

# Doing WikiLeaks? New Paradigms and (or?) Ecologies in Media Education

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This editorial provides a thematic bridge between the first three editions of this new journal. Our first editorial railed against the media specific view of media texts, institutions and practices. We argued for a more holistic approach, as our discipline was in danger of lagging behind the very media industries we seek to understand and contribute to. Our last edition was well received by the Media Education community, refreshed by the publication of research-based work by real, practising media and creative teachers, in a context which was relevant to the creative industries. Our next edition will present the best papers from two international Media Education conferences and include an interview with, among other keynote speakers, Professor Henry Jenkins from MIT.

Convergence, transmedia literacy and the differences these things might make to Media Education fit squarely with a key theme of MERJ – *the boundaries of Media Education and within Media Education*. Where do things begin and end? That is, what are the boundaries between text and paratext (Gray 2010), producer and fan, media and people? Or are we dealing with the study of media and culture ‘after the media’ (Bennett, Kendall and McDougall 2011/forthcoming)?

Media events that might have been previously treated as exceptions – or medium specific ‘utterances’ – are much more difficult to marginalise these days, it seems. Fandom, ‘prosumer’ exchange, postmodern media reception are very much at the centre of media literacy. Increasingly however, this narrative is played out almost simultaneously across different, but related, media platforms, as Tzvetan Todorov suggests, ‘There is no utterance without relation to other utterances, and that is essential’ (1984: 60).

Thomas Eriksen argues that speed now ‘threatens to fill all the gaps’ (2001: 59). In writing about television he points to, ‘... a fundamental change in our culture; from the relatively slow and linear to the fast and momentary’. For Anthony Giddens, Eriksen’s ‘gaps’ are ‘empty spaces’ which make possible the ‘substitutability of different spatial units’ (1997: 19). These ‘empty spaces’ in terms of the political narrative were the very ‘back regions’ now framed by the web which in turn feed the mainstream press. All these utterances

are connecting and re-connecting in a dialogic relationship which: 'is a way of looking at things that always insists on the presence of the other, on the inescapable necessity of outsidedness and unfinalizability' (Holquist 2002: 195).

As all these utterances connect to each other; it is not simply a relationship of exchange between 'front' and 'back' regions but of different 'framed' aspects of the 'back' regions engage in dialogic relationships with themselves. The web's transnational nature facilitates this type of exchange with other web-sites and message boards in other spatial locations commenting on each other.

This serves to highlight that, indeed, time and space have now split in that 'the dynamism of modernity derives from the *separation* of time and space [original italics] and their recombination in forms that permit the precise time-space "zoning" of social life' (Giddens 1997: 16–17). Giddens argues here that time has always been linked to 'place', but this has also become separated and so now we have a situation, in Eriksen's view, of 'everything at once'.

Increasingly this has the flavour of a new paradigm, however much Naughton (2010) might guard us against this way of thinking, or at least a new set of ecologies (Fuller 2007). Gauntlett (2011/forthcoming) moves ever further away from looking at 'the media', in favour of 'making and connecting' as a way of being with others in life, whilst Jenkins captures this with a practical 'application' to learning and teaching in his framework for transmedia education:

Transmedia needs to be understood as a shift in how culture gets produced and consumed, a different way of organizing the dispersal of media content across media platforms.... That's why our skill is transmedia navigation – the capacity to seek out, evaluate, and integrate information conveyed across multiple media. (2010: 1)

Elements of these types of transmedia narratives – often oppositional – are framed by different media forms at different times, but increasingly simultaneously. These framed 'utterances' have always impacted upon one another, but the often 'scandalous' and subversive nature of some of these utterances – and the public's increasing thirst for such content – have been framed by unstable utterances such as 'gossip' web-sites. These subversive elements are framed and are reworked and recycled in mainstream popular media, in an endless process of 'remediation' (Bolter and Grusin 2000).

At the same time the recent debate over the status of *WikiLeaks* has raised some important questions for Media Education. Is *WikiLeaks* a media text? If it is, then what kind

of text is it exactly? How can it be 'used' – as a case study for media and politics, as another example of 'new media'? Or is the content and intention of *WikiLeaks* outside of the reach of Subject Media? Will Merrin's view (2007) – that Media Studies is too self-regarding, ignoring political science, for example – comes sharply into focus here. Most of the members of our editorial board, when asked to share their ideas for using or responding to *WikiLeaks* in media teaching, told us that they hadn't considered this at all.

In a sense, there is nothing particularly new about *WikiLeaks*; it has been publishing 'leaked' documents since 2007, building very quickly into a vast repository of otherwise unavailable, or 'hidden' back-region material. In the celebrity arena, web-sites such as *Popbitch*, and latterly, *Holy Moly*, have been providing anonymous celebrity gossip since the late 1990s, in the former's case, which has in turn been picked up and used by the UK tabloid press. Indeed, whereas the *Popbitch* site would be bold in naming and shaming celebrities, these stories would be watered down to an anodyne and anonymised 'Wicked Whisper' in the next day's tabloid press. As this was part of seemingly low-cultural obsession – the private lives of the rich and famous – it didn't seem to matter largely and passed under the radar of media scholars and most commentators. Even more 'serious' sites such as *Smoking Gun*, in the US, attracted very little passing comment or scrutiny.

These sites operated in a way whereby ordinary contributors submitted stories they had heard, or commented on events and behaviours they had themselves witnessed. As these sites grew in popularity, frustrated 'professional' journalists and writers would contribute stories that their news outlets had refused to run, or sanction in a fuller form. These stories could then be reported on once they had been published on *Popbitch*. So, what was happening here then was a blurring of what Habermas (1989) would call the public, private and intimate spheres.

The effect though was significant: the advent of the world wide web, and its lawless nature – although this is often disputed – has seemingly allowed for the last 'hidden' elements of celebrity to be discussed and analysed by a public with an increasing thirst for celebrity gossip; magazines such as *OK*, *Heat*, *Now*, *Nuts* and *Zoo*, the contents of which are completely informed by celebrity narratives, all began post-*Popbitch*.

If *WikiLeaks* is textual, then it is journalistic. Understanding it as political or as an outcome of technology doesn't make it any less textual. But Media students could not be expected to make sense of it as textual without engaging with the narrative threads it weaves together and responds to/counters – as such an analysis of *WikiLeaks* becomes the kind of transmedia exploration Jenkins describes in relation to fiction precisely because of the way that the site sets up competing discourses and claims to truth. Relativism aside, *WikiLeaks* exposes the narrative of politics and journalism:

One of the main difficulties with explaining WikiLeaks arises from the fact it is unclear – and also unclear to the WikiLeaks people themselves – whether it sees itself and operates as a content provider or as a simple carrier of leaked data. .... One could call this the ‘Talibanization’ stage of postmodern – ‘Flat World’ – theory where scales, times, and places have been declared largely irrelevant. What counts is the celebrity momentum and the amount of media attention. WikiLeaks manages to capture that attention by way of spectacular information hacks where other parties, especially civil society groups and human rights organizations, are desperately struggling to get their message across. Instead of trying to resolve this inconsistency, it might be better to look for fresh approaches and develop new, critical, concepts for what has become a hybrid publishing practice involving actors far beyond the traditional domain of professional news media. ... What WikiLeaks anticipates, but so far has not been able to organize, is the ‘crowd sourcing’ of the actual interpretation of its leaked documents. (Lovink and Riemens 2010: 2)

So how might Jenkins’ framework help us to ‘do *WikiLeaks*’? We are, of course, in the mode of adaptation here, since ‘transmedia storytelling’ and its attendant literacy practices are framed by/around fiction. And yet if we think of *WikiLeaks* as converging news and fiction – only in so much as it exposes the always-already but hitherto concealed convergence of news across sources and platforms, narrative and ‘truth’. As such, news – in this form – can be viewed as ‘complex world building’, with multiple entry points. Lovink and Riemens talk of the uncharted ‘collective intelligence’ at work in the reception of *WikiLeaks* – a hunter-gatherer discourse *par excellence*. These elements neatly fit Jenkins’ framework. *Popbitch*, *Smoking Gun*, *Holy Moly* and even *Wikipedia* are fairly anonymous, almost ‘authorless’ texts. *WikiLeaks* on the other hand, has its author in founder Julian Assange. The now ‘auteur’ status of the web-site’s creator – now a media antihero, a kind of alter-ego to Murdoch – can be read as part of the orthodox discourse of ‘control and command’ media, very much an alternative to the ‘author functions’ (Foucault 1984) of the preceding gossip web-sites. In forming an alternative, with the idioms of a quasi-Marxist language game, *WikiLeaks* seeks to reveal a ‘truth’ and in so doing maintains ‘the media’ (in its guise as distorter of truth) as a ‘big Other’ (Žižek 2002).

The political narrative then is heteroglossic, shot through with all the unstable utterances which compose the modern political sphere. Bolter and Grusin hint at heteroglossia in that new media has created an era of hypermediacy, whereby new media acts as a management system for accessing content, what they describe as heterogeneous space, ‘in which representation is conceived of not as a window on the world, but...[full

of] windows that open into other representations [and] or other media.' (2000: 33–4). This suggests a dialogic plurality between utterances, but this is surely not the case? But, as educators, we will not be able to fully understand these new texts and paradigms unless we unfetter ourselves from medium specific views of the media. Where do things begin and end? In the 'Media Studies 1.0' view of the world, it was easy: issues of ownership and control, the practices of institution and policy makers, the work of various 'authors' of one kind or another were all easy to discern, and therefore study. Now, phenomena such as *Wikileaks* ask of us: what are the boundaries between texts, para-texts, technologies and institutions?

To that end, in this second edition of MERJ we continue with the theme of addressing the awkward questions for Media Educators and in so doing we are delighted to publish another collection of research-based articles from Media Educators. Sara Bragg uses the process and findings of action research in the classroom to set up important questions about modernist and postmodernist approaches to meaning-making in relation to production work.

Rudolf Kammerl and Sandra Hein look for Media Education in the German School system and add further insight into wider debates in media literacy. Eschewing clumsy effects models, David Buckingham, Havard Skaar and Vebjorg Tingstad examine new types of advertising from a teacher's perspective in Norway.

Andy Ash and Iain MacDonald, through a research intervention with Creative and Media diploma students, set up a rich dialogue between Media and Art Education, looking at how 'digital natives' respond to video art. Wayne O'Brien offers a work-in-progress report on his doctoral project on videogame 'effects' and the interplay between teacher-researcher in his experience. His useful literature review is one example of how the boundaries between technologies and forms have become so blurred. Finally, Dan Ashton re-examines the theory/practice question in relation to where Higher Education and employment intersect.

MERJ 01:02 also includes a comprehensive set of reviews – of the second edition of *The Media Teacher's Book*, the fifth of *The Media Student's Book*, *Teaching Media in Primary Schools*, *Zizek and the Media* and a new work from the scholar who coined the term 'digital native', Mark Prensky. We also have a report from this year's Media Education Summit – papers from which will be included in MERJ 02:01 (Spring 2011), some news about recent developments at the Media Education Association (MEA) and a list of conferences for people interested in our area.

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