

In praise of the media

Brian Winston refutes the charges made against media studies by chief schools inspector Chris Woodhead

“But have they learned anything except why kids pierce their noses and the semiotics of Who wants to be a Millionaire?”

One of the most heartening things to emerge from the recent RTS conference on university media education was the assessment by many of the professionals present that the academics were being paranoid. The professors gave the impression that the world was out to get them while everybody else, as Peter Fiddick reported in these pages, was thoughtful, reasonable and, although correctly critical of uneven standards and facilities or rightly questioning of purpose and methodologies, basically very supportive.

From the key-note speaker, culture secretary Chris Smith, onwards there was a refreshing sense that, at least as far as the RTS was concerned, a corner had been turned and a real discussion about the relationship of the industry and the academy could now begin.

Then, not a month later, the Government released its rotweiler, chief schools inspector Chris Woodhead, to make a widely publicised attack of exactly the sort that fuels academic anxiety – they are seducing students (as it were) in great numbers into studying a Mickey Mouse subject (ie media studies) with no employment prospects.

Never mind that this tired, counterfactual diatribe was obvious timed by the government’s spin-meisters to detract attention from the fact that this year’s ‘education, education, education’ university budget in effect imposed a cut. Never mind that David Blunkett has been heard recently admitting that some media courses, at least, are valid. Unfortunately it seems that the government, Mr Woodhead and many journalists, are still far less well informed about the realities of media education than is the RTS.

Consider the ‘flood’ of media studies students. You can take an exam in the subject at ‘A’ level. This is the only bit of media studies which one could have expected Woodhead to know about but clearly he is a man deeply committed to avoiding being bored by the facts. Last year 14,222 pupils chose this subject and, while this is, for example, about 15 times as many as did Welsh, it is six times fewer than the number doing English. In 1999, media studies A Levels accounted for 1.8% of all ‘A’ Levels taken.

Nor was it a soft touch. Only 9.7% of these students achieved an ‘A’. Of those taking the exam 57.5% obtained ‘A’ to ‘C’ grades. This compares with 15.2% ‘A’s in English, 16.3% in Geography, 28.3% in Mathematics. In Classical Subjects (Latin and Greek without the Latin and Greek) 71.6% finished up with ‘A’ – ‘C’.

On to University: the Funding Council, which pays for all students in England, reckons currently there are some 22,000 of them on media courses – about 7,000 graduates a year. But the council makes a distinction in the money it

allows per student according to an assessment of the cost of educating them. Physicists come top, of course, philosophers bottom.

Media studies is split and only about a quarter of students are in courses funded as ‘high cost provision’ (the band below the scientists). This yields some 1,750 graduates a year.

And are any or all of these employable? The government now requires universities formally to track their graduates. After six months, media studies graduates are 79% in employment, the same as business and better than English and History at 55%. Only Vets (95%) and Hotel & Catering (80%) are more certain to find work.

But do media studies grads get media jobs? Many universities, especially those not offering ‘high cost provision’, would claim to be teaching a humanist discipline for which vocational outcomes are no more pertinent than they would be with English. Nevertheless, 19.3% of graduates report finding work in the mainstream media industries of publishing, journalism, PR and media research and production and a further 21.8% of students find entry level clerical work including media positions.

Another study suggested a few years ago that after a year the figure in mainstream media employment, broadly defined, would significantly increase to over 40%.

But have they learned anything except why kids pierce their noses and the semiotics of *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*?

When intellectual giants like Chris Woodhead start accusing me of being a lightweight and my students dilettantes, I confess my usual scholarly Buddha-like clam is a smidgen perturbed. The truth is that media studies approaches come from an amalgam of methodologies arising from a variety of disciplines – semiotics, for example, pre-dates the First World War and is part of linguistics. (It has been on the academic back burner for decades, by the way. Don’t tell the Sunday broadsheets!)

When this case is made, of course, back comes the charge that all this has nothing to do with the everyday business of making television programmes. And, indeed, it does not. It’s a proper university level subject. That it might have relevance, or, alternatively, that it could be amended to make sense to professionals is the substance of the debate we ought to be having.

Perhaps the RTS could ask Chris Smith to tell David Blunkett to curb Woodhead’s yelping? It’s disturbing us and we have some real issues to discuss.

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