BOOK REVIEW (3)

Youth cultures, media practices & citizenship: really useful knowledge?

Media literacy and the emerging citizen: youth, engagement and participation in digital culture, by Paul Mihailidis, New York, Peter Lang, 2014, 224 pp., £25.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4331-2179-1

Disconnected: Youth, new media and the ethics gap, by Carrie James, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2014, 167 pp., £17.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-02806-6

Global Citizenship in a Digital World, edited by Sherri Hope Culver and Paulette A. Kerr, Goteburg, Nordicom, 2014, 404 pp. (paperback), ISBN 978-91-86523-97-8

Influential interest groups, described by Gott in 1932 as "the moralists, the educators and the trade" (p4), have long regarded youth media cultures as troublesome. Film was the new medium under scrutiny in the late 1920s/early 1930s and the subject of Gott's report, *The Film in National Life: Report of an enquiry conducted by the Commission on Educational And Cultural Films into the service which the cinematograph may render to education and social progress*. Almost a century later, the failure of public policy to address social inequality continues to be attributed to media in general and young people's engagement with and participation in media cultures in particular. Anxieties about media, culture and society inevitably seek their solace in intervention as a consequence. The most interesting research work in youth media cultures has emerged when ethnographic socio-cultural approaches have brought youth practices into dialogue with formal disciplinary knowledges to generate new thinking with which social, political and economic policy-making practices might be reformed. All too frequently, however, interventions are framed by existing political, social and economic priorities with the aim of reforming the behaviours of young people. The presumption that "arming" young people with tools for creating better political, social and economic systems in the future, indicative perhaps of the abrogation of responsibility by adults to do the same in the present.

The three publications listed above have shared interests in the relationship between young people, technology, media and citizenship. In his introduction, Paul Mihailidis (2014) states his intention to produce "a manifesto for media literacy education" that will "empower the next generation of leaders" (p5). The rhetoric of empowerment is a familiar trope in the history of media education that can reach dizzying declarative heights in discussions about citizenship

> in the long march towards a truly participatory democracy, and the
> democratisation of our institutions. Widespread media literacy is essential
> if all citizens are to wield power, make rational decisions, become effective
> change-agents, and have an active involvement with the media. It is in this
> much wider sense of 'education for democracy' that media education can
> play the most significant role of all.
> (Masterman, 1985, p13)

Thirty years since the early rhetoric of media education positioned it as the holy grail of democracy, the core argument Mihailidis makes in *Media Literacy and the Emerging Citizen: Youth, Engagement and Participation in Digital Culture*, that "more vigorous pedagogical responses" to the (new or otherwise) media environment are required if it is to realise its ambition, is familiar thus. Although the book is framed as a pedagogic intervention in its third act using "The 5A's of Media Literacy", inexplicably presented with an apostrophe throughout, Mihailidis does not claim a "prescriptive curriculum guide" (p8) for his manifesto.

Unlike the online *Manifesto for Media Education* in 2011 (www.manifestoformediaeducation.co.uk) and its subsequent publication *Current Perspectives in Media Education: Beyond The Manifesto* (Fraser & Wardle, 2013), that attempted to bring educationists and practitioners from all sectors together with the aim of establishing a dialogue about media education, Mihailidis' manifesto gives the appearance of a set of assertions about youth, digital culture and media literacy aimed at university teachers who, presumably, will find the knowledge contained therein useful. Mihailidis asserts however, that the implementation

of "top-down curricular mandates" is not appropriate in higher education where the "linear approaches media literacy takes in K-12" (p8) might puncture the "sacred" space of curriculum "for faculty". Instead, the book promotes a 5A framework for media literacy in formal and informal education: access, awareness, assessment, appreciation and action. There is something of a disconnect however, between the call for a more vigorous pedagogical response and the 5A framework.

The data Mihailidis has drawn from, a social media survey of 800+ Communications undergraduates on the USA's east coast and small group discussions with 70+ respondents is presented in the book's second section, *Listening to Emerging Citizens*. The research instruments are made available in the appendices but there is little by way of an account of his methodology. Although the author makes clear in his introduction that "using university students for my exploration skews my discussion to the (still) minority of young people in this country who will complete university" (p10), he claims "relevance across many different population groups" for the "general ideas". However, the absence of a coherent epistemological and methodological underpinning for the conclusions drawn in the book's final section, makes that claim quite tentative at best. Had the author focused on the implications of his data for the teaching of Communications in the Academy, his conclusions may have been more compelling.

There is no doubting the author's commitment to and belief in the capacity of media literacy education for social change but the argument and evidence presented here is not robust enough to persuade academics from other disciplinary fields to incorporate the 5As into their "sacred" curriculum spaces. The book gallops across a plethora of sources at breakneck speed without pause for critique. The critical thinking Mihailidis at times proposes, but at other times argues for the transcendental properties of mindfulness and meditation as a "means for media literacy education" (p151), is too frequently absent from the analysis itself. Hyperbolic claims and utopian visions for the capacity of media (old and new) to speak truth to power are not untypical and an uncritical, ahistorical and scattergun approach frequently substitutes for

scholarly rigour. The lack of a coherent epistemological frame may be responsible for the bewildering display of terminology, only some of which is clearly defined in the introduction, collected jackdaw-like and gimmicky thus, as well as giving rise to contradictory and conflicting claims. Scholars in Media Studies, Cultural Studies, Political and Social Science looking for knowledge will find this book an extremely frustrating read as a consequence.

If the aim of this book is to encourage a more vigorous pedagogical response to (new) media environments however, Education scholars will be particularly disappointed. There is little by way of pedagogic knowledge that could enable, rather than empower, university teachers to develop programmes that bring students everyday media cultures into dialogue with disciplinary knowledges. Learning how to theorise democracy, the public sphere and media cultures might be more useful knowledge than learning how to be "good citizens" through engagement with "volunteering, voting, signing petitions and helping those less fortunate" (Dalton, 2009 cited in Mihailidis, 2014). This is not to say that such activities are not important but are unlikely to solve the problem of disenfranchisement

> The more difficult challenge for teachers, as for news journalists, is to find
> ways of establishing the relevance of politics and of connecting the 'micro-
> politics' of personal experience with the 'macro-politics' of the public sphere.
> (Buckingham, 2000, p221)

The author criticises media education for its "silo" approach to teaching. His argument that "media *literacy* education [my emphasis] was born from a need to find pathways to understand, and to a degree confront, the dominant media industries of the 21st century" (p150) seems a little hollow in light of recent thinking about media literacy in the UK (Wallis & Buckingham, 2013, McDougall et al, 2014), media education developments in UK higher education (Leaning, 2015) and new directions in film and television production studies. More than thirty years ago in the UK, the development of media education symbolised the failure of previous educational interventions to widen access and increase participation using

technologies such as radio, film, television and computers to improve educational outcomes. Media education articulated a shift from teaching *through* media to teaching *about* media. Its promotion of media as an important object of study in its own right marked a change of emphasis and generated a conceptual framework *and* a pedagogic practice that, it was argued, was transferable to all educational contexts. Using the deceptively simple critical tools of audiences, producers and texts (Hall, 1980), media texts and practices were subject to critical scrutiny, to make visible the relations of power operating in these increasingly influential modes of communication. The portability of its critical frame located questions of power explicitly in cultural, social and institutional contexts and expressed thus

> media education can enable the good teacher to illumine relationships
> between education and its social, cultural, ethical, economic and political
> dimensions in a way difficult to parallel in other curricular disciplines
> [UNESCO, 1977, p8].

Unlike its predecessors therefore, the intrinsic aim of media education was to develop young people's understanding about media from their everyday situated experiences, through critical analysis and creative practices in the arts and humanities as well as in the social sciences

> Rather than ignoring or seeking to invalidate their everyday social experiences,
> educators must enable students to build connections between the personal and
> the political, and hence prepare them for a participatory form of citizenship which
> can function across a whole range of social domains.
> (Buckingham, 2000, p 223)

Recent ESRC-funded research about media literacy in the UK (2009-2012), *Developing Media Literacy: towards a model of learning progression* (RES-062-23-1292), led by Professor David Buckingham, explored the continuing viability of the media education meta-level conceptual framework (audiences, languages, institutions & representations) using socio-cultural theory

and an iterative and recursive approach to learning ie structured *and* non-linear. An asset-based approach, rather than a deficit-based approach, positioned learners not as "emergent" or in-waiting but as fully-formed with human rights and situated in communities of practice. The establishing of Youth and Children's Parliaments in the UK are examples of where such an approach has been incorporated into administrative structures and giving 16 and 17 year olds the right to vote in the 2014 Independence Referendum in Scotland marked a further step-change in thinking.

This review is not the place for a full discussion of the findings of that ESRC research and it has been written about elsewhere (Burn et al, 2010, Parry & Powell, 2012, Parry, 2014, Powell, 2014) but does have particular salience where this book is concerned, not least in relation to the idea of participation in communities of practice. Learners' contemporary experiences have the capacity to develop media knowledge across time and space as well as across concepts. The research project found that media education *pedagogy* continued to have the capacity to work across and between platforms and forms but competing and unacknowledged social, economic and political discourses made the process of establishing a desirable exchange value (Lamont Hill, 2008) between informal and formal knowledges and practices very difficult to achieve. The "disconnect" Mihailidis identifies is between "young citizens and perceptions of social media value" (p95). Whilst the role of social media in the public sphere is still not fully understood, working to improve the exchange value of citizenship itself is perhaps a more pressing task.

Part of the MacArthur series of publications on digital media and learning, Carrie James also explores a "disconnect" between on-line practices and citizenship to understand how young people aged between 10 and 25 situated in diverse communities of practice, think about privacy, property and participation. In sharp contrast to Mihailidis' media literacy manifesto for "sharing, expression, revolution and exploration" (p151), James' reflexivity produces a more cautious and measured approach to digital media "which are increasingly inseparable from analogue and earlier forms". The MacArthur series is characterised by a scholarly approach to

the "palette of literacies that are being defined through practice but that require more scholarly scrutiny before they can be fully incorporated into educational initiatives" (pxii). With a foreword by Henry Jenkins, James' book formulates its conclusions from data collected over six years at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The scale of this work, therefore, is potentially compelling, not least because her discussion of "blind-spots" is not limited to young people and includes those held by adults as well as the researcher and resonates with Ball's (1990) contention that the technicalities of research should include the social repertoire of the researcher herself.

Three types of thinking emerge from James' research: self-focused (individual consequences), moral (known others) and ethical (unknown others). James explores the "ordinary" knowledges and experiences of everyday life with which learners make meaning to suggest that disconnects happen when moral and ethical considerations are subordinate to self-interest. In her work on how young people aged 18-26 think about democracy in Greece, Magioglou (2008) also explores the capacity for creating new ideas and practices with what she describes as lay thinking, "a form of thought embedded in culture, constantly in the making" (p445). Magioglou was interested in the process of making the familiar unfamiliar through dialogic inquiry. Communities make sense of the unfamiliar by re-situating it in familiar contexts but importantly the familiar can also be re-situated and made unfamiliar. In both instances, this process has the capacity for innovation.

Organised into five chapters, James' argument is predicated on her concern about the extent to which users understand the normative function of online activity. She proposes a cross-generational approach to online practices described as "conscientious connectivity" (xxiii) to promote ethical thinking and its translation into ethical action. Mihailidis' work is also concerned with changing online practices but his approach promotes the potential of media literacy for civic action. When such little consideration has been given to the socio-cultural dimensions of media practices however, media literacy is framed as a political intervention in spite of the author's best intentions. James' work, on the other hand, is framed as a social

intervention. Although she does locate practices in broader cultures such as that of individualism, self-responsibility and personal success, the absence of explicit links made between these values and political and economic forces is curious. The author cites the work of Smith et al, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*, as an "important backdrop" to her research and the blame it attaches to (emerged?) adults for not providing young people with the tools to think about and lead a moral life.

The question of morality and ethics is an interesting one but James' book is perhaps most valuable for the extent to which it foregrounds the methodological challenges for qualitative researchers working with young people and online practices. Describing digital culture as a "moving target", James makes clear from the outset that the "rigour required to collect and look closely at data … is arguably at odds with the pace of change underway" (p19). Each of the data chapters begins with a "digital dilemma" scenario to elicit responses from young people about privacy, property and participation. Whilst there may be a degree of naivety in James' view of communities as benign, her argument that we need to work towards a more symmetrical relationship between the individual and the collective is an important one nonetheless.

All three data chapters focus on the dominance of young people's self-focused and moral thinking about the dilemma each scenario poses, the consequences of particular online practices at micro (the individual) and meso (known others) levels. James identifies the existence of "mentorship gaps" particularly at the macro (unknown others) level in relation to privacy, property and participation. The attention given to the consequences of young people contributing to discourses already in circulation and pre-determined as problematic (by "moralists, the educators and the trade"?, see Gott above), rather than enabling more reflexively critical and creative concept-led learning about the integrity of the macro systems in which privacy, property and participation have such traction might be considered the book's "blind-spot". From time to time James drops stitches when she deploys wooly phrases such as having "a conscience", using "kind speech" or the "goodness of the Internet". Unlike Mihailidis

however, whose assertion that the 5As can "arm" young people with "savvy, confidence and mindfulness" (p146), James' work draws attention to the contradictions between social norms and ethical behaviours and the dilemmas created for young people in their online practices thus. More importantly, perhaps, she offers concrete and coherent strategies for enabling young people to navigate these dilemmas but also an appeal for us all to be more critically reflexive in our digital lives.   Neither Mihailidis nor James however, address head-on the pleasures of young people's digital consumption and production and it is difficult to conclude therefore, that the idea of 'citizenship' might not be worth trading for.

The third publication under consideration here is refreshingly different from the USA-centric contexts and deficit approaches characterising the previous publications. The 2014 Yearbook of Media & Information Literacy & Intercultural Dialogue (MILID), a collaboration between UNESCO's University Twinning and Networking Programme (UNITWIN) and The International Clearing House on Children, Youth & Media, presents 31 individual chapters from researchers *and* practitioners on the theme of global citizenship from different perspectives around the world. Unlike James' work on imagining unknown others, the articles offer concrete and practical examples of work with young people organised into five themes: Global Citizenship; New Media, New Approaches; Youth Engagement; Education & Educators' Changing Role and Media & Information Literacy.

Both UNESCO and Nordicom have long been curious about the relationship between education, media and young people. This curiosity has survived platforms and forms and produced a deeper understanding of the potential of media education to "enable active critical inquiry *and* effective media production" [my emphasis] (p7). Whilst there may be a question about the use of "effective" rather than say, creative media production, the significance of *Global Citizenship in a Digital World* is its ambition to generate dialogue between researchers using a range of different approaches and practitioners situated in range of settings as well as between different regional contexts. The scale of the book permits a window of only twelve pages through which

to glimpse some interesting critical and creative digital practices. It is nevertheless, a rich source of practical ideas.

The editors of *Global Citizenship in a Digital World*, Sherri Hope Culver and Paulette A. Kerr, from the School of Media and Communication at Temple University in the USA and the Department of Library and Information Studies at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica respectively, conclude the collection with accounts of recent work that is interdisciplinary and externally facing. Hope Culver argues that key to these developments is situating responsibility for media and information literacy (MIL) in a specific school or college. She describes MIL as "a skill that crosses academic areas and industries" and whilst skill development is certainly an issue it could be argued that the question of knowledge (and whose knowledge) is at least equally pressing.

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