

“If media studies as an academic discipline is delegitimised then it becomes too easy to dismiss its critiques; critiques that often circulate around questions of power, influence, representation and value. This might be in the interests of politicians, even journalists, but it cannot be in the interests of an informed citizenry.”

This is the conclusion of Lucy Bennett and Jenny Kidd’s 2017 [paper](#), “Myths about media studies: the construction of media studies education in the British press”, published in *Continuum: The Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*. They are spot on.

Journalists can overstate their entitlement to the public’s trust. In response to the threat posed to good governance by fake news, they tend to take the view that if only citizens were reminded of the value of “real news” – and were prepared to pay for it – democracy would be less fragile. Politicians, meanwhile, advocate a shallow, safeguarding response, calling for quick-fix media literacy schemes and initiatives to verify legitimate news stories,

But teachers, academics and students in the media studies community of practice take a more rigorous approach. And a year-long [project](#) that I recently led, bringing together US and UK media literacy researchers with teachers, librarians, journalists and young people, concluded that the best antidote to fake news would be to make media studies mandatory at school. Unlike the “giving fish” approach of reactive resources and small-scale projects focused on competences, teaching media studies in school teaches future citizens to fish for themselves.

Studying the *mediation* of the social world and the influence of media in all aspects of our lives has always been necessarily uncomfortable, and academically difficult, both to study and to teach. But it is becoming ever more necessary. Moreover, the healthy enrolment figures for university media studies courses suggests that students recognise this, even if the media itself does not. Some credit can perhaps be taken by the colleagues from across the discipline that have provided deconstructions of the perennial “Mickey Mouse” attacks, often channelled through the subject associations.

The media’s antipathy to media studies amounts to a thinly veiled display of class prejudice: an othering of a non-traditional subject often taken by non-traditional students at non-traditional universities. Professional journalists are, after all, no more representative of the general public than politicians, given the nepotism and networks of privilege that operate around media internships and recruitment. As the *Guardian* journalist Owen Jones, a friend of media studies, [put it](#) in 2018: “If you have so many people from such similar backgrounds – from a small and relatively privileged slither of British society – then similar prejudices and worldviews will reinforce each other.”

And while it may be true that progression to postgraduate study is lower in media studies than in other disciplines, that is surely not unconnected to the relatively high employability of media graduates. It is also related to the subject’s status as a semi-permeable membrane that takes in influences from a wide range of other disciplines and feeds graduates and scholarly work back into them. One person’s lack of disciplinary coherence is another’s interdisciplinary contribution to knowledge.

Media studies is always a fusion of theory and practice, increasingly practised in the “third space” between industry conventions and counter-narratives for social justice. As such, students are usually assessed with regard not so much to their static knowledge as to their ideas for “doing media differently”.

Our project captured a range of different views on the subject's essence, but one common thread was the impossibility of disconnecting the study of media from the study of power. So if healthy numbers of undergraduates are engaged in the critical deconstruction of mediated power, that is surely a very healthy thing in a democratic society. But, equally, it's easy to see why the media might see that as a threat.

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