

University challenge

As media studies gives a student a better chance of employment than many other humanist degrees, maybe it isn't such a waste of time, argues Brian Winston

In the dialogue of the deaf which takes place between the media industries and the universities, I think a hearing aid has appeared. It's in the form of the government's vision of a new and major sector of the economy called The Creative Industries.

Given that the world of film, broadcasting, advertising and publishing (including journalism) is worth, by Chris Smith's reckoning, £3.2 billion a year and employs nearly a third of a million people, the charge against university media courses cannot logically be that these activities are themselves trivial and therefore not worth serious examination. Now, clutching the £3.2 billion, academics are in a better position than they were, if only slightly, to argue that the subject is a legitimate one.

Of course, the universities give many hostages to fortune. Not all the study is worthwhile – much of it is faddist, overly complex and just plain silly. But then of what intellectual area is that not more or less true? Even if studies concentrate on the media's economics, politics and history, academics can still be told this bears little relation to everyday life in broadcasting and the explanation – that academic study is not the same as professional practice – ignored.

But television professionals have a better case when they complain that many academics have taken up the study of the media not, as most humanists do, because they have a love of the object of study, but because they actually dislike it.

This is further complicated because many more in the universities, too old at 40 for broadcasting work and now teach-

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ing, are ex-professionals as hostile to (and as ignorant of) theory as any still in the business.

But the idea of The Creative Industries confirms that all this stuff is as fascinating and important as anything in the humanist canon – archaeology, philosophy, linguistics, *Literae Humaniores*. Most broadcasters and many academics have a common ground here waiting to be occupied.

The concept of the Creative Industries also impacts on the other main issue: that the universities mendaciously pretend to offer an entry to the industry but actually only provide useless qualifications. Many courses would deny that they offer anything other than the usual non-vocational humanist deal, but be

that as it may. Despite the constant panic about uselessness, the fact is that media studies students do at least as well in the job market as do graduates from other non-vocational courses.

Despite about two thirds of all courses being more theoretical than practical, nevertheless one media graduate in six, after taking no little time to find such work, does go directly into the mainstream media. As for the rest, equipped with a general understanding of the communication process which is useful in many places outside the media heartland, 72% find work in the UK, a third of them at management level, upon graduation, compared with 65% of graduates in all subjects. (Some 10% stay on for graduate study.) So, shock horror – overall, media students do better in the job market than other humanist graduates.

Only in this one academic area are universities held to a strict outcomes accounting. Even in overtly professional fields such as the law, 4 of every 10 graduates on the totally vocational legal practice courses (many law graduates having already given up on legal careers) fail to find work as lawyers – but there seems to be no great panic about that.

Academics do much that needs explaining and more that has been explained but remains unheard. On the other hand, sympathy for the harassed tv professionals, as overwhelmed by ill-equipped young media graduates as was President Reagan by food-stamp recipients using their dole to buy booze, has to be limited, too.

The knowledge that, according to the the BFI tracking study of new entrants to the film and tv sectors, around 1 in 3 are privately educated and rather more than one in 3 are related to people in the industry, gives pause. In the face of such class-based nepotism, where even princes of the blood royal with no discernable training in anything can declare themselves to be tv producers, it is hard to take a professional criticism which says the universities are deliberately misleading the young.

But now we have £3.2 billion and hundred of thousands of jobs. There is space for all, even the traditional nieces and nephews as well as those graduating from jumped-up ex-polys who can't even speak properly but nevertheless want to work in the medja. The hearing aid is at hand.

Now we can start to have a serious conversation about where the next generation is to come from and how it is to be prepared. Let's turn the damn thing on.

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A full report from the forthcoming RTS Media Faculties Liaison Conference will appear in the March issue of Television