Media Education in the Digital Age: An Interview with David Buckingham

For publication in Sociologia della Comunicazione, 2021.

David Buckingham is internationally known for his work on media education, and on young people's media culture. He is an Emeritus Professor at Loughborough University, and a Visiting Professor at Kings College, University of London, UK. He recently delivered a Lectio Magistralis at the virtual conference on 'Innovative Teaching in the Field of Arts and Media' at the University of Bologna, and we took the opportunity to conduct this written interview with him. David's blog, along with numerous essays and articles, can be found at: www.davidbuckingham.net. Some links to posts that are most relevant to our discussion are included in this interview.

In The Media Education Manifesto you discuss the limitations of framing the debate about technology in binary terms, that is, either as a risk or an opportunity. How can we think about and interact with digital media and technology in a more nuanced and productive way that helps to overcome this dichotomy?

Historically, new technologies always seem to be surrounded with a mythology of hopes and fears. Either technology will be the solution to all our social problems, or it will take us to hell. We can see this very clearly in the case of digital media, and particularly the internet. In recent years, the utopian views of the early internet pioneers have given way to a much more negative assessment of its harmful effects; yet we seem to shuttle incessantly from one side to the other. We can see this particularly in relation to young people: either young people are 'digital natives', who are already competent and empowered by technology, or they are vulnerable, passive victims. One way of getting beyond this is simply to be aware of it. We need to avoid monolithic generalisations, and resist the mythology of technology – as well as the chronic sentimentality that seems to apply particularly when we talk about children and young people.

The reality, and the difficulty, is of course that the positives and the negatives, the risks and the opportunities, are bound up together: we can't have one without the other. Research shows that the young people who use these technologies most intensively and competently are also those who are most likely to be exposed to risks – although risk doesn't necessarily translate directly into harm. What some regard as risks, others see as opportunities – and children don't necessarily take the same views on this as adults. If you seek – as an educator, or as a parent – to eliminate risk, you will very often also be eliminating opportunity. So this is another way of moving beyond the binary way of thinking: to be aware of this inherent, necessary ambivalence. I don't actually think this is very different from how we raise children to function in the 'offline' world: we have to make them aware that there are risks, but we mustn't paralyze them with fear. We know that they will ultimately have to make their own decisions on their own behalf, and the best we can do is to enable them to do that in an informed and sensible way.

For educators in particular, that means taking a broader view. Much of the educational attention in this area – and a good deal of the funding – has been focused on internet safety. We are obsessed with teaching children to be obedient and well-behaved, in a world that few adults really experience or fully understand. In the process, we often deprive children of a broader understanding of the so-called 'digital world' – of the social, political, economic and cultural dimensions of these media. Yet if they are going to learn to make their own decisions – and yes, to protect themselves – this is the broader critical understanding that they need. (You can find some of my more critical thoughts about teaching internet safety here: https://bit.ly/3htGawF.)

In your work you discuss the complicated relationship between media education and policy and in particular the passing of responsibility from the government to the individuals. In your opinion, what would be an appropriate and productive way to find a balance between strong governmental impositions and individual responsibility?

I talk about this particularly in relation to 'media literacy' – in thinking about how and why it has emerged as a theme in communications policy at this moment. Because the emphasis on media literacy is happening at the same time as governments are backing away from regulation. They are leaving media and communications to the operations of the commercial market – partly because they seem to believe that they can no longer control what is happening, but also because they implicitly believe that markets will provide. And the problems that may arise – well, they become the responsibility of the individual. People have to regulate their own use of media, because governments no longer see this as their role: hence 'media literacy'. This process of 'responsibilization' is something that is happening in many other areas of social and welfare provision: it's an increasingly familiar neoliberal approach to government. (I have some further thoughts about this on my blog here: https://bit.ly/3flse5c.)

In some respects, you could see this as quite a democratic development, even an 'empowering' one; but it is also a highly individualizing approach. And in practice, as we have found in the UK, it is often a very weak commitment – policy-makers, regulators and media companies will all pay lip service to media literacy, but they don't really take it seriously, and there is no real effort to deliver it through formal education (which is not the only way, but certainly the most important one, in my view).

I would agree that we need to enable individuals to make informed, critical choices – but we need to do this in a thorough and systematic way, rather than looking for superficial 'quick fixes'. For example, teaching children how to 'spot fake news' is a very inadequate response to the fundamental challenges we are facing in politics and in terms of public knowledge. This is why we need a comprehensive and sustained form of media education, rather than just vague, well-meaning platitudes about 'media literacy'. In the modern world, media education should be a basic entitlement for all children throughout their school career.

Even so, education is not a substitute for regulation, or an alternative to it: we also need better media regulation. Governments have a responsibility to ensure that the communications system works for the public good, and that it provides public benefit. This applies, for example, when it comes to providing reliable and high-quality content; to ensuring privacy and accountability; to achieving equality of access for all sectors of society; and so on. There are difficulties here too – and 'free speech' is not the least of them. But having a 'media literate' – or, I would prefer, media educated – population can and should go along with having a properly regulated media system. (Some further thoughts on this are here: https://bit.ly/3w6n4Aq.)

How can teachers and educators foster creative thinking and practices among their students when social media seems to promote specific representations of the self and the world often standardized through their algorithm-driven and "like-based" logics? Do you have an example of any initiatives or projects that have successfully adopted effective strategies to stimulate student creativity?

I must confess that I am a little wary of 'creativity'. It's another one of these buzzwords that become fashionable in education from time to time. A bit like 'media literacy', nobody is likely to argue against it: nobody will argue for 'illiteracy', or that young people should be 'un-creative'. It's a feel-good term, but it is one that can be defined in many different ways. In relation to media education, it overlaps with another such term, participation. In the early days of 'Web 2.0', in the early 2000s, there were some very influential arguments made about the potential of technology to promote creative – and also 'civic' – participation. Yet participation seemed to be regarded as a Good Thing in itself, irrespective of how and why people were participating. And these qualifying terms – like 'creative' and 'civic' – were often very poorly defined. There was an almost utopian view that all this participation and creativity was bound to be beneficial, both for individuals and for society in general.

Some years on, there are many reasons to be sceptical about all this. Look at the frenzy of self-promotion and hate speech on social networks, for example; look at how the extreme right has weaponized social media; look at how these media are being used as means of data-gathering, and the intensive surveillance and commercial targeting of users. There's no doubt that technology is offering new opportunities for creative self-expression, for sharing and communicating, and for active participation in civil society. But the vast bulk of this creative activity is happening on commercial platforms, and it serves commercial purposes. The algorithmic logic of social media dictates that this is not primarily about creative self-expression, but about consumption, and about the buying and selling of data: every 'like' is an economic transaction.

In the early 2000s, there was a good deal of excitement about the creative uses of technology in education, at least in the UK. Writers like Ken Robinson, and organisations like NESTA and FutureLab, played a key role here. Although this kind of thing goes against the grain of current educational policy, examples are still easy enough to find. There are many teachers using technology for creative purposes – getting their students to make videos or podcasts or digital stories, and share them online. There is the whole 'maker movement' in education, which is partly driven by a kind of fascination with technology for its own sake, but in some cases is also offering new creative possibilities – making 3D models and installations, or just new variations on old-fashioned crafting activities. The key thing for me is to hold on to the critical dimension alongside the creative one: we need to find ways of integrating the two. I don't believe that creativity alone – simply making media – is going to bring about critical understanding. (Some ideas on this in relation to self-representation ('selfies') can be found here: https://bit.ly/3fd2g3D.)

Furthermore, it's not clear how any of this this might impact upon the wider context of digital media that I've just described. In particular, it's hard to see how we can create alternative spaces in which creative work can be shared. There are platforms that refuse to gather or to sell user data; there are some small non-profit, public spaces online; there are various 'open source' initiatives. But they remain very marginal. It's really striking how, even for large public service media organisations like the BBC, so much of the digital infrastructure they use is supplied by a very small number of Silicon Valley technology companies. And I'm afraid the same is true in public education: aside from its potential benefits in terms of learning, the spread of digital technology in education has provided significant new market opportunities for companies whose primary interests are not to do with the public good, but with profit. And of course this has been particularly evident with the rise of remote learning during the current pandemic. Which leads us on to your next question…

During the Covid-19 Pandemic the role of teachers and educators with skills and expertise in media education became pivotal in facing the challenge of carrying out their daily activities with students remotely. Media education and media literacy have been invoked as the panaceas to respond to the new regulations. Suddenly, a field of study and practice that has held a relatively marginal position within the school system, became the center of discussion also among policymakers, professionals, corporations, small businesses, creative industries, organizations, etc. A variety of different agents started to borrow concepts, elements and ideas from media education employing them in different contexts and for a multiplicity of purposes. What do you think have been some of the misuses, misconceptions, advancements, and innovations in media education during the pandemic?

The first point I'd make here is that we need to distinguish between media education and educational media, or educational technology. When I'm talking about media education, I am talking about teaching students to be critical of media – not only the media they encounter in school, but mainly the media they use outside school. Media education means teaching about media, not just teaching with or through media. People often confuse the two: I have been to schools where the teachers proudly point to the number of computers they have in the classroom in order to show how much media education they are doing. But this isn't the same thing at all.

In my view, most uses of media in education are instrumental: media are used as neutral tools for conveying content. But media are never neutral: they do not simply present the world, they re-present it in particular ways that reflect particular interests and ideologies. That's not to imply that these two approaches to using media are unrelated to each other. Indeed, I would argue that they should be. Teachers who are using media, in whatever area of the curriculum, need to be asking critical questions about how those media are constructed, who makes them and why. (You can find further discussion of these key critical questions, and a systematic definition of media education, here: https://bit.ly/3eFzlWS.) If people are looking to media educators to help improve this instrumental use of media, to make educational technology more efficient, then they are looking in the wrong place.

One area where this is often confused is in what gets called 'digital literacy'. It's sometimes assumed that digital literacy is simply about learning how to use digital tools: learning how to operate hardware, or to use software such as search engines. This is the instrumental approach I was referring to. For me, this is just the beginning of the process. Of course, we need to know how to find information online; and doing that effectively is something we have to learn. But the more difficult questions come when we have to make sense of that information, to process it and to evaluate it. We need to make judgments about what we should trust, and that's far from easy. This is where media education comes in. Despite all the loose talk about 'fake news', this isn't just about telling the difference between what's true and false. It's not something we can do with a simple checklist: on the contrary, it involves a much more complex, multi-dimensional process of analysis and evaluation. This isn't straightforward to learn: but without it, we are lost. (Some further thoughts on this here: https://bit.ly/3ocBFYx.)

All of this has been particularly problematic during the pandemic: one of the challenges has been to navigate our way through what some have called the 'infodemic', the profusion of more-or-less accurate information about the health crisis and how we should respond to it (see: https://bit.ly/2YJZ3lc.) In this context, the need for media education is all the more obvious and urgent. But we need to resist the idea that 'media literacy' is going to solve all our problems, or that it can offer a kind of easy solution.

The Covid-19 pandemic revealed how the digital divide doesn't affect only remote and isolated localities of the globe, but also urban and supposedly "technologically advanced" societies. This digital divide has proven to be related not only to access or lack of access to the appropriate technologies/infrastructures and media literacy skills, but it is also closely interconnected with a much broader issue: the cultural and economic divide that exists within societies. How do you think that digital media can be used to foster a more open and inclusive learning experience?

I would certainly agree with your definition of the digital divide. In the past, the digital divide has been understood primarily in terms of access – and that is certainly still an issue, both globally and (as you say) within technology-rich nations. During the pandemic in the UK, a great many children were only able to access school classes on basic mobile phones; and many of their families couldn't afford to have unlimited data. Technological infrastructure and connectivity were also a major problem. These divides continue, and (as we know very well) they largely replicate existing economic inequalities, which are actually increasing in many so-called 'developed' nations. In the UK, the government's response to this was really quite inadequate.

Inclusion just in terms of access is an important goal. In countries like the UK and Italy, we should be providing universal broadband access as a free public utility, rather like clean water. This isn't a utopian fantasy: the pandemic has made it clear that it is now a basic social need. However, as you say, there are other digital divides that may prove even more resistant to change. There are also inequalities to do with skills and competence, and with knowledge and understanding. Here again, it's important to get beyond a functional or instrumental view of this. It's not just about the ability to operate equipment, or even to find things online. If we are going to make the best use of these technologies, we need much more complex forms of cultural and communicative competency. These build upon familiar forms of literacy – the ability to read and write to a high level – but they also involve critical understanding. And at present, these things are unequally distributed. Inclusion in terms of access is still a vital goal, but we need to address these broader inequalities as well.

Aside from policies, the key need here is for more in-depth, sustained training for teachers. I don't buy the idea that most teachers are 'dinosaurs' in this respect: many of them use the internet and social media in their own lives, albeit sometimes for different purposes than their students do. But what they aren't getting is proper training in how to use these technologies in the classroom. As a result, most uses of educational technology are very limited indeed: technology is mainly used for school management, for collecting performance data, and for testing, rather than for the kind of 'open and inclusive learning' you're referring to. Here too, the dreams of the early pioneers of technology in education – which were all about transforming learning – have largely disappeared. (I wrote a lot about this several years ago in a book called Beyond Technology. There's a short summary of it here: https://bit.ly/3ogCK1A.)

Once the pandemic restrictions will be completely lifted, which aspects of the distant learning and smart working experiences should be reevaluated, and which ones should be permanently integrated in our daily lives?

The longer-term implications of all this are hard to identify at this point: maybe you should ask me again in a few years' time! It seems likely that in future educators will be making much more use of digital technology, although I know that many teachers and students have found the experience of online learning boring and alienating. The use of Zoom and similar platforms seems to have resulted in more top-down instruction and less dialogue; although one would hope that these platforms will become more flexible over time, and will build in ways of enabling students to interact with each other. As an academic, I can see some benefits – not least in that I no longer

need to travel to attend seminars and meetings – but personally I am craving a return to face-to-face communications!

Where I think we should particularly take care is around the commercial dimensions of all this. At least in the UK, the pandemic has been used as a cover – even a kind of alibi – for extending the privatization of public services. We can see this in health care, and in education – in universities perhaps even more than in schools. For the technology companies, this has been a great commercial opportunity; and there are some really quite horrifying stories of education being 'outsourced' to private digital providers. (I've written about this on my blog here: https://bit.ly/3dZyCOO.)

Technology is already pretty ubiquitous in so many areas of our lives, and this is bound to extend to education. Virtual, remote learning is inevitably going to become more widespread. Yet we know from history that new technologies will not completely replace older technologies or arrangements: in some form, the school will still be with us in the twenty-second century, and the basic 'grammar' of education (teachers, students, classrooms, subjects, examinations…) is not going to disappear. The question, I think, is how these new means are going to be integrated – and particularly how we will strike the balance between online and face-to-face learning.

Media literacy and Media Education are processes in constant evolution. Given the speed at which these transformations are occurring, teachers and educators must constantly keep up to date both with innovation in technology and with the media consumption habits of their students. In your opinion, what is the best way to keep up with this ever-changing mediascape? What strategies have you personally found more effective to stay current on the different forms of consumption and circulation of media products among young people?

I don't think it's our responsibility as teachers to know everything about our students' media practices. To some extent, that's an impossible aim: we would never be able to achieve it, even if we wanted to. There's something rather pathetic about teachers who try to be popular with their students by showing off their knowledge of all the latest trends. And students don't want this anyway: they want and need to have their own interests and enthusiasms that are different from those of adults, and they are absolutely entitled to that. So I don't think we have to be playing Fortnite, or posting on Tik-Tok, or whatever is the latest craze – although we should certainly know what those things are! But let's not encroach on our students' space too much.

Of course, we can, and we should, try to inform ourselves about what's going on: media teachers need to be 'media alert', but I don't think that's too hard to achieve these days. Academic research is probably useful for getting the bigger picture, although it's not always the best source for this: most academic research studies take far too long to reach publication. But there is a good deal of useful popular commentary on the media within the media themselves: there are particular radio programmes and podcasts that I try to listen to (like Trending on the BBC World Service), as well as some good specialist websites, including those that are intended for people who work within the media industries.

In terms of teaching, the key point here is to create opportunities for dialogue. We should be learning from our students. We need to listen to what they say about their own media experiences, and we need to take it seriously – although we should also recognize that in any given group of students, there are going to be diverse experiences, and hence different kinds of knowledge and expertise. We should be giving them opportunities to research their own enthusiasms in greater depth, and to share what they find with us, and with each other.

We need to validate their knowledge, although I don't think that means we need to celebrate it. They may know a good deal in particular areas, but I don't accept the argument that the 'digital natives' automatically know everything – far from it. I think we also need to be clear about what we are bringing to this encounter: as teachers, we have access to other kinds of knowledge (for example, about how the media industries work, or about the history of media) that is important as well; and we also bring critical tools and perspectives that they might not be encountering in their everyday experiences outside the classroom. We have a more academic kind of knowledge, perhaps, where theirs is more of a vernacular knowledge: but both are valid and useful, and the challenge is to find ways of bringing them together. In the past, I've found Vygotsky's ideas about the development of conceptual thinking a very useful way of understanding this encounter between different types of knowledge. (There's a little more on this here: https://bit.ly/2GoKQ6P.)

In your experience as a British scholar who has encountered various national contexts within the European Union, have you found any valuable examples of media education and media literacy programs in the school systems of the countries you visited? Have you had any close experience with the Italian education system? Does the European Union have a centralized/shared plan of action or guidelines for the implementation of media education and media literacy within the national school systems of its members?

I have encountered a range of good practice in many countries across Europe, in some cases where you might not expect to find it. Of course, there is some really excellent media scholarship everywhere, and there is increasing international dialogue through organisations like ECREA, the European Communication Research and Education Association. What's harder to identify is how any of that translates into schools. The experts who find their way to international meetings are often not the people who are most involved at the grassroots: although some of them tell a good story, I'm not always convinced that it is really happening on the ground. Many countries have good networks of teachers and academics – and MED in Italy is one of the most active across Europe, alongside groups like the GMK in Germany. There is also IAME, the International Association for Media Education, which tends to focus mainly on Europe.

Even so, it's hard to find examples of education systems where media education is really happening in any sustained way in schools. The one that I find most interesting right now is Finland, where the education system generally is very progressive, and there are strong national policies (I wrote about this on my blog here: https://bit.ly/3htm1qy.) But establishing media education has always been an uphill struggle. Even in the UK, where we have had media education courses for a very long time, we now seem to be going backwards: specialist Media Studies courses in high schools are being undermined, and media education has effectively been removed from the core subject of English (mother tongue language and literature teaching). Media education does not sit easily with the wider political trends that are currently dominating educational policy-making – what the Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg aptly calls the GERM, the Global Education Reform Movement.

The European Union is another story again. The Commission has supported some really excellent initiatives and projects in media education. One I'd mention here is the Transmedia Literacies project, which was led by the University of Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona: it brought together research on young people's media practices with the development of some very useful teaching materials. However, there are some real constraints as well. Education policy is a matter for member states, not for the European Union, so there's little scope for any centralized plan. European-funded initiatives tend to be quite short-lived and fragmented, and it's rare to find projects that have been really integrated into mainstream schools. Personally, I feel there have been far too many conceptual models and definitions, and too many flashy websites that nobody uses. (Once again, I've written about this on my blog: https://bit.ly/2Rm0VPV.) If somebody was to

gather together all the work that had been done, all the research and the classroom materials, and do a critical evaluation, we might have the basis for a more sustained and systematic approach; but at the moment, the system tends to prevent that from happening. And please be assured that this isn't motivated by any sympathy for Brexit – on the contrary!

David Buckingham's book Un Manifesto per la Media Education (translated into Italian with an introductory essay by Gianna Cappello) is published by Mondadori, 2020.