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**Going “Unplugged”
Exploring Students’ Relationship with the Media
and its Pedagogic Implications**

CEMP Pedagogic Innovation Fund

Final Evaluation Report

© Dr Roman Gerodimos

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The Media School

Bournemouth University

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Timeline of the core “Unplugged” study and follow-up pedagogic project

August 2010	“Unplugged” experiment designed at the Salzburg Academy on Media & Global Change
October 2010	“Unplugged” experiment takes place around the world Core data collection completed at Bournemouth University (n=128)
November 2010	Post-experiment questionnaire data collection (n=169)
January 2011	Post-experiment questionnaire data analysis
February 2011	Textual analysis of student reflections from core experiment
March 2011	Reflective analysis of data vis-à-vis learning and teaching strategies Data dissemination - Final Evaluation Report
May 2011	Data dissemination - Journalism Research Group Research Seminar

1. Background, Aim and Outline of the “Unplugged” Research Project

In October 2010, Bournemouth University joined 18 other universities from around the world (Africa, Latin and North America, Asia and Europe) in the biggest global media experiment of its kind. The study, entitled “Unplugged: 24 Hours without Media”, was launched at the 4th Salzburg Academy on Media & Global Change and is led by Prof. Susan Moeller (University of Maryland). It involved thousands of media students giving up all use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for 24 consecutive hours and engaging in a process of reflection about their relationship with media.

Participants pledged to give up all types and outlets of mediated communication including mobile phones and smart-phones, tablets and mp3 players, TV, newspapers, radio and the internet, music/DVD players, video games etc with the exception of books and landline telephones. Having completed the experiment – regardless of having made it through the full 24 hour period or not – students completed a short online survey (demographic and baseline variables on media habits) and wrote a reflective piece addressing a few key questions [see **Appendix 1** for the brief handed out to students]. The aim of this experiment was to encourage students to reflect on the role of the media both in their own lifeworld and daily routines but also in society at large. Whether students managed to complete the full 24 hours without media was not as important as their own thoughts and feelings in response to the lack of media; the changes that they implemented to their routines and daily activities; their reflections regarding those in society who do not have access to the media; and the effects of this change to their study, socialisation, free time and physical activities.

At Bournemouth University the “Unplugged” study was conducted by Dr Roman Gerodimos with the assistance of Shelley Thompson. Five hundred first year students from two Academic Groups at the Media School (Journalism & Communication; Corporate & Marketing Communications) were invited to participate as an integral but non-assessed part of a Level C unit (Media, Journalism & Society for J&C; Communications & Research Skills for CMC). In the event, 128 of those students took part in the “Unplugged” experiment. All but one student are enrolled in the three undergraduate programmes of the Journalism & Communication Academic Group (BA (Hons) Multi-Media Journalism, BA (Hons) Communication & Media, BA (Hons) English). While the brief specified a minimum word count of 300 words for the reflective pieces, most students wrote much longer pieces with the total dataset reaching 60,000 words.

2. Objectives and Outline of the Pedagogic (Follow-Up) Project

After the completion of the core experiment, a follow-up project was carried out in order to examine the implications of the study for the teaching of media theory, focusing in particular on the pedagogic benefits of “Unplugged”. Given the lack of participation observed amongst CMC students, we were particularly interested in the reasons for which some students chose not to carry out the experiment, as well as in the obvious question of what those who did participate gained from it.

Hence, a post-experiment survey was carried out across all student cohorts that had been originally invited to participate (n=169, including 87 students who chose not to participate in “Unplugged”). This was followed by a textual analysis of all reflective pieces submitted by the students who completed the experiment (n=128) in order to identify explicit statements of pedagogic benefits in the participants’ own narratives. Finally, and in light of the data outlined

here, we reflected on the main pedagogic implications of the “Unplugged” experiment while also considering ways and means of incorporating the lessons from this study into the teaching and learning process for the Level C Media, Journalism & Society unit.

3. Step A: The post-experiment questionnaire

The post-experiment survey comprised two sections, each being applicable to those who either did take part in the study (the “participants”) or who chose not to even attempt the experiment (the “non-participants”) (see **Appendix 2**).

Profile of post-experiment survey participants:

- n=169
- 67.5% female
- 91.7% from the UK
- 51.5% “non-participants”

TABLE 1: KEY FINDINGS FOR “PARTICIPANTS”	
Found the experiment somewhat / very useful	83.5%
Found the experiment somewhat / very difficult to complete	89.9%
Faced practical issues that challenged their participation	67.5%
Participation had direct impact on that day’s study routine	26.2%
Benefit – “gave me sense of relationship with media ”	84.1%
Benefit – “encountered alternative materials / people”	15.8%
Benefit – “helped me relate theory to practice ”	8.5%
No benefit to learning	13.4%
No statistically significant association was established between gender and participation, practical issues or benefits	

The great majority of students felt that taking part in the “Unplugged” experiment was a useful albeit very challenging experience. By far the biggest educational benefit emerging from this post-experiment survey is gaining a sense of one’s relationship with the media (**Table 1**). Yet, it is important to note that less than 1 in 10 participants felt that the experiment helped them “relate theory to practice”, which reveals a fascinating (and somewhat worrying) gap between students’ lifeworld and their study of the media. Given the wealth of educational benefits highlighted by the students themselves (as established through the textual analysis, see section 4 below), this may be due to a misperception, or inadequate understanding, of the role/relevance of theory or of the purpose of the curriculum. This point is addressed further in section 5.

TABLE 2: KEY FINDINGS FOR “NON-PARTICIPANTS”			
Reasons for not participating	Learning	Media	Other
It would interfere with my studies	49.4%		
I couldn't live without (...)		39.3%	
Felt it was going to be too hard		29.2%	
I was afraid I'd miss something		20.2%	
It was not assessed	11.2%		
I couldn't see the point of doing it	10.1%		
It was too much work	6.7%		
Other			6.7%

The analysis of the reasons for which students chose not to participate in the “Unplugged” experiment also revealed a fascinating pattern. One in two respondents thought that taking part would “interfere” with their studies (**Table 2**), which confirms the previous finding i.e. that some students could not directly link the experiment to the formal learning process. It is also interesting that many students did not participate because of their dependence on media, even though we had explicitly and repeatedly explained that we are much more interested in their post-experiment reflections rather than on whether they would manage to last the full 24 hours without media.

4. Step B: Textual analysis of student reflections

A preliminary reading of the participants’ reflective pieces showed that many students had in their own narratives explicitly highlighted reflections about the media and pedagogic benefits as a direct result of taking part in the experiment. Hence, a systematic textual analysis was manually performed on the entire dataset of the core “Unplugged” study with the specific purpose of identifying such pedagogic benefits (or “take-aways”). It should be noted that the reflective pieces provided us with an extremely rich and dense set of narratives including subtle as well as direct statements that could be interpreted as signifying pedagogic benefits that relate to students’ understanding of the media.

However, for the purposes of this project we chose to capture only those segments of the reflective pieces that explicitly linked a pedagogic benefit to participating in the study. That is to say, only sentences showing an explicit cognitive or logical link between participation and reflection were included in the coding. Countless examples of such links can be found in the reflective pieces, such as: "The key thing that I learnt over this 24hours is...", "It showed me that...", "on reflection I realised that...", "I think my experience has reminded me that...", "I

certainly think that unplugged has made me notice...", "To me, this highlighted how...", "this experiment has illustrated just how much...", "I suppose that this demonstrates...", "If anything, this experiment has shown that...", "“Unplugged” was successful in exposing...", "I believe that doing this experiment has revealed that I..."

Following this process of data coding inevitably means that some references to educational benefits were discarded because it was not explicitly stated that the reflection had been reached as a direct result of taking part in the experiment (hence the student might have already reached that understanding regardless of the experiment). Still, the coding showed that most students went considerably beyond the narrow brief of the experiment and reflected substantively about the role of media in society and in our everyday life.

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029
When I was first told about the experiment, I thought it was going to be easy. I have good self-regulation and I thought the most difficult bit would be trying to avoid other peoples' media. To an extent I was right. My flatmates like to blare out their music so I had to be like a hermit and keep to my room. It has taught me that the media is inescapable, anything short of setting up camp in a field and you are pretty much guaranteed to come face to face with some kind of media, whether it be poster advertisements or radio programmes.

Other than having to keep my door permanently shut, I had to hide my iPod to prevent me from lapsing and I made sure that any computer work was done before so I only had work that used books. The most exciting part of my day was doing laundry and I got a little too transfixed by watching washing going around in the tumble dryer. I guess it goes to show that the media is not only a source of knowledge, but it is also a source of entertainment and gives you something to do. Although I think I achieved more in 'unplugged' 24 hours than I would have done if I was allowed access to different ports of media. The media has a tendency to distract us.

I think the thing I missed the most was using my 'iPod.' I love music and I couldn't live without it. I was just really bored most of the day as all I could hear was silence and I kept thinking: "I think I will put some music on," but then I remembered I couldn't and I can safely say that I made it through the whole 24 hours. Ironically I think I could live without knowing the news and watching television. It only occurred to me through the process of being 'unplugged' that the media is taking the place of the community. It's a

globalised community, bringing people from all different cultures together, all talking about what is essentially 'gossip' like a more major version of what would be heard at a village fete. People no longer talk to one another as they can gain knowledge without having to leave their comfort zone. If you think about people like 'the Kayapo tribe' in the Brazilian rainforest, they don't have access to any media, but they are still living fulfilled lives. They may not know what is happening in Europe, but they are happy and content, therefore they are not missing out on anything as otherwise they would desire it. You can't miss what you don't know about.

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030

Comment: 8. Facilitated awareness of media use as a social norm /unavoidable

Comment: 2. Facilitated awareness of society's reliance on media

Comment: 4. Facilitated prioritisation of messages and activities

Comment: 2. Facilitated awareness of society's reliance on media

Comment: 11. Facilitated awareness of withdrawal to the private sphere due to excessive media use

Comment: 6. Facilitated appreciation of cultures that are not dependent on media

The data analysis showed that, of the 128 students who took part, only 14 did not explicitly identify any specific benefit to their understanding of the media's role in society or of our relationship with it. A list of distinct benefits (codes) was developed during the coding process. Discarding multiple references to the same code within the same piece, 374 references to different pedagogic benefits were highlighted in total (**Table 3**).

The two commonest reflections reached through this first-hand experience of going without media were the extent of the participant's personal reliance on the media as well as that of society at large (in fact only 11 participants did not make an explicit reference to either of these two reflections).

Furthermore, the list includes a range of valuable reflections that directly relate to the core subject matter of the media theory unit (Media, Journalism & Society) as part of which this study took place. For instance, taking part in this experiment led many students to

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appreciate cultures that are not so dependent on the media, as well as to re-evaluate their priorities, routines, perception of time, and use of private/public space. One of the most pertinent reflections was the awareness of media use as a widely accepted – and often unavoidable – social norm. While many participants wished to refrain from using the media, they realised that this was not only very difficult to achieve but it might also lead to social isolation as constant media use is now expected of us by our immediate social environment; it has become a fundamental “glue” for the social fabric, while key social rituals revolve around the shared consumption of media narratives (e.g. watching reality TV shows on a Saturday).

TABLE 3: PEDAGOGIC BENEFITS EXPLICITLY IDENTIFIED BY PARTICIPANTS IN THEIR REFLECTIVE PIECES

Code	Benefit	Frequency
01	Facilitated awareness of personal reliance on media	83
02	Facilitated awareness of society’s reliance on media	68
07	Facilitated appreciation of the benefits of media / ICT use	37
09	Facilitated appreciation of non-mediated activities and communication	33
08	Facilitated awareness of media as social norm / unavoidable	24
24	Found the experiment interesting / thought-provoking	24
06	Facilitated appreciation of cultures not dependent on media	22
11	Facilitated awareness of withdrawal to private sphere due to excessive media use	20
12	Facilitated awareness of self / own behaviour	15
05	Facilitated appreciation of older media forms / communication skills	9
22	Would like to repeat / try experiment for longer	7
10	Facilitated observation of other people’s media uses	7
13	Facilitated re-evaluation of time availability	6
04	Facilitated prioritisation of messages and activities	5
21	Would encourage others to participate	3
25	Has implemented / will implement changes to routine due to taking part in the experiment	3
03	Facilitated awareness of reliance on / importance of socialisation	3
26	Discussed issues raised by the experiment with others	2
14	Facilitated awareness of independence from the media	2
23	Distracted/lapsed but continued experiment because it’s valuable	1

5. Step C: Incorporating the lessons of “Unplugged” into the teaching & learning process

Based on the preliminary analysis of the data from the core “Unplugged” study, and in light of the evidence produced through the follow-up pedagogic project, the following conclusions can be reached:

- ✚ Apart from its primary by-products in terms of the research into young people’s relationship with information and communication technologies, the “Unplugged” experiment produced a range of significant and tangible pedagogic benefits. These are directly relevant, and can contribute, to the undergraduate media theory curriculum (e.g. Level C Media, Journalism & Society unit). Furthermore, while initially reluctant, the great majority of students ultimately felt that taking part in the experiment was valuable and thought-provoking. Therefore, it is recommended that **“Unplugged” should become an embedded part of the L&T process** for this unit, e.g. by being carried out once a year at Level C, preferably shortly after the commencement of Term 1.
- ✚ It was reiterated that **the role of the post-experiment reflective piece is fundamental to the learning process**. That is to say, “going without media” for a set time is not adequate on its own as an important part of the reflective process took place while participants were articulating their thoughts on paper as part of the written exercise. This can be inferred both from the volume and richness of that data, as well as from the logical and reflective lines of thought contained in the students’ written narratives.
- ✚ The experiment should be followed by an **in-class “de-briefing” / debating session** in which students have the chance to discuss their experiences in a group setting, as well as to be presented with the main findings of the research. Given the problematic link that was identified between students’ perceptions of their own lifeworld and the formal theoretical element of the curriculum, such a session could also be used to draw links between their first-hand experiences/reflections and key theoretical debates.
- ✚ Furthermore, **follow-up activities** (e.g. for small groups) could be developed as part of the teaching and learning process that would allow students to **draw linkages between the benefits** to their understanding of the media that they had identified (e.g. appreciation of non-mediated cultures, media use as a social norm, withdrawal to the private sphere) and scholarly theories (e.g. Elihu Katz’s theories of segmentation and media events) as well as case studies.
- ✚ A certain tension between the experiment’s voluntary / non-assessed nature and its potential contribution to student learning was identified. One in two students who did not complete this assignment thought that “it would interfere with my studies”, even though the use of books was allowed and students were allowed to choose any consecutive 24 hours (including during the weekend). This pattern was reinforced by those who could not see the point of the assignment or that chose to ignore it because it was not assessed. This problem could be tackled by **reinforcing its value and relevance to the learning process** in the run-up to the experiment period, although by overemphasising its importance there is the danger of pre-empting or leading students’ written responses

Appendix 1: “Unplugged” Experiment Brief



bacom | baeng | bammj
media, journalism & society

18 – 31 October 2010

UNPLUGGED is the biggest global media experiment ever.

It will take place simultaneously in five continents: Africa, Asia, Europe, North & South America. Thousands of students across the world will go without media for 24 hours. The Media School at Bournemouth University is the only institution hosting the study in the UK.

Instructions for students

Your assignment is to find a **24-hour period during which you pledge to give up all media:**

no internet, no newspapers or magazines, no TV, no radio, no mobile phones / smartphones, no iPods or iPads, no music, no films etc. No Facebook, no emails, no texting, no computer games.

If you lapse by mistake (i.e. you answer your mobile phone without realising it), do not then “give-up”. Note the mistake and go on to finish your 24 hours.

If you do NOT make it the full 24 hours without lapse, be honest about it. How long did you make it? What happened? What do you think it means about you?

Although you may need to use your computer for homework or work, try to pick a time when you can go without using it – which may mean that you have to **plan your work** so that you can get it done before or after your 24-hour media-free period.

Your grade does **not** depend on whether you went 24 hours, but we expect that you all will make it through the entire time without using any forms of media.

After you have completed your 24 hours you are to **write about your experiences**. Your comments should be at least 300 words.

In your comments, **reflect on the following questions:**

- What about your day: How different was it and did you adapt your routine?
- What feelings did you experience during the 24 hours?
- Were you surprised either by how hard or how easy it was?
- What does your experience say about you, about our society and about how you – and everyone around you – use media?
- If you find that you are tied to media, what about those in our society who are not connected? Is there something they're missing? Is there something you're missing out on by being so surrounded by media?

Type up your reflections into a Word document (including your full name and whether you are BACOM, BAENG or BAMMJ) and **email** it to Roman Gerodimos **from your university account** as soon as you have completed the experiment

Email: rgerodimos@bournemouth.ac.uk

Finally, after sending the email, please complete this **short online survey:**

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/mediafree>

The questionnaire does not take more than five minutes to complete and it is vital for the study.

All responses will be anonymised. We only ask for your names in order to establish who has completed the study. Please note, **there are no right or wrong answers**; we simply ask you to reflect on how you felt during the experiment. If you have any questions about this study please email either Roman Gerodimos at rgerodimos@bournemouth.ac.uk or Shelley Thompson at shelleyt@bournemouth.ac.uk

Appendix 2: Post-experiment questionnaire

Page 1 (for those who did not participate)



bam | baamc | bammj | bacomm | baeng
Post-study questionnaire

Please take a few moments to answer the questions provided. Your answers will help us evaluate the Unplugged research project and explore how students use the media in daily life. In advance, we'd like to thank you for your time.

Instructions: *Please circle as appropriate.*

1. Did you participate in the Unplugged research?

No *Yes (please turn over)*

2. On which course are you currently enrolled?

English	
Advertising	Marketing
Communication & Media	Multimedia Journalism

3. What is your sex?

Female Male

4. What country are you from? (please state) _____

5. Which of the following media do you use at least weekly (circle all that apply)?

Personal computer	Blog (<i>read or write</i>)
Tablet computer (<i>eg. iPad</i>)	Instant Messaging
Smart phone (<i>eg. Blackberry</i>)	Internet
Mobile phone (not smart phone)	Radio
Landline telephone	Television
E-mail	Newspaper
Social networking site (<i>eg. Facebook</i>)	Books
	Other: _____

6. Why did you choose to NOT participate in the Unplugged experiment (circle any that are appropriate)?

Felt it was going to be too hard	It would interfere with my studies
I couldn't see the point of doing it	It was not assessed
It was too much work	I couldn't live without
I was afraid I'd miss something	_____

Page 2 (for those who did participate)

1. Did you participate in the Unplugged experiment?

Yes _____ No (please turn over) _____

2. On which course are you currently enrolled?

Advertising _____ Marketing _____
Communication & Media _____ Multimedia Journalism _____
English _____

3. What is your sex?

Female _____ Male _____

4. What country are you from? (please state) _____

5. How was it to participate (please place an X in the box between each pair of words where you believe appropriately describes how you felt)?

Useful Waste of time
Easy Difficult

6. Did you face any practical problems that challenged your participation?

No _____ Yes, please provide an example: _____

7. Did participating in this study affect your learning?

No, I did it on a free day _____
Yes, I needed to seek out alternative sources for information _____
Other: (please state) _____

8. How did participation benefit your learning (circle all that apply)?

It gave me a sense of my relationship with media _____
It helped me relate theory to practice _____
I encountered material or people I would not normally encounter _____
It did not benefit my learning _____

Thank you very much!

If you have any questions or comments, please contact Shelley Thompson at shelleyt@bournemouth.ac.uk or Roman Gerodimos at rgerodimos@bournemouth.ac.uk