifications

Although the period developing the Subject Content documents felt interminable, it was nothing compared to the drawn out agonies of writing and re-writing the specifications. The DfE published drafts of the Subject Content documents and put them out for public consultation, eventually resulting in the final documents on which specifications had to be based. Any assumption that these online consultations would influence the outcome turned out to be very naïve. More than once, consultations were put out during the summer holiday - a time when teachers would be least likely to be mobilized. Even so, campaigns by the MEA resulted in a higher turnout on behalf of Media and Film Studies than for any other subjects. The consultation documents were enormous and the meaning of some of the questions was often impenetrable, but teachers (and students and parents) did respond. Nevertheless, they were effectively ignored.

At this point, the DfE, which was responsible for subject content, handed over the process to Ofqual, which was to be responsible for assessment. The exam boards worked to produce draft specifications and specimen assessment materials (draft exam papers) for the remainder of the 2015-16 academic year. All were published in the summer of 2016, following numerous questions to Ofqual about how the subject content criteria were to be interpreted. There was a good deal of optimism that these specifications would be accredited, though everyone involved expected some tweaking would be necessary; after all, only a handful of the 300 specifications submitted for other subjects in tranches 1 and 2 had gone through on their first draft. However, nobody was quite prepared for what came back: all specifications in both Film and Media Studies at GCSE, AS and A level were rejected, with detailed feedback on what was unacceptable in each case.

Each of the boards then went away to re-write and re-submit in the late Autumn. The gap between this re-submission and Ofqual's feedback was often considerable; indeed in one case the overdue feedback arrived late on the last working day before Christmas, just after the exam board offices had closed for the holiday. Teachers

became increasingly anxious at the lack of accredited qualifications in their subject area, particularly as they could see other subjects being gradually ticked off the list on the Ofqual website.

Ofqual had employed external consultants to provide subject expertise, which the institution does not have ‘in house’. In the case of Film Studies, it was clear that the consultant did provide that expertise, but for Media Studies, the longer the process went on, the more obvious it became that the expertise was lacking. The feedback contained enormous amounts of petty detail and pedantry; and it was often contradictory, as the goalposts were constantly shifted. In an attempt to ‘get it right’, some submissions deliberately re-used wording which had got through the process for another subject in a previous tranche, only to be told that the rules had changed. ‘We got it wrong then’ said Ofqual; ‘we’ve learned from our mistakes and there are new rules now’. The process increasingly came to resemble a Kafka-esque bureaucratic nightmare.

As in the ‘subject content’ phase, when they were trying to figure out what the Minister might want, the participants increasingly found themselves attempting to second guess Ofqual’s wishes. In effect, each set of Ofqual feedback became a shopping list of requirements that had to be checked off – and yet that list grew longer and became more specific with each successive draft. Sometimes these requirements could be dealt with logically, but sometimes they forced the exam boards to put things together in strange combinations, or to leave things out in ways that didn’t make sense. The whole process was like having to jump through multiple hoops simultaneously – or like a game of Twister in which the players were forced to contort themselves in ever more grotesque permutations.

Film Studies came through this process at a relatively early stage, with both OCR and Eduqas gaining accreditation at GCSE, AS and A level. Though lists of set films had to be included, both boards were able to offer a certain amount of choice and provide a reasonably varied menu. However, the greater emphasis on cinema history and the absence of institution and audience from the courses represents a substantial shift away from a broader view of the subject towards one that is centrally focused on close textual analysis.

In terms of Media Studies, the process was much more difficult. Eduqas managed the coup of having all their Media Studies courses accredited in February 2017, after four successive drafts. This at least gave the other boards a clearer indication of what they might need to do to get their courses through. Yet despite attempting to replicate aspects of the Eduqas model, both have suffered further rejection.

So what was Ofqual looking for? Unfortunately, this has never been entirely clear, and as we approach the end of the summer term with several specifications still not accredited, it still isn’t clear. Though much of the feedback referred to detailed problems with the wording of question papers and marking schemes, or the interpretation of assessment objectives and subject content criteria, some of it still seemed to reflect fundamental misinterpretations of what the subject is all about. Ofqual frequently referred to the need for everything to be spelled out in the specifications, arguing that they should be written in such a way that a non-specialist teacher would know exactly what she or he had to do. Yet this requirement would

be most unlikely for other subjects. Re-drafting became more complex each time, as boards were told that they had to be quite specific about which context would apply for which topic or text (historical for this one, economic for that one, and so on).

The drafting was further complicated by the strange role of AS level. AS level, taken at the end of Year 12, was previously an integral part of A level, with the first two units worth 50% of the qualification. As part of the wider qualification reform process, AS is now only available as a free-standing qualification worth 40% of A level in terms of UCAS (university entry) points, and it cannot contribute to the full A level. Nevertheless, many schools and colleges still intend to offer it, in some cases entering all their candidates (at vast expense) for all subjects, so that they have a clear indication of progress at the end of Year 12. This has complicated the business of writing specifications, since the exam boards feel the need to create a course which still acts as the first half of the A level and is 'co-teachable', but because of the stipulations of the Subject Content document, effectively needs to cover most of the subject. Eduqas's approach to this involved having half of the set texts at AS level (one TV drama instead of two, for example) and OCR have largely followed suit in their most recent drafts.

4.2 Broader Issues

Several of the broader issues outlined in Section 3 above have remained problematic, although they have been further complicated by the arcane complexities of the drafting process.

4.2.1 The Place of Theory

It was clear from the outset that a more explicit emphasis on theory was going to be required, although different exam boards attempted to deal with this issue in different ways. It appeared to have slipped into the background by Autumn 2016, with drafts of specifications suggesting that reference to theory would be expected as part of essay responses, rather than being the overt focus. Meanwhile, some boards attempted to classify many of those on the list more accurately as 'commentators'. However, once the accredited Eduqas specifications and assessment materials were published, with a question specifically asking for discussion of a quote from David Gauntlett, it became clear that an 'implicit' approach would not satisfy Ofqual, who now pressed for explicit 'evaluation of theory' in A level questions.

The list of 'theorists' itself is alleged to be the reason why Nick Gibb was happy for Media Studies to be allowed to continue: it didn't actually matter who was on it, just that there was a list that made the subject appear rigorous. The list was apparently changed at a meeting in late 2015 involving some horse trading amongst the three exam boards, with names from an earlier list being taken off and different names (including some eccentric personal preferences) being added. The names are specified in relation to particular parts of the theoretical framework (key concepts); and while in some cases, this seems appropriate (Barthes and semiotics comes under 'media language', while Hall's encoding/decoding model relates to 'audience'), others appear quite out of place (Baudrillard is identified as a theorist of 'media language',

for example). It seems likely that that even expert teachers will struggle with this element of the specifications.

As was explained above, the criticisms here are not to do with the need for *theory*, which remains a central aspect of Media Studies, but with a specified list of *theorists*. What is already apparent in the published specifications is that theory is being reduced to a set of one-line summaries that can be drilled by Powerpoint into students' minds (three bullet points on Judith Butler, anyone?). This effectively reduces theory to a set of facts to be ingested and then regurgitated in examinations: it precisely removes the potential of theory as a resource for critical understanding and learning. Of course, the notion of what makes a subject more or less 'demanding' was a problem from the outset. Yet this issue cannot be resolved simply by the addition of arbitrary lists of compulsory 'theorists', or by increasing the amount of content.

4.2.2 Defining Subject Content

In the original submission by Buckingham and Fenton, a list of nine media forms (television, film, radio, newspapers, etc.) was included purely as an indication of the scope of the field of study. The contemporary media landscape is of course highly convergent, with much blurring between those forms, particularly in the online environment. Yet at some point, at Ofqual's insistence, the nine media forms had apparently become compulsory topics with somehow equal status (with music video being equal to 'online, social and participatory media', for example); and there is a requirement for all of them – along with specific 'set texts' in each case – to be assessed in the final exam.

Once the boards became aware of this, they assumed that it would be possible to cover at least one of them in the coursework, but this was disallowed: all nine have to be studied in preparation for written exam assessment. Three of them (at least one print, one audio visual, one online) are to be studied in depth, which means that in these cases all four key concepts need to be covered. These three will turn up in the exam, but the other six may or may not, not least because it will be impossible to fit them all in to question papers. As a result, teachers will have to cover all nine, but each year only six will come up, although they won't know which six. Of course, this is not unfamiliar in other subject areas, where some topics that are compulsory to cover do not come up in the exam, although this is not the case with English, the other subject with specified set texts. In effect, the insistence on all nine media forms seems to reflect a desire to 'catch out' students and teachers. While it might reflect an attempt to increase the level of demand, it seems almost bound to result in greater superficiality.

Hitherto, many Media Studies qualifications have encouraged students to refer to their own chosen examples in the exam. Again, this is potentially an indicator of independent critical thought: students are expected to apply broader conceptual understandings to specific texts or media phenomena drawn from their own experience. Sadly, the shift to set texts for every medium is likely to remove this opportunity: there is a distinct risk that the examination will simply test students' rote learning of what the teacher has told them.

As the drafting process unfolded, it became apparent that the DfE and Ofqual found it difficult to understand a subject that had huge potential content but which did not insist on a particular selection from it. Somehow, it seemed that offering the choice for teachers to use particular media as *case studies* (maybe film, magazines, television and the web, but maybe not radio and newspapers, for example) implied that there was something intrinsically invalid about the objects of study, or that this validity could not be measured in quite the same way as in other subjects. This may account for their insistence that the nine media forms have now become the compulsory territory of a media course.

The issue of set texts was the focus of some intensive negotiation. The exam boards initially attempted to combine set texts with opportunities for teacher choice, but once again this approach was rejected by Ofqual. There was also an attempt to follow the same path as Film Studies, where there is to be quite a range of choice of set texts. However, unlike in Film Studies, Ofqual insisted that for every option offered, the exam board would have to write detailed indicative content of what would be expected in an exam response. While a general outline appeared to be acceptable in Film Studies, for Media Studies a detailed response on every possible choice would have to be written. This obviously discouraged too much choice, as it became unmanageable.

The requirement for set texts has resulted in some strange and seemingly arbitrary outcomes. Looking across the specifications, we have women's magazines, print adverts and *Observer* front pages from the 1950 and 1960s. TV drama is included under the banner of 'long form TV', but this is tied to questions about the very first episode. There are set newspapers where specific editions have to be studied, although the exam questions will be about completely different papers; and there are radio programmes such as *The Archers* for GCSE (which may again have reflected assumptions about the Minister's tastes).

There are some interesting choices here, and some quite inexplicable ones; but the whole process is obviously very restrictive, and it seems to require teachers and students to make guesses about why the texts were chosen. From the boards' point of view, this increasingly became a game of imagining what would be acceptable to Ofqual. Some texts were rejected on the grounds of age appropriateness (even though this was not a restriction in the same way for Film Studies, where there are 18 Certificate films on the specifications): *Game of Thrones* and *The Wire* were both rejected on this basis. Even websites have to be set texts. When this was queried, on the grounds that they are subject to constant change, Ofqual argued that the sites could be printed out at a given point in time. One board apparently wanted to use Mumsnet at GCSE, but Ofqual turned this down when the first result from their online search was about penis enlargement, which meant that they regarded the whole site as age-inappropriate.

In the case of music video, OCR put forward two lists (ten 'mainstream' videos, with lots of YouTube hits, and ten innovative or alternative ones), with the idea that students could select one from each list for their exam response, depending on the question set. Ofqual rejected this in favour of a shorter, more comparable list which (they argued) would 'ensure that all learners are equally equipped to respond to

tasks'. Their clear assumption was that schools would just pick one video from each list to study, when the point of producing such a list was that it broadened the experience of students. They explicitly stated that the rationale for set texts was that without them, teachers somehow wouldn't know what to teach.

As a footnote, Film Studies did not come through unscathed on this front. OCR attempted to include Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* for Soviet Montage cinema. The film would have cleared the quality threshold: it was ranked number 8 in the most recent *Sight and Sound* critics' poll of the '100 Greatest Films'. However, it failed the test, because at 69 minutes it was deemed too short to qualify as a feature film (and therefore presumably not demanding enough for the students). It has, however, made the Eduqas list as a short film!

4.2.3 Media Studies and Film Studies

The bifurcation between Film Studies and Media Studies has also had some paradoxical consequences. Film may now only be studied within Media Studies as a 'cross-media' topic or in relation to institutions. Thus, Eduqas has dealt with this dimension through a marketing case study of *Straight Outta Compton*, while OCR is proposing a case study of *The Lego Movie* at GCSE and *The Jungle Book* at A level. Reference to film is now effectively absent from the new practical coursework requirements in Media Studies: students are no longer permitted to produce film openings, trailers or short films, which have hitherto been three of the most popular video tasks (although film posters are still allowed). However, Ofqual seem to have climbed down on regarding television as essentially the same as film, so that coursework tasks might now include TV openings or trailers.

If film now occupies a more marginal and awkward place within Media Studies, the specifications for Film Studies (provided only by Eduqas and OCR) largely exclude key aspects of the field – and especially the more sociological and economic dimensions of institutions and audiences. Instead, what we have is a retrograde and somewhat formalist emphasis on close textual analysis. In this respect, it is certainly debatable whether the subject will now provide adequate preparation for university courses in the field, which typically take a much broader approach.

Perhaps the only exception to this lies in the stipulation that there must be some study of key developments in film technology. Yet here again, the focus is on factual recall, which leads to specimen questions such as the one below, from Eduqas GCSE:

In which decade was the first full colour feature film produced? (1 mark) State the correct answer in your answer book: 1930s 1940s 1950s.

Actually none of these is correct. *The Gulf Between* (of which only fragments remain) dates from 1917, *The Toll of the Sea* was a colour feature made in 1922 and *The Vikings* was the first with colour and sound in 1928. Yet even if students know the correct answer, what does such knowledge reveal about their understanding?

In terms of the films on the lists available for study, there is commendable breadth from both boards in terms of global cinema. However, only OCR includes any

recent Hollywood blockbusters. While the canon of approved texts may have broadened somewhat, there appears to be a continuing problem with addressing mainstream popular films, unless they have acquired the patina of history.

4.2.4 Coursework and Creative Production

Production work in Media Studies can be very demanding: with the current specifications, students are required to show detailed evidence of their research and planning, demonstrate a range of technical and 'soft' skills (teamwork, organization, communication etc.) in the production itself, and then undertake a reflective critical evaluation. Yet in addition to reducing coursework (or Non-Exam Assessment) to 30%, Ofqual has now removed these additional elements. Under the new specifications, students are no longer required to undertake evaluation, or to provide evidence of research and planning. There is also to be no assessment of group productions, although students are allowed to contribute to (or appear in) each other's individual productions. In this respect, Ofqual has specifically excluded the assessment of important skills that can self-evidently transfer both to university courses and to the professional workplace.

Here again, Ofqual appears preoccupied with the idea that coursework is an opportunity for malpractice. For example, it was suggested at one point during the drafting that a younger sibling might copy an older sibling's work. This anxiety seems to be predicated on a notion that every piece of creative work is 'original' and is made in some kind of vacuum. It seems to be a problem if students attempt to re-use ideas or generic conventions they have gleaned from 'real' media texts. Yet if students were to copy and paste from a final edit, any teacher would be able to spot this as genuine plagiarism. The difficulties here were again compounded by the lack of expertise on the part of Ofqual's subject consultant. Judging from his feedback, it appeared that he had no experience of student production work: he frequently made bizarre assertions, for example that students could not be expected to make their own soundtracks.

This misplaced obsession with originality has resulted in a situation where tasks set for practical coursework now have to change every year and can no longer be released till the summer one year before the qualification is completed (that is, half-way through two year courses). This is one of several changes that were overwhelmingly opposed in responses to Ofqual's public 'consultation'.

4.2.5 The Mechanics of Assessment

Under this new regime, assessment in Media Studies (as in other subjects) now appears to be driven by a desire to catch students (and their teachers) out. This peculiarly old-fashioned, schoolmasterly approach is precisely not about enabling candidates to show what they can do. The insistence upon a high degree of unpredictability in questions, and the use of over-complex assessment objectives (which Ofqual themselves do not even seem to understand), leads to very 'picky' exam questions. For those who set the examination papers, it will almost certainly result in all possible options being used up very quickly. The sheer amount of

content – and the level of prescription – leaves very little room for teacher input and creativity. It will also have significant implications in terms of training: it is doubtful that any media teacher will be familiar with all the potential content, even if they have a specialist degree.

Perhaps in recognition of this, the exam boards have been asked to produce question papers which contain more guidance for candidates in terms of what is required. Instead of just the essay question itself, candidates will be given a series of bullet points indicating what to cover. For example in the specimen paper for OCR AS level, we have what is already a lengthy question:

Changing social contexts, caused by technological advances, have created a long term decline in the circulation of national newspapers. Explain how newspapers have responded to these changes. Refer to The Telegraph to support your answer. (10 marks)

Yet students are also provided with the following further guidance:

In your answer you must:

- consider relevant social contexts that influence newspaper circulation
- use your knowledge and understanding of relevant academic ideas and arguments
- explain the relationship of recent technological change to the production, distribution and circulation of newspapers
- refer to The Telegraph as an example of how newspapers have responded.

This is all provided for a question which the student is allocated about 15 minutes to answer, although it could take several of those simply to read and digest the instructions. The bullet-point approach means that any scope for extended responses – or indeed for originality or independent thinking – is considerably reduced.

Part 5. Conclusion

The latest government reforms represent a further step towards the institutionalization of Media Studies. This is an inevitable development, and in many respects a welcome one: it is, perhaps, a positive sign that Media Studies is being taken seriously. However, institutionalization has come at a significant cost, especially in the context of current educational policy-making. We may have won the war – in that Media Studies has largely survived the attempt to eradicate it – but we have lost a great many battles along the way.

One of the professed aims of the reforms was to increase the ‘demand’ of qualifications. Yet almost all of the changes would seem to point in the opposite direction. They make it easier for teachers to ‘teach to the test’, and for students to simply regurgitate content in the examination. The new specifications require a superficial grasp of a large quantity of material, and very little in-depth engagement. The marginalization of practical work undermines a key opportunity for creativity, and for exploring and generating new theoretical insights. In the draft examination papers, concepts and ‘theorists’ are arbitrarily linked to specific media examples; complex intellectual debates are reduced to exercises in factual recall; and the

selection of media texts seems to lack any coherent rationale. None of this provides anything like effective preparation for university courses, which is one of the primary functions of A-levels.

In fact, whether or not the examinations are more difficult, the pass rates and the grading at A-level are likely to remain the same. While *marking* is criterion referenced – in that it relates to the criteria published in the specifications – *grading* will remain norm referenced, in that roughly the same proportions of candidates will be awarded particular grades in any given year. In effect, there are approximate quotas for different grades that cannot vary much from one year to the next. Examinations will continue to serve their primary function of sorting the sheep from the goats; and the proportions of sheep and goats will remain pretty similar.

How any of this will play out in classrooms remains an open question. There are already signs that some teachers are abandoning Media Studies in favour of Film Studies – which, while it may now seem more old-fashioned, has at least retained a reasonably coherent approach, and includes some interesting and challenging content. Media teachers appear especially alarmed by the eighteen ‘theorists’, and publishers and exam boards are already producing potted summaries of their key ideas (a more challenging exercise in some cases than others, it must be said). One possibility is that teachers will leave the narrow and tiresome work on set texts until much later in the course, and will be able to spend more time on more important and exciting issues. However, the need to drill students for examinations based on factual recall is likely to result in much more rote learning. With such a prescriptive approach, the space for creativity and in-depth investigation – on the part of both teachers and students – is bound to be dramatically curtailed.

Media Studies has been strangled, but it continues to draw breath. No doubt, experienced teachers will continue to engage and challenge students, and to make the curriculum relevant to their needs. Yet this is bound to become more of an uphill struggle: it is something teachers will strive to do *despite* the framework of assessment, rather than being enabled and supported by it. For veterans in the field, it will remain important to cling on to a memory of what Media Studies used to be, or should be, as distinct from the travesty that the government has now created.

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