
From Cultural Studies to Impact Factor: Media and Communication Research in the United Kingdom

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1 Media and Communication Research in Britain

We address the early development and present context of media and communication research in the UK. Political devolution in the UK means that public discourses, political initiatives and educational policies are often multifaceted and diverse, and so mapping these can be a complex matter.¹ Therefore, this chapter will examine the changes to media and communication studies through the lens of

¹There are major structural differences in education provision in England, Wales and Scotland and Northern Ireland with Higher Education (HE) being less centralised than in other European countries (i.e. there is no central government control over appointments, contracts, curricula (Couldry 2011, p. 135)). Universities in the UK rely on income derived from public funding, student fees and increasingly their commercial activities. Public funding of the university sector is managed by different government agencies: Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and the Department of Employment and Learning Northern Ireland, each with their own jurisdiction and policy strategies. Funding for research is available through seven UK Funding Councils, the most relevant of which for the fields of media and communication are the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The majority of the funding distributed by the councils is through peer review competition.

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changes to UK-wide research funding policies and the specific impact of these policies on the field. Drawing on David Morrison's (1998) proposition that "organisational forms structure knowledge", we also pay close attention to institutional influences on the evolution of media and communication research in the United Kingdom. In the process of this analysis we aim to raise key issues which have influenced media and communication studies in the United Kingdom, along with the contemporary structural conditions which shape higher education as a whole and the disciplinary challenges faced by researchers in the field. As will become apparent throughout the chapter, media and communication studies in the UK is highly diverse and heterogeneous with a variety of approaches, research methods and paradigms. Among other factors, media studies' roots in sociology, English studies and vocational training courses, as well as its institutional emergence out of polytechnics and colleges, have played a part in the emergence of this highly diversified scholarly field.

To begin, it is worth addressing nomenclature. Today the term 'media research' is much more common in the UK than 'communication research' although historically, as Philip Lodge (2008) demonstrates, the first research centres and institutes founded in the UK carried the term 'communication' in their title. It was in 1966 that James Halloran established the Centre for Mass Communication Research (CMCR) at the University of Leicester (Lodge 2008). Around the same time, in 1968, Jay Blumler founded the Centre for Television Research at the University of Leeds. Nicholas Pronay, also based at the University of Leeds, was developing courses in communication, though "not media" as he emphasized in an interview in 2006 (Lodge 2008, p. 6).² About twenty years later, Pronay was to become the first director of the newly established Institute for Communication Studies (ICS) at the University of Leeds. Therefore, even at this early stage of communication and media research and teaching in the UK, academics working in the same field (and even at the same institution), did not necessarily connect and collaborate. Lodge (2008) proposes that a certain degree of embeddedness in a recognised department was an important symbolic and occupational resource, and often formed part of a strategy to avoid the marginalisation of one's output—it was often strategically useful in terms of career development. However, this kind of positioning was not unique to the UK. As John Durham Peters (2008, p. 156) points out,

²Furthermore, John Corner, who also began to teach communication and media courses in the 1960s, was based in the Politics Department of the University of Liverpool. Similarly, Colin Seymour-Ure found an institutional home in the Department of Politics at the University of Kent.

the status of being affiliated to a university though not quite part of the institution or an established department characterised the status of several founding research centres in other countries at the time.

In addition to the research centres at Leeds and Leicester which were both closely linked to broadcasting institutions there was a third centre which strongly influenced the emergence of communication and media studies in the United Kingdom: The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham.³ Founded by Richard Hoggart in 1964, the CCCS was first to name and institutionalize “the practice of cultural studies [...] in any official sense” (Redal 2008, p. 273). As its name indicates, the centre did not limit its scope of research to television, media, or film, but was keen to consider the entirety of popular culture and its meaning for and effect on people. Stuart Hall became the director of the CCCS in 1969, though he had been working at the Centre since 1964 (Redal 2008, p. 283). According to Redal (2008, p. 286) cultural studies was generated out of the objection to

any kind of reductionist approach that failed to account for the intricate complexities, significant nuances and multi-textured richness of the cultural sphere. It was only through interpretation that culture as a web of relations and determinations could be adequately encountered. That proposition, above all, was the central tenet and most important intellectual contribution made by cultural studies in the initial conceptualizations of the project at Birmingham. Reading the media for meaning, and legitimizing the meaning-making capacities of audiences, were the dominant influences of the cultural studies approach to media research in 1960s Britain and beyond.

Returning to the significance of institutions with regards to their fostering of fields of knowledge (but also to the human tendency to guard one’s own professional turf) the CCCS was reminded not to overstep disciplinary lines: “Hoggart received a firm letter from the head of the Sociology department warning him not to ‘pretend to be doing sociology,’ Hall recalls. The letter reminded Hoggart that there was ‘nothing systematic’ about his method and thus, no claims could be made that the center’s work would have any connection to sociology whatsoever.” (Redal 2008, pp. 283–284). While the CCCS never claimed to take a sociological

³Leicester was the main beneficiary of the Television Research Committee which was created after the Pilkington Report (1962). Named after its chair, Sir Harry Pilkington, the Pilkington Committee was set up in 1960 to consider the future of British broadcasting. On the other hand the Television Research Unit at the University of Leeds was funded by Granada Television.

approach—Hoggart and Hall both had a background in literary studies and adult education—it is worth noting that a number of the early media and communication researchers in the UK were in fact trained in sociology (in the widest sense); scholars like James Hallaron, Jay Blumler, Peter Golding and Philip Schlesinger to name but a few.

Despite strongly diverging disciplinary backgrounds, what brought early researchers together in the field of media and communication was a concern with the social change taking place in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, they focused on what effect changes to television, the media or more broadly popular culture had on society. Richard Hoggart (1970, p. 50) summarised the pressing questions of the time in the following way:

It is difficult to live in a society which is changing so quickly, and perhaps especially difficult if much in your way of life was previously decided by the customs of the groups, if the range of deliberate, planned, conscious, individual decisions was limited by custom as well as by lack of cash. Here a whole new feature of British life comes in strongly: mass communications.

In other words rather than setting out as a discipline with media as its core focus, it was the issues that were at stake at that time (e.g. class struggles, the social system and social problems, violence, power struggles between different groups within society), and how these issues were considered *in relation to* mass media and mass culture more generally that was at the centre of this emerging field (see also Lodge 2008, p. 10).

Comparing the landscape of today's media and communication studies to the early beginnings of the field, a number of similarities must be acknowledged. Christine Geraghty (2002) observes that the discipline of media studies is often viewed as an "unruly" one. In the UK, media (and communication) in higher education still encompasses an assembly of disciplines and fields ranging from cultural studies, film studies, management, journalism, radio, television studies and critical theory. According to Durant (1991, p. 416) "media studies programmes (like programmes in virtually all other academic fields) are composites, having forged apparently distinct identities out of a range of often contradictory materials in an over determined history" as briefly outlined in the previous section. In relation to the field of media and communication the composite materials were largely drawn from three pre-existing fields: English studies, vocational media training. It is the historical amalgamation of these which has resulted in the current broad discipline of media studies. As a result, academics working in the field of media might belong to different departments, including "Sociology, English, Drama, Languages, and Politics" (Geraghty 2002, p. 25). Therefore, the

origins of media and communication studies, as sketched, are manifest today in the intellectual and institutional positioning of the subject, its affiliation to other disciplines, the research methods used and some of the research topics and themes which dominate British research in this field.

It is striking that there is relatively little scholarly attention given to the development of media studies as an academic field in the UK; although there are some exceptions, notably Terry Bolas' (2009) *Screen Education: From Film Appreciation to Media Studies*. There are a number of reasons for this academic blind spot. The diverse origins of the field mean that while literatures and canonical texts now exist for sub-fields within the broader field of media studies (like television studies, film studies and journalism) these histories remain largely segregated with each developing its own paradigms, internal value judgements and organizational momentum. Few accounts address the interactions (or are even written in dialogue) with the broader development of media studies in mind. This means that cross-cutting histories and points of intellectual and institutional overlap are largely absent in the field of British media studies. Instead, we can often observe patterns of mutual indifference (Pooley and Park 2008, p. 1).

Further, as a result of the diverse collection of sub-fields subsumed under the media studies umbrella, widely accepted agreements on what constitutes media research, or even what a media studies degree should look like, are difficult to come across. The relative infancy of the field compared to other disciplines meant that in the UK media studies developed mainly through colleges, polytechnics, and research centres and institutes, rather than through established universities.⁴ Colleges and polytechnics, which eventually became universities in the 1990s, were associated with vocational disciplines, applied research and widening participation to a greater range of students particularly from low income families and ethnic minorities. In many ways this changed the face of media studies challenging the high/popular culture binary, bringing new perspectives and objects of study into the field, and ultimately changing the provision of media in the UK. This evolution is also noteworthy from a historical point of view: Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and James Halloran had all been involved in adult education through extramural courses which forced them to demonstrate

⁴In the UK in 1992 polytechnics, a group of tertiary education institutions with a focus on professional vocational subject and applied education for work, were reclassified as universities almost doubling the number of universities in the UK. A number of other higher education colleges were also granted their university charter in the 2000s (see Collini 2012 for a discussion of this development). This group is often referred to as the 'new university' sector. See Marr and Forsyth (2011) for a history of UK universities.

the relevance of media and communication studies to their students within but also beyond the academic realm.

Where a media studies landscape can be discerned there has been a gradual diversification of the emerging research field into different focal points. As Nordenstreng (2011, p. 196) argues, media and communication studies as a discipline has both expanded and diversified and now has evolved into “highly specialized—and often unconnected—focal points of interest in communication and media studies”. In the UK such diverse and often insular nodes of interest are acutely evident with research often artificially categorized by medium (e.g. television, film, radio, digital media, etc.), by scholarly focus (e.g. on textual analysis, modes of production and/or consumption, the research methods associated and commonly used in each one), by different contexts of research (including political, economic, social, technological, legal, etc.), and increasingly by territorial and geo-political boundaries. This diverse landscape can be seen in the number of research clusters and centres which have emerged in various institutions across the UK, and in the range of presentations appearing in major UK-based media studies conferences (from papers focusing on advertising and mobile devices to analyses of war films and documentaries; see McCCSA conference programme 2013). All of this makes capturing the landscape of media and communications research extremely difficult.

Research in the UK is further characterised by the openness of media studies departments in terms of recruiting scholars with a wide range of academic backgrounds (as a result of its fused origins) as well as academics trained outside the United Kingdom. International researchers bring their own perspectives, which further enhance the flow of ideas. Britain has long been an important destination for international researchers, particularly doctoral students, for both short and longer periods of research. Furthermore, many of the major publishing houses and prestige journals are UK-based while “UK media phenomena are generally of international interest – and thus more likely to get published in international (and not least UK) journals” (Dahlgren 2007, p. 311). However, one could also view the UK research community as inward-looking with comparatively little encouragement of domiciled postgraduate and early-career researchers to go abroad or view their contribution to the field on a more transnational scale.⁵ However, cuts to the amount of domestic funding available for research and the evolving rules and requirements for European funding are certainly changing this characteristic of research provision.

⁵In contrast, one of the first documents a new member of the German Communication Association (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft, DGPK) receives outlines how to aim for a more international profile and publish on an international scale.

Despite the efforts of academics and their subject associations, public criticisms of media studies and its associated research agenda continue to feature as part of the history and story of media studies in the UK, perhaps differentiating this context from other national experiences with regards to the vehemence of such criticism. Their fifty-year head start has earned some other fields and disciplines at least a partial exemption from the legitimacy crises that regularly beset communication research (Pooley and Park 2008). In the UK critics continue to argue that media studies is a “mickey mouse subject” offering “mickey mouse degrees” (Shepherd 2010) leading to national debates on standards, appropriateness and value. The implications of this debate on the subject’s value can be seen in the precarious position Media and Film Studies finds itself in the national curriculum where the subject is in danger of being removed at GCSEs and GCE A levels in favour of more ‘rigorous’ and ‘facilitating’ subjects (Fraser 2014). It is in this context, perhaps more so than any other academic discipline, that media studies has had to justify its own existence through enhancing and emphasising two agendas: the “employability agenda” within teaching (Thornham and O’Sullivan 2004) and the “impact agenda” within research. We address the relevance of the “impact agenda” in detail below, suffice to say at this point that researchers devising new projects within media studies departments are strongly advised to consider the impact of their research outside of the academic realm in order to get funding but also appease university and departmental agendas.

2 Media and Communication Research in the Knowledge Economy

It is worth pausing a moment to consider the wider context of higher education in the UK in order to contextualise the discussions which follow. Higher education in the UK has evolved considerably in the last few decades with globalisation, economic instability, technological innovation and neo-liberal policy agendas impacting on the sector. Policy-makers increasingly position the HE sector solely to meet the needs of the knowledge economy under the banner of enterprise, innovation and creativity. In his foreword to *Our Competitive Future: building the knowledge driven economy*, Prime Minister at the time Tony Blair writes:

The modern world is swept by change. New technologies emerge constantly, new markets are opening up. There are new competitors but also great new opportunities. [...] This world challenges business to be innovative and creative, to improve performance continuously, to build new alliances and ventures. [...] In government,

in business, in our universities and throughout society we must do more to foster a new entrepreneurial spirit: equipping ourselves for the long-term, prepared to seize opportunities, committed to constant innovation and improved performance. (Department of Trade and Industry 1998, p. i)

The effect of this has been that universities have been opened to greater competition and public funding of the system has been removed in favour of private investment in future. In turn this has led the sector to have a very different relationship with its publics, including: staff and students, government policy-makers, industry and broader non-academic audiences. Therefore, like never before, higher education is facing a major interrogation of its role and the fundamental values which underpin it, along with threats to the economic viability of some of its institutions and academic disciplines.

The policy trajectory in the UK means that universities are increasingly positioned as instruments of economic growth and change, building intellectual capital which is orientated to the market and enhancing the economic capacity of a future workforce. Social and civic outcomes from university activities remain secondary. To fulfil the objectives there is a growing trend within the modus operandi of the university sector for selectivity, competition and entrepreneurialism and it is factors like these which give shape to disciplines and their intellectual products (Pooley and Park 2008). The squeeze on public budgets makes the need to secure private funding for research, to supplement or in some cases replace public funding, even more acute. Today, allocation of public funding for research is selective and governed by centralised assessments of performance, in contrast to the historically decentralised control. It is the impact of these developments on the research agenda for media studies in the UK which deserves further scrutiny and to which we now turn our attention.

3 Research Funding and the Growth of Impact

In discussions of academic research in the UK the conversation inevitably turns to, or at least alludes to, “REF”, the Research Excellence Framework. As the successor to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), REF is the national system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs).⁶

⁶The last RAE took place in 2008 with the current round of REF completed in 2014. The next one is due to be completed in 2020. For a further historical background to both RAE and REF see Elton (2000) and Willmott (2003).

Its purpose is to allocate funding to HEIs for research based on measures of ‘excellence’; provide accountability for public investment in research and evidence of the benefits of this investment; and finally to provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks (REF 2012). However, for many it is symptomatic of the continued neo-liberalisation of higher education in the UK, and its focus on prioritizing market values and the commodification of research and scholarship. For Couldry it “deepens and widens government’s management of the research process” (Couldry 2011, p. 136) and, through a process of self-regulation and forced competition, narrows definitions of the public value of research (Elton 2000; Willmott 2003). This section considers the impact of this process on academic research in the UK but also how media and communication research is and will continue to be directed and reconfigured within this system.

First, we will provide some background for those not familiar with the process, though perhaps experienced in their own respective national systems of monitoring and accountability. A single uniform mode of assessment is applied to all HE institutions (irrespective of their size or circumstance) and all disciplines; therefore, the same metrics are applied to science, business, humanities, etc. which has proved problematic. Submissions to the REF are made in 36 units of assessment (i.e. disciplinary groupings) with an expert panel of peers assessing submissions.⁷ The main unit of assessment which is of interest to those in the field of media and communication is the single unit “Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management”—highlighting the arbitrary nature of many of the units and their groupings. Academics working in the field of media and communications could also (depending on institutional structures and strategies) submit their work for review to other units such as: Art and Design; History, Practice and Theory; Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Art; Sociology and Philosophy. This demonstrates the porous nature of media and communications research and how rigid disciplinary divisions imposed as part of a system of allocating funding and prestige might be particularly problematic for this field of research.

Currently the primary outcome of the assessment will be a “quality profile” awarded to each submission, which encompasses three elements:

1. “Research Outputs” in the form of books, journal articles, performances, etc. with these assessed by the criteria of “originality, significance and rigour”.

⁷For a critical discussion of the use of peer review as a tool within the system see Willmott (2003).

A maximum of four outputs can be submitted by each academic depending on their career stage and personal circumstances.

2. “Research Environment” will be assessed in terms of its “vitality and sustainability” and considers research strategy and activities, staff development, doctoral training and successful completions, external income generated, etc.
3. “Research Impact” will measure all “kinds of social, economic and cultural benefits and impacts *beyond* academia, arising from excellent research [...] Impacts or benefits arising from engaging the public with the submitted unit’s research will be included” (REF 2011). Reporting of impact will be done via the use of case study narratives (minimum of two per unit submitting) and should include tangible indicators and evidence as appropriate. Case studies will be assessed against the broad generic criteria of ‘reach and significance’ of the impact or benefit.

Each of the elements is weighted (outputs at 65 %; research environment at 15 % and impact at 20 %) and the higher the accumulated score the greater share of the funding that the institution will enjoy in subsequent years.⁸

The introduction of the measurement of “impact” is the biggest change to the system of assessment and one of the most controversial aspects of the REF. Critics raise a number of conceptual and logistical objections and the “disturbing consequences” that may result from its inclusion in the measuring process (Couldry 2011, p. 137; Collini 2012). These criticisms include the threat it represents to academic autonomy as a result of the focus on impact/benefit outside the academy. Increasingly academics are required to act as intermediaries between HE and industry and how these groups “value” research is being steadily used to direct research priorities. The subjectivities in its measurements also prove controversial and although the REF has moved away from citations as a metric it still remains unclear how impact would be effectively compared across institutions. This is particularly relevant to the arts and humanities where articulating and evidencing the impact of certain subjects (e.g. philosophy, languages or history) can be problematic. In the UK science and the techno-economic paradigm remain the policy model for knowledge development, transfer and measurement which crucially underestimates the often social and civic role delivered by research and also problematises the measurement of value for certain categories of knowledge.

⁸A statement by REF maintains that “given that the impact assessment in the first exercise will still be developmental, the weighting of impact in the 2014 REF will be reduced to 20 %, with the intention of increasing this in subsequent exercises” (REF 2011, p. 1) highlighting that this element is likely to grow in significance for subsequent exercises.

Questions are also raised about how trans-national and long-term impact can be measured by such a local and time-bound system. The fear is that this may skew focus and give priority to shorter term projects where impact can be readily measured, rather than more complex longitudinal studies which are urgently needed for some research issues (e.g. the evolution in audience behaviour, the exercise of power at an institutional level, developments in genre and narrative structure). Moreover, at a time where institutional and academic collaboration is being encouraged, this system further encourages a climate of competition between universities and academics. As discussed earlier a key goal of the current policy imperatives is to enhance competitiveness in the knowledge economy and such an ideology is becoming increasingly well-established in the academic context in monitoring processes such as REF and RAE (Elton 2000). Finally, some critics worry that it is the beginning of the standardization of research and engagement, and that it will inhibit creative approaches to some projects due to the perceived risk associated with them. This is further compounded by the use of peer review within this system as it often reinforces ‘academic traditionalism’ (Elton 2000) running counter to the ethos of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research. Webster (2004) also recounts the challenges of judging work in the RAE process during his time as a peer reviewer, stating that for one, due to the breadth of material presented for review, only one or two reviewers in each panel will actually be familiar with the work they are supposed to judge. He suggests: “Judgement does not simply emerge from judicious assessment of materials, but materials are worked on to justify a perceived position” (Webster 2004, p. 852). The Research Excellence Framework (as well as its predecessor, the RAE) and the metric of impact is therefore seen by many in the UK higher education system as a further tool in the strategy to commodify research and to put narrow boundaries around the ‘public value’ of research.

Turning attention specifically to media and communication studies within this system, we want to consider for a moment the likely impact of “impact” (pardon the pun) on the field and the particular tensions and challenges it will have to negotiate in this context. Two immediate concerns emerge. First, there are certain areas of study within the field for which the impact agenda may prove particularly problematic. For example, there is a long history of research on cultural products and in the UK (as internationally) a particularly vibrant strand of research which uses the text as the object of study. This research informs our thinking about the historical evolutions in cultural products and their tendency to mutate and shift through time and place; how structure, form and narrative interweave in often complex ways for our viewing/listening experience and often forming a long-lasting relationship with the audience; how these texts are crucial in forming

and exchanging complex social identities; and how these identities then become represented in the media. In these the question and answer is often located within the text and their interventions beyond the academy and in the public sphere are often intangible or subjective. If a range of responses to a text are possible, therefore a range of impacts should also be possible many of which are difficult to quantify or physically observe. The aim here is not to single out studies of text as limiting or call into question the considerable value of this research, but to use this as an illustration of how the “market potential” (Collini 2012, p. 172) of certain topics may come to shape the direction of the field as it moves forward (for instance debates have taken place in the UK around the future of film studies where there is now a shift away from screen theory which is seen as outdated to more institutional and socio-economic themes whose value can be more readily translated for external audiences (Newman 2007)). That is also not to say that all academic research agendas are driven by funding or metrics like the REF, but increasingly access to support for research work of any scale is driven by funding. With media and communications now an established area of study within the UK, and one which has (and seemingly continues) to fight crucial battles for public support as discussed earlier, it seems unnecessary and unfortunate for its boundaries to narrow now and for researchers to be disciplined by the market.

The question of representation, mentioned above, brings us to the second point: the research does not always tell us what others want to hear. This becomes particularly acute in this field when the “others” is the media itself and they are often the object of study. The REF guidelines are clear: “[d]issemination activity—without evidence of its benefits—will not be considered as impact” (REF 2011, p. 4). Research must be made public beyond the traditional academic audience and at times the most efficient way to do that is through the media. However, according to Miah (2013) “media researchers may feel that locating themselves in the media betrays their critical perspective in some way”. Can we expect research which is critical of the media to be given access or a fair hearing by that same media especially as it is already well-noted the tensions that exist between journalists and academic researchers?⁹ Certainly media engagement is only one way of dissemination, (the use of social media, such as blogging, is becoming increasingly more prominent in this domain in order to share knowledge, engage and stimulate various audiences and stakeholders). However, public dissemination means letting research go out into the world, giving others the

⁹See for example Goldacre (2009) who discusses at length the misreporting of scientific data in the media’s coverage of biomedicine.

opportunity to control and define that research and its value to the public. It also merges the quality of the research with the quality of its public dissemination and translation. As Collini argues in this assessment system “research plus marketing is not just better than research without marketing: it is better *research*” (Collini 2012, p. 175, italics in the original).

One of the major challenges to media and communication researchers in the UK today then is to devise research projects that ask significant questions keeping the assessment tools of the REF in mind. As outlined above, the first generation of media and communication researchers had a strong interest in societal challenges and the type of questions they were asking stemmed from those concerns. However, the RAE and now the REF have brought very different parameters of measuring the relevance and significance of research into the equation. As the closure of the Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology at Birmingham University—the “successor” of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies which combined with sociology after the so-called “cultural turn”—shows, low scores in the RAE/REF can have real and tangible consequences (Webster 2004). In a climate where the judgements of a department’s output, research environment and impact are crucial, it becomes more and more challenging (though not impossible) to instigate research projects which might resolve long term and large scale issues—a key agenda in the early development of media and communications research in the UK.

4 Research and Practice

While the REF attempts to standardise research assuming all researchers are the same and are doing the same work, the field of media and communication in the British context has auspiciously seen a significant change in the nature of what it regards as research and a widening of the research process. Scholars continue to question existing theoretical frameworks and the processes for creating knowledge. However, one area which has developed significantly is in the use of practice as a way to understand both the processes of cultural production and the product of that process, blending the intellectual requirements of media studies with activities of practice (Hobart 2010, p. 55). The combination of research and practice, the “practice turn” as Kershaw (2010) labels it, emerged from outside the discipline, namely through disciplines such as performing arts and sociology, again highlighting the porous nature of disciplines. This framework can be traced back to the 1960s, and although disciplines such as social science have a long tradition of applied research in their field, this is relatively new in media and communication.

Today this approach to research has been extended to a number of media and communication sub-disciplines such as journalism, gaming, film-making, and radio production, and continues to grow as a place where process, action and reflexivity can be effectively combined for research purposes.¹⁰ There are two distinct forms where this merge of practice and research occurs, highlighting the different perspectives possible in this field: one where practice is a process of study, and the other where practice is the object of study.

The first is about how the researcher/practitioner understands their practice – blurring the line between the scholar and the artist—and is driven by a desire to:

[U]nderstand the role, processes and function of cultural practice more generally, it is important to be able to explore through doing [...] an art-making process can generate new insights and perspectives relevant to understanding a diverse range of social and cultural phenomena – identity, community, narrative and testimony, transformation, space and time [...] and so on. Practice as research, in any disciplinary area, privileges action as a methodological imperative. In the arts, practice as research involves artist-researchers exploring, testing and extending a diverse range of creative methodologies and working across diverse contexts – exploring the relationship of creative interventions to both making and understanding the world. (Sjoberg 2012)

This approach carves out a territory for arts practice and media production in academic environments at a time when sub-disciplines are increasingly being merged into one department (e.g. drama departments incorporating theatre, film and television). It has also grown due to a significant change in the make-up of university staffing, the latter particularly evident in media and communication faculties. In 2009 the *Looking Out* report surveyed 108 art, design and media departments in the UK and found that over 85 % employed teacher-practitioners as a way of “sustaining current industry knowledge in the curriculum” (Clews and Mallinder 2010, p. 2). For many the move from industry into HE or their simultaneous employment in the cultural industries and HE offers a moment of reflection and analysis and a prompt for rebuilding their relationship with their art, industry and knowledge—a critical engagement achieved through the vehicle of practice-as-research. While the rewards of developing and sharing knowledge is certainly a pull factor, there are also a number of push factors ensuring the union of practice and research in some parts of academia is likely to continue in the future. Challenging conditions in the cultural labour market, coupled with specific structural features of

¹⁰For a detailed discussion of practice-as-research as a project and the challenges ‘from epistemology to evaluation’ see Piccini and Kershaw (2003).

the work (such as insecurity and issues of access), mean that many practitioners regard HE as a relatively more stable environment (Ashton 2013).

The approach gained significant credibility in the 1990s and 2000s due to its inclusion in the previous assessment exercise (the RAE), however, while it does open up new opportunities for research, combining the spheres of practice and research can also generate “troublesome contradictions” (Kershaw 2010, p. 64) as the principles of this research approach often run counter to “the wider critical engagement with ‘knowledge making’ in the arts and humanities” (Piccini et al. 2003, p. 120). The problem-solving approach has become the established process for knowledge-making in the academy, and as Kershaw (2010, p. 81) argues this creates tensions where practice often has a tendency towards “problem creating”. The UK funding councils, who have been instrumental in its development and acceptance within the academy, require applicants to approach practice-based projects using a question/resolution model. This model becomes a way of standardising some of the contours of practice-as-research and redresses some of the subjective judgements on the quality of the research produced.

While the outcomes of practice as research are multiple (Sjoberg 2012), another issue with this approach is the diversity of transmission possible: “the means by which any knowledge/understanding/insight it produces are communicated [...] is always multi-modal and has the qualities of a moveable feast” (Kershaw 2010, p. 66). An increasing number of academic journals now encourage media-based practice as part of their editorial agenda and these are accepted as part of the outputs in the REF process discussed above.¹¹ The growth of digital media and the possibilities this affords through visual, aural and online platforms, along with the collaborative networks this nurtures, means that in the academy the integration of practice and research to address certain issues is likely to be a key feature in the future of media and communications research. It is also likely to continue as the make-up of university staff continues to evolve in the UK through things like the casualization of academic contracts and the skills agenda in undergraduate provision which sees a greater emphasis on the role of the creative professional in the curriculum—further evidence of the neo-liberal agenda manifest in British HE.

The second approach is to understand the practices of others asking what are people doing in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts and what types of things do people say in relation to media (Couldry 2010, p. 39).

¹¹Of course not all these journals are housed in the UK but many have contributions and editorial input from UK-based scholars who in turn contribute to a global flow and exchange of ideas around research, practice and scholarship.

Couldry (2010, p. 36) proposes this as an attempt to “decentre media research” in order to overcome the old theoretical division between structure and agency redressing the limits of political economy approaches, audience research and text-centred research. However, as in the previous approach “practices tend not to line up neatly. They exhibit sprawl, mutual contradiction, often unplanned originality, undecidability—in short they exemplify everything that undermines system” (Hobart 2010, p. 69). For instance, practice is often culturally and historically specific (Hobart 2010), it can be difficult to distinguish between distinct practices therefore rendering the boundaries of the research invisible and questions arise about whether and how people make sense of their practice and how that is negotiated in relation to researcher subjectivities (Couldry 2010, pp. 41–42). For Hobart (2010) this approach necessitates a reinvention of our constitutive intellectual practices.

While such discussions on the epistemological presuppositions of media studies are not UK-specific, they are currently having considerable purchase due to the public criticisms of the discipline, the current threats to academic autonomy and orientation of universities towards the market. Both of these approaches also demonstrate how the variety in intellectual backgrounds and disciplinary settings which characterises media studies in the UK, while challenging in terms of distinguishing a definitive disciplinary history, identity or approach, can also provide the necessary framework for considering the possibilities of a new approach to media research, and its possible reinvention. As Sonia Livingstone (2014) recently argued regarding the question “Media Studies: where are we now?”:

I see our strengths in our history of media analysis, our theoretical and methodological openness, and our practical, professional and political commitments. Although I think our strengths lie less in being any one particular thing than in being many things, this does not – and should not – make us so dispersed as to disengage from shared debate.

5 Concluding Remarks

Media and communication studies continue to be a major part of the university system in the UK and the discipline has grown in both size and status over the past few decades. Since 1999/2000 there has been above average increases in enrolments in courses related to “mass communications” and “creative arts and design”, with media studies showing “an increase of 150% between 1999/2000 and 2008/09” (UK Universities 2010, p. 27). This growth in undergraduate students has been accompanied by a growth in both institutional provision and

number of researchers. The number of PhD students, pursuing full-time doctoral study between 1996/1997 and 2009/2010 quadrupled in creative arts/design (HEFCE 2011, p. 3), to name but one example of the continuing increase in media and communication research. These figures would suggest that the discipline is in good health; however, as we have shown, due to both disciplinary stresses and wider trends in the HE agenda the field faces a number of challenges. The (enforced) shift towards international collaborations and interdisciplinary research, the growth in privately funded research, the current public re-examination of the values of the university and how this impacts both education and scholarship, and the responses of the sector to structural challenges (e.g. university funding cuts, casualisation of academic labour, threats to academic freedoms, cuts to public agencies such as the British Film Institute which continue to play a key role in research) will no doubt continue to impact media and communication scholars in the UK and demand a variety of creative responses (Ashton and Noonan 2013). In this way the future of media studies in the UK can be seen as part of a larger question regarding the future of universities as a whole.

However, media and communication studies as a maturing field in Britain is facing its own internal trials. The diverse beginnings of the field, new approaches to research methods (such as research-as-practice), and the succinct developments of media and communication research in national contexts (in the UK this even boils down to different research foci in Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland), leads many researchers to contemplate what the main paradigms and the most pressing questions are. At this point in time these type of questions characterise the field as a whole, with some researchers wondering whether media studies and communication research is in fact facing a Kuhnian crisis (Lang 2013; Jensen and Neuman 2013) though one in which its impulse for multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, international and comparative research will be central to its agenda (Livingstone 2014).

As we have outlined in this chapter, while media and communication studies in the UK commenced with the 'big' questions as a starting point, recent developments in UK higher education policies are making it more and more challenging to create projects outside of the now common frame of assessment. In an era of globalisation, policy frequently travels and such monitoring and management of research is likely to be attractive to other governments looking to further their development of the knowledge economy, to make the work of academics more responsive to industrial and policy priorities, while reducing costs and competing internationally for prestige and talent. In this context, the case of media and communication studies in the UK also provides a stark warning to researchers in other

national contexts and hopefully offers an opportunity for critical reflection on the key question of this volume: what next for communication research?

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