What is Media Studies? By Richard Gent

Media Studies isn’t easy to describe. It’s a living concept that continues to change just as technology and our experiences with technology change.

Media Education encourages people to question their own and others’ media use, and to analyse media products, media institutions and media technologies. Media Studies tends to approach the investigation and analysis of a text through a set of key concepts including Media Language, Institutions, Audience and Representation. Other key concepts commonly addressed in Media Education are Ownership, Ideology, Genre and Narrative. These key concepts form a critical framework that can be applied to any text.

As a qualification, Media Studies is desirable because its curriculum is inclusive; it provides opportunities for cross-curricular skills to be developed.

Creativity in the form of production skills plays a principal role in Media Education. Students both analyse media texts and make them. One activity informs the other. Production tasks can include all sorts of individual and team enterprises including the research, planning and making of music videos, newspapers, magazines, posters, interviews, soaps, films and trailers, animation, websites, blogs and video games. The distribution, marketing, regulation and evaluation of these products become part of the creative process and can be assessed.

There are several key issues that structure the media education curriculum.  These include the patterns of ownership of media organizations, where the national and global holdings of corporations such as News Corporation, Disney or Time Warner are assessed in terms of the concentration of media power in the hands of a few main players.  The laws and regulations of media industries are also studied, in relation to censorship, bias, and assumptions about the influence of the media (especially on children).  In terms of specific media texts like TV shows, films or magazine ads, media education asks what audience the text is addressed to, and how the conventions of a certain genre or form are used to target the audience with particular meanings. Looking more closely at media audiences, media education is interested in how different groups of viewers or readers interpret media content in different ways according to (for example) age, sex, gender or economic status.  Because of recent rapid changes in the global media landscape, media education has a special interest in newer technologies such as the Internet, social networking and mobile communications.

Media education began in the 1930s on the assumption that mass media had bad effects on society, and that educating citizens about how media products are made would help to protect them from their impact. By the 1960s the emphasis moved to offering media education as a tool-kit that would enable ordinary people to originate their own media culture (in local TV, or small-scale print publications). In the 1970s and 1980s, theoretical developments in academic media studies, such as semiotics, led media education to focus on deconstructing media representations to reveal their hidden ideological assumptions, especially about gender.  Most recently, media education has become interested in audiences, conducting studies of individual media users or audience groups, to provide a more finely-textured understanding of how and why media are used in the context of ordinary life.

At its core Media Studies assumes, just as Rousseau suggested in his Social Contract, that ‘Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.’ These chains include language and other media. Media Studies is growing in popularity partly because society is beginning to account for the child born in the mediated world. Our citizens need a language and theoretical framework, a media literacy, which engages with and articulates the issues and experiences encountered in our mediated culture.