A Site of Conflict and Resistance: The Impact of the 2014 Curriculum Reforms on A' Level Media Studies

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Abstract

This thesis explores a pivotal moment in the development of A' Level Media Studies, precipitated by the UK government's 2014 educational reforms. Implemented in September 2017, these reforms represented a radical departure from what had gone before, and led to significant debate and discontent amongst the media teaching community. The study focuses on how these changes affected media studies, based on the lived experiences of teachers navigating the new specifications. Using the author's dual status as a teacher-researcher, this research adopts a multi-method approach, combining critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1989, 1995) with netnography (Kozinets 2020) and a hermeneutic phenomenological 'attitude' (Suddick et al 2020) to build a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of the real-life experiences of media studies teachers against the political backdrop of education reform.

The study addresses four key questions: the impact of the 2014 reforms on media studies' curriculum and subject identity, the effect on teachers' pedagogic experiences, the reforms' influence on teacher agency and professional identity, and how the subject might evolve in the future. Research methods include critical discourse analysis of policy documents and reform speeches, a netnography of three online media teacher communities, and a range of qualitative interviews with media teachers and other key figures in media education. Findings reveal widespread dissatisfaction among teachers regarding the new curriculum's content and structure, with many expressing frustration, disillusionment and, in some cases, anger. However, the study also reveals a renewed ideological commitment to the subject, with educators advocating for a more flexible, dynamic curriculum.

The thesis argues that the rigid and narrow conception of knowledge underpinning the reforms is incompatible with the 'spirit' of media studies. Instead, it proposes an alternative conception of knowledge—*the dynamic episteme*—which offers a more fluid, agile, and responsive approach that acknowledges the collective ways in which knowledge is constructed by those vested in the subject's development. This theoretical concept can also extend beyond media studies to broader educational contexts. By providing a more adaptable understanding of knowledge, *the dynamic episteme* presents alternative ways to conceptualize how knowledge is co-constructed in contextually relevant ways, generating new understandings about how other subject disciplines may develop and evolve.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This research sets out to examine the impact of the Conservative government's 2014 curriculum reform on A' Level Media Studies, a reform which was characterised by conflict and met with resistance by those invested in its implementation. The importance of this research lies in the examination of a subject under attack at the very time it is appears to be most needed, and poses all sorts of other questions about cultural politics and power structures in education discourse on a wider level. This research seeks to build a 'thick description' of the interplay and dynamic relations between teacher communities, subject identities and policy, and capture a critical moment of curriculum change in the subject-specific context of media studies. However, it also discloses how curriculum change can play out, influence and impact on an individual, institutional, national and, to some extent, international level. This points to the generalisable significance of the study and how its findings might inform and provide insight into other subject disciplines and fields of education in the context of curriculum change and reform, subject identity, teacher agency and professional identity.

There has been comparatively little focus on the role schools play in media education, not least research done by practising teachers. With the virtual eradication of media from all other areas of the national curriculum at a time when there is a fundamental need for critical literacy and education to navigate the ever-growing, ever-complex digital world, A' Level Media Studies, alongside other subjects such as English, sociology and computing/digital production, represents one of the prime academic qualifications at post-16 authentically positioned to do this. This research is deliberately centred around the lived experiences of media teachers in the context of curriculum reform, and presents a renewed opportunity to reinstate the voices and perspectives of teachers from the classroom back into the research field.

In September 2017, following the UK government's 2014 wholesale reform of A' Levels and GCSEs that included the move from modular to linear qualifications, all media studies students and teachers embarked on new specifications - the result of a lengthy, convoluted

and complex process involving the policy makers (DfE[1], Ofqual[2]), the examination boards and relevant stakeholders. There were initial fears that A' Level Media Studies would be shelved entirely as a qualification when it didn't appear in the initial announcements of subjects approved for reform. When the announcement came in March 2015 that the subject would be approved for first teaching in 2017, initial relief at the subject's 'survival' was subsequently tainted by the wrangling that ensued between the different parties over what was to be considered its core content. The resulting curriculum framework was seen as somewhat a pyrrhic victory by a significant number of those who are involved in the 'on-the-ground' delivery of the subject.

While beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to recognise the vocational context of the subject and its relevance to this research. Precipitated by the publication of the Wolf Report in 2011, commissioned by the then education secretary, Michael Gove, vocational media has undergone significant reform of its own. The government's vision to have a streamlined tripartite system of A' Levels, T Levels and apprenticeships has courted much criticism from the education sector on the basis this system will reduce student choice, close down viable pathways at post-16 and "could set progress in widening access to higher education back by decades" (Atherton 2021). This also points to a burgeoning (and problematic) hierarchical bifurcation of the subject into an 'academic' subject for study ('knowledge') and vocational ('skills'), with minimal cross-over between the two.
These shifts and schisms described provide a necessary backdrop to the questions this thesis asks about the instrumentalization of knowledge and reproduction of inequalities.

A Brief History of Reform

Media studies, as an academic subject for study, emerged out of the progressive educational reforms of the 1960s and 70s from the much wider and interdisciplinary field of cultural studies in UK universities. A reaction to the culturally elitist 'discriminate and resist' legacy of FR Leavis and Denys Thompson, the seminal work of The Centre for the Contemporary Studies of Cultural Studies (CCCS) founded by Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall at The

[1] Department for Education, a ministerial department responsible for children's services and education, including early years, schools, higher and further education policy, apprenticeships and wider skills in England.
[2] The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation is a non-ministerial government department that regulates qualifications, exams and tests in England

University of Birmingham in 1964, laid the foundations for a subject that embraced the study of popular culture and the cultural value of texts within the mass media.

There is a dearth of research and writing about the place of media studies in schools compared to Higher Education (Golding 2019). This is likely to be in some part due, particularly in the early days of the subject's development, to the less formal and more arbitrary ways it manifested within schools' curriculum. Media studies was introduced as a CSE[3] and CEE[4] in the 1970s, but unlike the centralised and standardised nature of the school curriculum today, these were devised and assessed by teachers themselves and ratified by exam boards on a local or regional level only. There were attempts to introduce practical media teaching resources into the classroom (such as Hall and Whannel's 'The Popular Arts', 1964) and some regional appointments of advisory teachers, but whilst there wasn't a lack of passionate and innovative individuals driving the teaching of this new subject, many initiatives, like the Thames Television studio set up for school use, tended to be London-centric and the lack of a joined-up or consistent approach between regions and schools where media was taught, meant that it wasn't until the introduction of the national curriculum in 1988 that media studies existed as a nationally recognised formal qualification in the school curriculum in the form of GCSE and A' Level Media Studies.

'Curriculum 2000' was the last significant education reform before the reforms of 2014. Preceding its implementation, the National Advisory Committee of Creative and Cultural Education published the report 'All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education' in 1999 (Robinson 1999, Lucas 2019). It was commissioned by David Blunkett, Labour's Education Secretary at the time, alongside three other reports ('Citizenship', `Personal and `Social Education' and `Sustainable Development') and whilst it was only 'accompanied by a lukewarm endorsement' by Blunkett, and appeared to promote that the purpose of creative education lay in its economic benefits (Buckingham 2001), it opened up a new rhetoric around creativity in education.

[3] The Certificate of Secondary Education ran between 1965 and 1986 until the first GCSE was introduced. The CSE was taken by 16 year olds as an alternative to O' Levels.

[4] The Certificate of Extended Education was first introduced in 1978 at post-16 level and was an alternative qualification to A' Level.

Curriculum 2000 was QCAs's umbrella moniker for the reforms that saw the introduction of new modular system of AS and A' Levels where students could take and be awarded subjects at AS Level as standalone qualifications, or opt to carry them forward as 50% of their final A' Level grade. The modular system also created greater flexiblity, inclusivity and wider choice, as students could select a broader range of subjects at AS level and then specialise at A' Level (Priestley 2003). The corollary of this was that many students who may have been dissuaded from choosing less 'traditional' subjects such as media studies under a linear system were now able to broaden their choice.

In the decade that followed the introduction of Curriculum 2000, through to a peak in the early 2010s, the number of students taking A' Level Media Studies increased (see Figure 1).

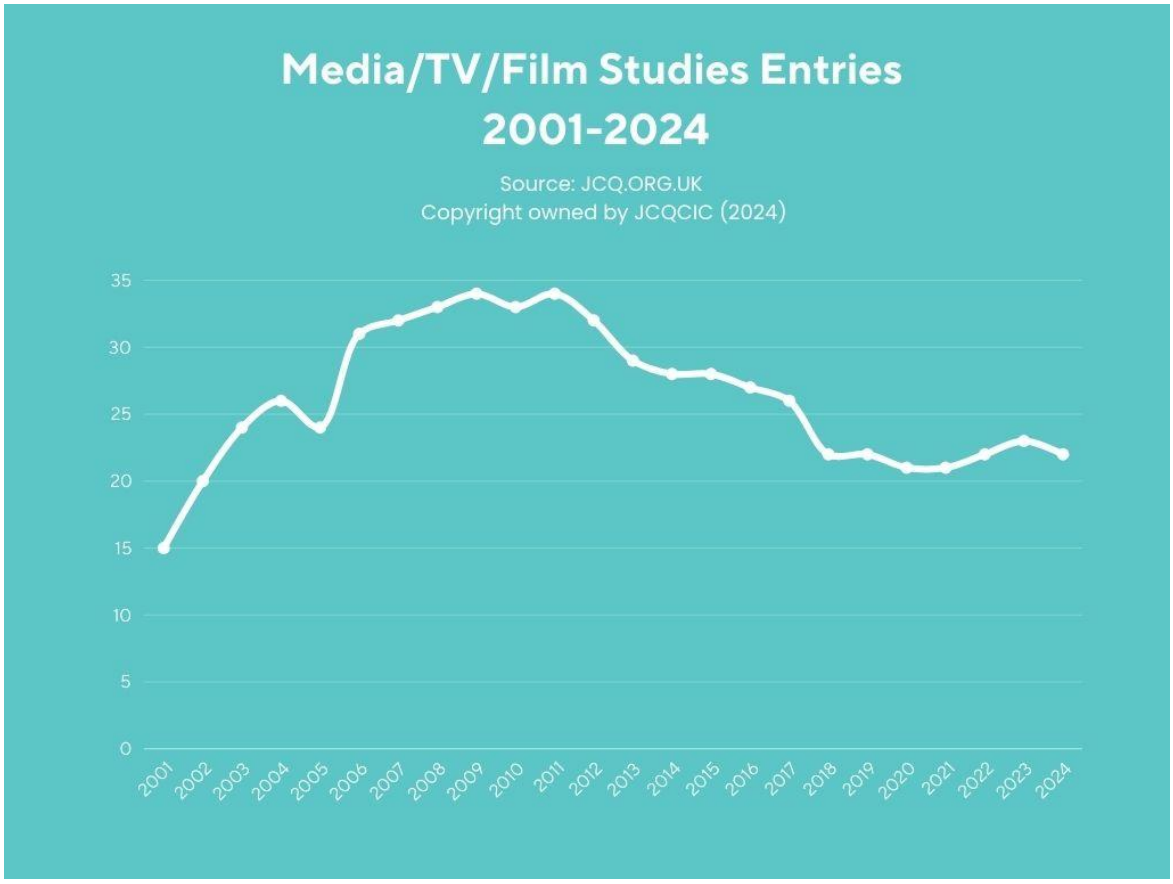

Figure 1. A' Level Entries Media/Film/TV Studies 2001-2024 (Data copyright owned by JCQCIC (2024))

It is interesting to note that since the reintroduction of the linear model and the implementation of the reformed media studies' specifications in 2017, at the time of writing, student numbers taking the subject have declined by almost a third. In comparison, the UK government's drive for STEM in education since 2010 and the subsequent rise in student numbers taking these subjects correlates with the decline in students numbers taking media studies, along with arts and humanities based subjects.

For example, over 85,000 more students gained an A' Level in Maths than in A' Level Media Studies in 2024 compared to just over 49, 000 in 2011 (see Figure 2)

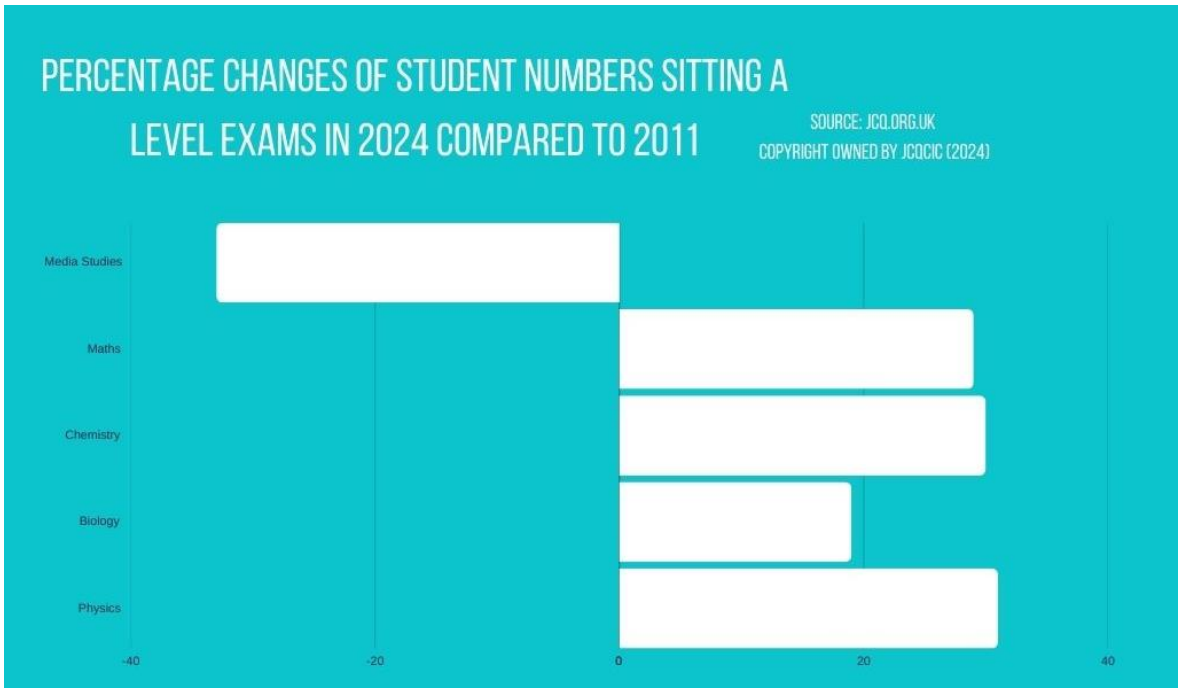

Figure 2. Percentage Changes of Student Numbers Sitting A' Level Exams in 2024 compared to 2011. (Data copyright owned by JCQCIC (2024)

However, despite its popularity with students, it still persists in being a much derided subject, often dismissed in Daily Mail-esque insults such as 'Mickey Mouse' and 'a soft subject' or ascribed mocking terms such as 'trendy' that equate popularity with something of less value (Eg. Barker 1997; Geraghty 2002; Thornham and O'Sullivan 2004; Laughey 2010; Berger 2013; Curran 2013, Bennett and Kidd 2017). Whilst of course not all students who study the subject at Key Stages 4 and 5 will take the subject to graduate level or wish to work in the media industry, this disparity that exists between the actual 'worth' of the subject and its perceived 'worth' devalues not only the subject as a qualification but potentially stunts the economic wellbeing of students who elect to take the subject in the first place.

In addition, it seems incongruous and anachronistic that, in a society permeated by a discourse of anxieties over the influence of social media, a subject which advocates for critical debate about our media-saturated world, is seen by some, and vociferously criticised by others (largely sections of right-leaning press and commentariat), as lower status, raising further potential questions over hegemonic influence and the reproduction of social

inequalities. At the very least, there is an obvious dissonance and troubled relationship between those who make policy and those who are tasked with implementing it.

In November 2014, despite fears that the subject would not be taken forward for reform and that it would cease to exist as a legitimate qualification for study, GCSE and A' Level Media Studies were finally accredited for reform in the 'General Conditions of Recognition'. For Media Studies, the aim of the reform was to increase the rigour of assessment as well as improve its comparability, manageability, and to ensure the grade range was reliably differentiated. In addition, there was to be the removal of any overlap between media and film studies qualifications. However, as mentioned previously, David Buckingham, in his comprehensive account of the reform process, 'The Strangulation of Media Studies', states:

> "These broad principles are worth bearing in mind, not least because the outcomes of the process have been very different." (2017, p.1)

The process itself was not straightforward and according to Buckingham, it was not objective or transparent but "a jumble of confusion, prejudice and ignorance – and, behind that, some very clear instances of political interference" (ibid, p5).

That political interference came in the form of Nick Gibb, the Minister of State for Schools, who, like Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education, the instigator of the reforms, is a known and vocal advocate for 'traditional' education. For example, he makes the comparison between two of the grammar schools he attended as a child:

> "What was good about [the first school] was it was rigorous. Every lesson was rigorous, even things like music: it was taught in the same way as chemistry. [The second school], by contrast, was terrible. There was no rigour there." (The Guardian 2010)

Like Gove, Gibb is heavily influenced by the US educational philosopher, E.D. Hirsch, and both ministers have explicitly stated how his work has informed their own visions of school reform, with Gove being an early advocate for his Core Knowledge books, first published in 2006 in the UK by the right-leaning Civitas. These books focus on knowledge and facts-based learning. Indeed, Gove ended his 2009 speech to the Royal Society of Arts by saying that if he were entrusted with power he "will completely overhaul the curriculum – to ensure that the acquisition of knowledge within rigorous subject disciplines is properly valued and cherished".

The proponents of media studies, therefore, have a harder uphill struggle to not only fight for the survival of the subject at Key Stages 4 and 5, but also in what constitutes the core content of the subject and 'how' it is learned. Indeed, Buckingham speculates whether, ironically, it was the popularity in terms of numbers taking the subject saved it. Perhaps driven by economic reasons, perhaps by the desire of politicians to remain in favour with the electorate, or by the fact it just wasn't a priority to the minister, whatever the reason behind it, A' Level Media Studies survived the cull.

Whilst there was always going to be discussions and potentially controversial decisions made regarding the core content for the new curriculum, given the nature and huge breadth of the subject, what ensued was a lengthy process that started with the DfE. Meetings, convened by the BFI[5] for a consultation process, involved relevant stakeholders from the academic and teaching world as well as representatives from industry trade bodies, exam boards and the DfE.

Buckingham details the lengthy iterative process between the DfE and the exam boards for drawing up a framework for the new curriculum. He talks of "contradictory requirements and impossible demands", "shifting goal posts" and an abstruse traffic light system to indicate how close the framework was to being approved. The presiding influence from Gibb was clear with drafts being returned with comments like "The Minister doesn't like concepts" and clear concern over the quality and demand of content to be included (Buckingham 2017, p. 7). After The Media Education Association (MEA) refused to endorse the framework, Buckingham and Professor Natalie Fenton from Goldsmiths University were enlisted to meet with the Department for Education. After a hasty redraft this was endorsed by The MEA, Skillset and The British Film Institute (BFI). Further re-drafting ensued including a public consultation process and the framework was finally published in early 2016.

Whilst the resulting framework represented success in terms of survival, Buckingham details how the public online consultation appeared to have had no impact in the outcome, and that

[5] The British Film Institute is a film and television non-profit making, charitable organisation which promotes and preserves film-making and television in the United Kingdom

his and Fenton's suggested content had been modified into a more rigid interpretation, particularly where it concerned the inclusion of named theorists:

> "Our draft specified: semiotics (e.g. Barthes); theories of ethnicity (e.g. Hall); political economy (e.g. Curran); and so on. In the published version, however, 'for example' became 'including' – 'theories of semiotics, including Barthes'. In effect, what we had ended up with was a canonical list of compulsory theorists to be studied". (Buckingham 2017, p.9)

Despite concerns over the prescriptive and didactic nature of the framework, in the summer of 2016, exam boards submitted specifications to Ofqual, which had now taken over from the DfE. However, all came back rejected. Issues with timeliness of feedback, shifting requirements and concerns over the quality of the external consultant employed by Ofqual to provide subject specialist expertise, meant that it became a "bureaucratic nightmare" and exam boards had to "second guess the minister" (ibid, p. 15) whose involvement in the whole process was still clear.

The named theorists, attributed to nineteen specific theories, who appear on the framework are perhaps the most radical change evident between the old and new specifications, but the insistence of the addition of 'high quality' set texts is also a significant departure from previous media studies specifications. The impetus for this research was observations of teachers voicing their discontent of the reform which included what Buckingham later sums up as, in his own account of the reform process, a "motley collection" of theorists, some of whom are "sadly outdated", and other concerns over the content which features "writers who by any estimate would be much too difficult for most Master's students, let alone 17-year-olds at A' Level (Baudrillard, Butler)" (ibid, p.17). A detailed analysis of these teacher experiences is outlined in Chapter 6.

A Site of Conflict

As outlined above, media studies' long and fractured history is characterised by internal debates about what should constitute its academic framework and a dissonance in perceptions of its value as a subject by those beyond the media education community. In essence, since its inception, conflict, in one form or another has to a large extent shaped its development as a subject. The coalescence of critical thought, the study of contemporary culture and social change, its practical creative components and interrogation of hegemonic

and ideological positions has imbued media studies with a quality of 'the subversive', which clearly has its importance and attractions, but which is often held in cynicism and, in some cases, contempt by those who make distinctions and judgements about 'high' and 'low' culture, hierarchies of knowledge and their place in the curriculum. Indeed, it may be these very arguments about its worth that hint at a deeper unease, held by those in power, about the subject's 'subversive' inherencies and its ability to equip young people with a more critical mindset – and the resulting ramifications of a more questioning and informed electorate.

Media studies is certainly no stranger to change, competing interests, external scrutiny and public criticism, but it has, to a large extent, been left to develop and control its own curriculum. With the curriculum reforms of 2014, that no longer held true, and what this ultimately represented was a new stage in the life of the subject where external political forces are key drivers in its evolution. This thesis sets out to explore the conflict within the discourse of wider UK educational context, an edu-landscape freighted with the dominance of 'top down' neoliberal policy and the hierarchical assertion about what knowledge 'counts'.

A Site of Resistance?

The corollary of media studies' long history of conflict has built up an accompanying narrative of resistance within it too. Defence has certainly been part of this, with rebuttals to attacks on the subject in the media and justifications of its importance as a subject discipline being published, for example, in the press and online (Eg. Rustin 2016; Price 2019; Brabazon et al 2019; Mcquillan 2021; Weale 2024), the radio (McDougall on Radio 4's Today Programme's 'Defend your discipline!' 2009), academic conferences (Curran at MeCCSA 2013), manifesto publications (CEMP 2011; Buckingham 2019) and other academic publications (Barker 1997; Laughey 2010; Berger 2013; Bennett and Kidd 2016; Thomas 2019).

However, rather than dwelling on the defensive, I wish to frame 'resistance', for the purposes of this thesis, as more positive, cumulative and collective movements rather than specific acts of explicit and individual protest. For example, this research goes on to propose that the informal communities of practice that sprang up around the time of the reformed curriculum coming in have served as a means of reclaiming some of the professional autonomy lost by teachers within the reformed curriculum, and a way of reconstituting a

subject-specific identity and collegiality. I also go on to propose in chapters 5 and 6 that the curriculum reform of media studies is not compatible with the epistemological 'spirit' of the subject and suggest that the online communities of practice represent one type of 'resistance' to the reforms and a key characteristic of what I go on to conceptualise as *the dynamic episteme*.

Insider/Outsider: The Researcher/Practitioner

My own experiences of teaching A' Level Media Studies for over twenty years have afforded me a depth of autoethnographic understanding and reflexivity to inform further academic enquiry, and my research undoubtedly is informed by own subjective experiences. My first hand experiences as a practising classroom teacher and media curriculum area leader during a time of radical curriculum reform fraught with tensions between the policy makers, exam boards and the media educators, provided the impetus for this research. As I explore in Chapter 3, my embeddedness within the teaching community under research has allowed me the kind of cognizance, insight and 'praxis nuance' that a purely 'etic' researcher would not have.

Teachers' experiences of the reform in the time of curriculum change are the deliberate and central focus of this research. As later outlined in more detail in chapter 6 through the findings and discussion of the teacher participant data, negative sentiment regarding the new curriculum for media studies appeared to be widespread amongst the media teaching community and rather than pursue a purely autoethnographic approach, my intention was to mobilise my position as an educator within the media teaching community and gather the qualitative perspectives of other media teachers also experiencing teaching the reformed qualification. I am mindful of the extent to which qualitative research of this nature can provide a fixed view of an objective reality thus I have sought, rather, to capture a 'thick description' and a moment in time in the time line of media studies teaching in schools, to explore how such a radical reform of the media studies curriculum is enacted in real classrooms by real teachers (Miles et al 2014; Pring 2000) and what these findings may offer with regards to the future of the subject. This research may also offer more generalisable findings regarding such things as the impact of reform on education more broadly, debates about knowledge, and who gets to decide what knowledge what knowledge 'counts' as well as and teacher agency and professional identity.

My teaching career began in the year that Curriculum 2000 was introduced, the first reform to bring in modular A' Levels and consequently a wider choice for students - a move that the 2014 curriculum reforms later reversed. Whilst my intention is not to present the teaching and assessment of Curriculum 2000 as uniformly unproblematic (see McDougall 2004), the subsequent decade, in which I taught A' Level Media Studies, could arguably be considered the 'golden age' of the subject, with rising student numbers and relative curriculum autonomy. From the introduction of Curriculum 2000, the subject rose in student numbers sitting the qualification to its peak of popularity in 2011. The course, in this period, represented (and perhaps more sharply in hindsight) a more creative, less prescriptive curriculum which comprised of 50% practical production work and allowed teachers to select their own texts within the parameters of regularly changing unit topics.

The reform in 2014, conversely, can be viewed as a complete reversal of this as it excised teachers' freedom of choice over texts, with the installation of set texts and theorists, a significant reduction in its practical component and the removal of group work, and the perceived overlap with film studies has seen any study of film removed from the media studies curriculum framework save for its audience and institutional contexts. As a member of the media teaching community as the A' Level Media Studies curriculum reform took place, I bore witness to an overriding feeling of negativity that plagued the process from the initial uncertainty over the qualification's approval for reform, to the consultation process over the core subject framework, through to the protracted tensions involved in the different exam board specifications being approved. As stated earlier, there was a great deal of pessimism expressed by a large number of media educators over the course content, and much of this building sentiment was captured on the three main teacher sharing groups on social media, nominally linked to each exam board, and whose membership numbers rose sharply[6] at the same time as each of the specifications were approved.

The online teaching 'communities of practice' (CoPs) (Lave and Wenger 1991) on Facebook were particularly interesting as initial observations showed they appeared to offset, at least

[6] As of July 2024, the three main Facebook Teachers' Groups had nearly 5000 between them (and increase of 67% from when the pilot study data collection period began in 2019), with the Eduqas Facebook group, the first exam board to be approved, at 3, 200 members alone and an increase of 73% from March 2019.

superficially, the 'conflict' exhibited elsewhere in the reform process. These online communities of practice, like other CoPs, offer a social structure and professional support network for individuals, in this case, media teachers teaching a new specification for the first time, or perhaps operating on their own in a department, or, in some cases, teaching out of their subject specialism. They help teachers make sense of new knowledge, and over time, they develop a shared culture and rules of belonging. As they have become established, they have offered members the benefit of archived resources and the knowledge of more experienced 'expert' members and provide a rich environment for teachers to share and build knowledge, and ways to apply new knowledge in practice (Li et al 2009). However, crucially, they also offer, in the time of significant curriculum change, a free, informal forum and professional 'safe space' for teachers to discuss their views and find solidarity in shared experiences, build confidence and strengthen professional alliances.

Whilst the membership of these communities on Facebook appeared to be largely critical of the reforms and unsettled about the changes, they also seemed to represent a form of 'resistance' in that they, as stated earlier, represented a more galvanised, positive and energised approach to the teaching of the subject, actively engaged with supporting each other and innovating as far as they could within the new parameters of the curriculum. - something that, arguably, had not been present – or certainly not as palpable - in the profession for a while. It was the emerging phenomenon of these new CoPs that provided some starting points for qualitative enquiry and it became quickly apparent these self-created learning ecologies needed to be a prominent dimension within my research, and a rich source of dynamic data to capture the surfacing challenges and resistances that the reform provoked.

Qualitative data was generated by the research of these CoPs, in the form of 'field observations' of the online Facebook groups and interviews with individual teachers. The data, which captured these quotidian lived experiences of media teachers, were then set into dialogue with the theoretical framework and literature review to understand meanings in the wider subject context.

Research Design

My insider/outsider status of being both a teacher and researcher, as already outlined, has its

significant benefits in this research but it would be naïve and inadequate to view it as a straight, equal or easy interrelationship. The implicit tension between subjective bias and objectivity has been an invisible but constant cognitive burden throughout the study and I have taken care to attend to both without losing the integrity of either. Adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological 'attitude' (Suddick et al 2020, p. 4), however, has provided a way of approaching this through using the lived experiences of my role as a teacher and transitioning to directing them with a 'systematic and rigorous openness and attentiveness' to explore the possibilities of meanings of the "shared inter-subjective space" (Dahlberg 2006) of the experiences of other media teachers in both the qualitative interviews and the field observations of posts on the Facebook groups.

Within this hermeneutic phenomenological 'attitude', I have employed a multi-methodological approach that encompasses Critical Discourse Analysis and Netnographic methods to elicit a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973), in order to gain the fullest sense of the research area. Figure 3 outlines the research design which I go on to outline in more detail in Chapter 4.

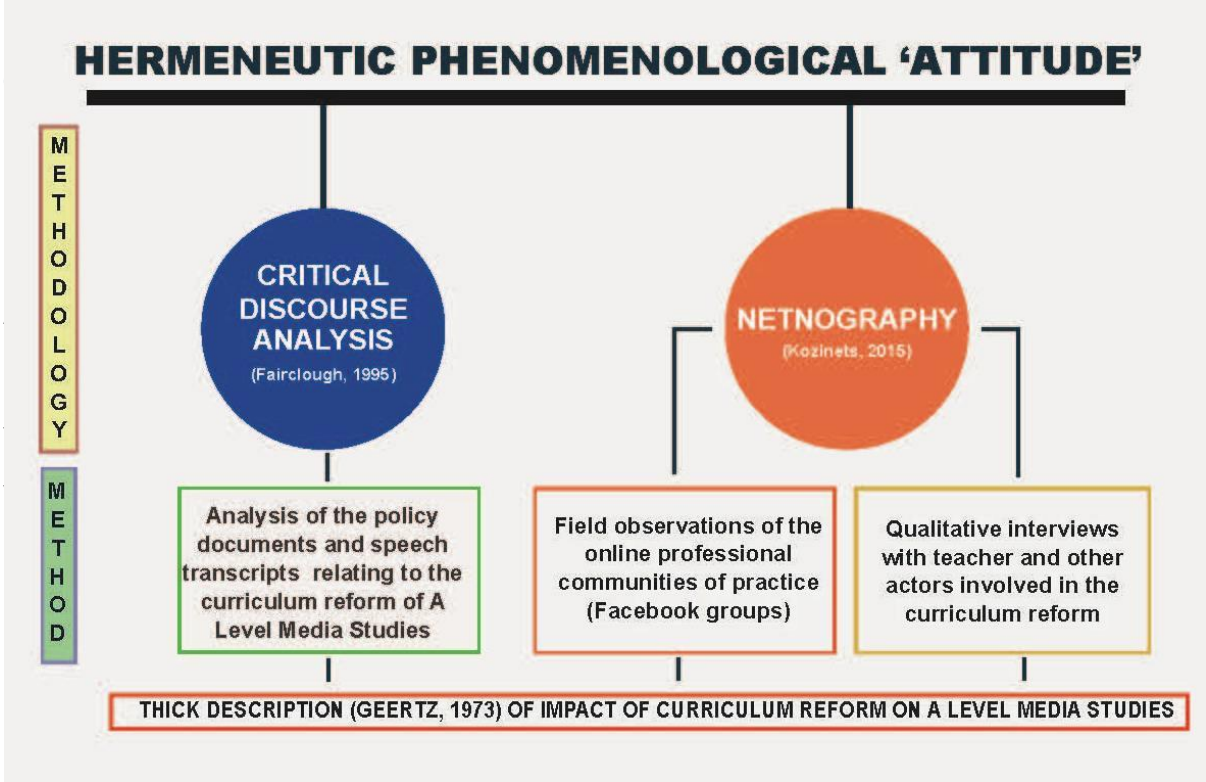

Figure 3 Methodological Framework

By analysing the language used – choice of words, phrases and narrative structures - I critically analyse the underlying ideologies and power relations that inform the Conservative party's approach to education policy. This involves examining how the

reforms are justified, the role of language in shaping public perception, and the impact of these discourses on educational practices and policies. Additionally, I explore how these rhetorical strategies align with broader political and social goals, and how they might influence the educational experiences of students and teachers within the system.

Netnography

Taking the approach of netnography (Kozinets 2010, 2015), a type of digital ethnography characterised by a precise set of methods for data collection and analysis, the qualitative aspect began with phase one of my research which comprised two strands:

1. Field observations and thematically coded analysis of posts on the media teachers' Facebook group with the largest membership over a seven day period (87 posts in total)
2. Eight qualitative semi-structured interviews with a selection of media teachers who were members of the same Facebook group (self-selecting through an open call for participants

This first phase revealed a number of key themes that informed the design of the second phase. Rather than aim for complete systematic field observations of all Facebook posts within a certain period of time, the intention was still to continue with the method of 'naturalistic' passive field observations but, this time, instead select key posts for relevance relating to the curriculum reform, particularly posts garnering multiple comments and/or 'reactions'. This was opened out to all three Facebook groups. However, not long after this period of research started, the first lockdown of the pandemic begun. A' Level exams were cancelled soon after and attention on the Facebook groups naturally took a different turn.

Across both phases, in total 25 semi-structured interviews with media teachers were carried out as well as interviews with individuals in the wider media education community, including participants involved in the reform and consultation process, media subject specialist ITE HE providers, BFI media education, an exam subject officer, and a university media studies lecturer. Over half of the interviews were conducted prior to the first lockdown of the pandemic, but unlike the field observations of the Facebook group, access to interview

participants became significantly better and despite the context in which they took place, the pandemic made very little difference to the quality of the interviews that took place during it. Chapter 3 goes on to details how the data was collected and analysed and the methodological decisions underpinning this.

Research Aims and Questions

As stated earlier, the overarching aim of this research is to build a 'thick description' of the impacts of curriculum reform on A' Level Media Studies and my four research questions outline the parameters of how I have intended to do this. A clear starting point is with the educational ambitions and theoretical underpinnings of the 2014 curriculum reforms and their perceived incompatibility with the media studies curriculum. Connolly (2020) outlines that there have been various attempts by academics, teachers and organisations to "define ideal curricular content for media" (cf. Buckingham 2003; BFI 2000; McDougall 2006) but that these attempts have always resisted laying down any kind of 'fixed' knowledge or a de facto canon of texts to be studied. What these do serve to do, however, is to adumbrate the epistemological 'spirit' of media studies, a subject identity founded on a more expansive curricular approach than the present Govian reforms allow. This 'spirit', whilst a rather nebulous concept, can be loosely described as being characterised by advocacy for pluralist critiques, diverse voices and contemporary texts, teacher agency in textual choice and the equal privileging of practical creative skills with theoretical knowledge. The current curriculum framework determined by education policy does not appear to represent the dynamic nature of a subject rooted in the critiques of contemporary mass media in an accurate or productive way.

The reforms, heavily influenced by the educational philosophy of E.D Hirsch's 'Cultural Literacy' (Eaglestone 2021), promote a curriculum based on a narrow set of facts and 'core knowledge'. Inherent in this approach lies the tacit notion there is a 'canonical' body of texts and incontrovertible 'proper' knowledge to be studied, a knowledge that young people need to have in order to be emancipated and avoid 'the vapid happy talk' as Gove (2013) calls it, of progressive educationalists. In the current edu-landscape, most notably in proliferation on X, (formerly Twitter), progressive education has become a label freighted with negative connotations and framed within a false binary that serves as a divisive mechanism to bolster the current wave of traditionalist hegemony in education. A crux of what underpins this research is who gets to decide what knowledge is important because, whilst in the current

education policy, knowable 'facts' and canonical texts are king , this does not mesh well with the more fluid, dynamic and multi-disciplinary approach that the study of media is predicated on.

Therefore, the first research question reflects the intent to critically analyse what effect these discourses and theory, and the power relations of knowledge hierarchies and production implicit within them, have had on the reformed subject content framework for A' Level media studies, and what impact this perceived misalliance, between the policy reform and the media studies curriculum, has had on the perceptions of media studies' subject identity:

RQ1 How have the knowledge and curriculum discourses and theory that underpin the 2014 education reform impacted the Media Studies A' Level curriculum and perceptions of its subject identity?

The enactment of policy is the next key component in capturing the ontological realities of the curriculum reform and, as such, my second research question opens the research out to inquiry and description of the 'lived experiences' of the media studies teachers teaching the new curriculum:

RQ2: What impacts have the curriculum reform had on the 'pedagogic lived experiences' of media studies teachers?

This research aim seeks to capture what the reformed curriculum means for the teaching of the subject and how it has influenced everyday classroom experiences in, for example, pedagogy, curriculum design, student engagement, recruitment, and progression. The natural corollary of this inquiry leads on to discourse about how much (or little) autonomy is bestowed to teachers in the context of the curriculum reform process, and the impact of this on how they view themselves, both as subject specialist professionals and, in more general terms, as members of the wider teaching profession. The third research question is therefore:

RQ3: How have the policy reforms impacted teacher agency and the professional identities of media studies teachers?

Whilst the main body of the research seeks to provide a thick description of the unfolding and current experiences and impacts of the curriculum reform, my fourth research question has the more speculative function of envisioning the longer term implications of the curriculum reform on media studies.

RQ4: What ramifications will the policy reforms have for the 'futuring' of media studies?

With these research questions in mind, the next chapter moves to the literature review to contextualise the research study within its genealogy as a subject discipline and to draw up the key themes that have defined the subject throughout its evolution.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review charts out the terrain of scholarly works to provide a rounded and contextual picture of the ideas, debates, histories and theoretical thinking that have shaped the evolution of the subject to the present day. Rather than following a purely chronological structure and to avoid, what Cary Bazalgette (2001) states as, "chewing over the debates of the last thirty years", the review takes a transecting approach and groups together discourses of a similar nature to establish a number of motifs and thematic discourses. This approach aims to elucidate the recursive nature of the kinds of issues, ideas and debates that have frequently punctuated the development of media studies, in varying contexts and over different time periods. Whilst there is inevitably a natural overlap between these themed groupings, such a structure serves to provide a clearer field within which the key issues, thoughts and debates impacting on and defining the subject can be examined.

The Birth of Media Education: Calibrating an Identity

Since its inception in the late eighties as an academic subject for study in UK schools, media studies has been a site of conflict, of resistance, and competing interests between academics, politicians and policy makers, educators, society and the media themselves. Its characteristics - its 'newness' as a subject and as a nexus of various disciplines - meant that establishing an autonomous identity and a coherent conceptual framework that transcended political, educational and societal 'fads' that was able to keep pace with the rapidly changing nature of the subject was not always straightforward. As a result, the literature spanning this period reveals a subject trying to forge, calibrate and recalibrate its identity against a backdrop of social, political, technological and educational variables of change.

Whilst the genesis of 'media study' can be traced back as far as the 1930s, the subject, as a qualification in the post-16 setting, owes much to the generative debates between influential academics and figures in the media education world. These figures, such as Len Masterman, Roy Stafford, Cary Bazalgette and David Buckingham, well versed in the contested history of the subject, derived their differing, and quite often oppositional, positions, visions and hopes for the subject from a wholesale rejection of a Leavisite 'discriminate and resist' philosophy to positions that have been variously informed by and branched from the subject's antecedents of cultural studies and screen education. Subsequently these positions have

challenged, modified or remediated what constitutes media studies and reflect the dynamic and changeable nature of the subject – a characteristic that this thesis will revisit frequently in the context of the reformed curriculum.

Whilst these discourses inevitably interlink with and shape how the subject translates into a curriculum at post-16, it needs to be kept in mind that much of these discourses operate on a more polemic, ideological level than is perhaps currently manifested in the everyday 'on-the-ground' teaching of the subject. Bolas, in his comprehensive genealogical account of the hard-won development of film and media studies from 'film appreciation' to 'high theory' in schools, noted:

> "It was perhaps inevitable that as media education became more professionalised, the classroom teacher would be a less frequent participant in the debate." (Bolas 2009, p. 8)

Much of the literature reviewed tends to demonstrate that the area for research is weighted towards these more academic discourses, and whilst there clearly is literature about the teaching and learning of the subject and its delivery in a school setting, it is worth noting that there has been much less research carried out by practising teachers in a post-16 setting. This paucity in this particular research context is significant and, as such, this thesis offers new research not only conducted by a practising teacher but also that primarily centres media studies teachers as research participants.

In discussion of these discourses, it must be recognised and noted that media education in the UK has grown up within heavily Eurocentric epistemologies that prioritise Western (and predominantly white British) media theories and practices. Whilst there is not the scope within this thesis to provide a fuller critique of this, it is important to consider the geo-cultural context that media education in the UK inhabits, and the global majority epistemologies that are not represented (or, indeed, excluded) in its genealogical formation – particularly important and relevant for later discussions in this thesis about decolonising the curriculum and some of the inherent related issues that have arisen in its teaching as a result of the new curriculum framework.

Regarding the particular epistemological frameworks that underpin media education in the UK, implicit tensions can be identified through much of the literature, between what might

be described as the epistemological 'spirit' of the subject, the subject in its school curricular 'assessable' form and the hierarchical conceptions of knowledge that drove the 2014 curriculum reform policy. Building on Peim's work in 'Critical Theory and The English Teacher: Transforming the Subject' (2004) in which he coined the term 'Subject English', McDougall refers to media studies within the school curriculum as 'Subject Media' (2004, p. 2). This term encapsulates the subject's institutional, formal, and assessable framework, its "cultural politics", and how these elements shape the social practice of teaching media studies (ibid). Whilst 'Subject Media' will always be inherently be shaped by its 'spirit', it is not necessarily a given that its 'spirit' will be accurately reflected in its formal and assessable manifestation in schools – and the various agencies involved in its formation may result in a curriculum that is 'lost in translation' at best, or a palimpsest inscribed by political and educational agenda at worst. Thus, a key focus of this research is to explore the dynamics and impact of these tensions and what they may reveal about the subject now and its future direction.

A further tension evident in the literature is the popularity of the subject with the students who take it against a distinct backdrop of criticism about the value and rigour of the subject. Despite a slew of regular criticism from commentators in the media and certain corners of politics and education, the popularity of the subject steadily grew to its peak in the late 2000s out of the 'relevance boom' (Margolis 1977). The criticism of popular culture that manifested still resides today in a prism of hostility, cynicism and misunderstanding, and from notions that perhaps derive from a kind of Leavisite hangover which act as a convenient displacement for the fear of cultural degeneration - a particularly prominent feature in the discourse of political agenda about media studies (E.g. Barker 1997; Buckingham and Sefton Green 1994; McDougall 2004; Laughey 2010; Buckingham 2017, 2019). Indeed, the present-day situation has seen the agency of those who have been instrumental in shaping the subject – the media academics, educators, exam boards and subject associations – significantly attenuated by policy makers who have made a deliberate move from their historical position of "arms-length agency" to "calling the shots" (Barker 2008; Buckingham 2017).

After a disquieting period where it looked entirely possible that the subject may cease to exist at all in secondary education, media studies reappeared but in a very different incarnation to what had gone before. The fractured and discordant process that occurred is

dealt with in more detail in chapter 6, through David Buckingham's account of his involvement in the initial consultation process, alongside Professor Natalie Fenton, but it is worth highlighting here the difficulties and misunderstandings of the process that resulted in a very different curricular framework to that wished for or intended by media educators, particularly how their suggestions regarding the inclusion of theorists were changed from optionality to a list of theorists for compulsory study (Buckingham 2017). Buckingham goes on to further outline the disconnection between those involved in driving the policy (Nick Gibb, the Minister for Schools, the DfE and Ofqual), those tasked with devising the subject specifications from the subject content framework (the exam board), and those tasked with implementing and delivering the subject (the teachers).

Thus, this takes us to the point in time that this research centres on but whilst this review is not, nor should be, an historical precis of the subject's beginnings in its school curricular context, it is necessary to contextualize discourse about the current guise media studies takes under the new curriculum through a genealogical lens. The focus of this will be trained on the work of those who have contributed to and written about the subject's development as an academic qualification in schools from its early days in the late eighties through to present day.

'What is Media Studies?': A Site of Conflict

In the introduction to Alvarado and Boyd-Barrett's collection of essays 'Media Education: An Introduction' (1992), they state:

> "The genesis and development of any new subject is in part a history of contest for curriculum space and of struggle between competing traditions and ambitions. Media education is no exception" (p. 9)

There are two aspects here that point to wider debates in discourses about the study of the media: the 'newness' of the subject, and the contested arena in which the subject sits. From the literature reviewed, a dominant theme is that the subject will always remain 'new' due to its amorphous, constant and rapidly changing nature - an endemic, ontological feature of a

subject that intersects with other disciplines and tries to keep pace with the changes in society, politics and technology, and changes that we may not ever accurately be able to predict (Merrin 2014; Gauntlett 2015). Also evident in the literature reviewed is a prevailing narrative of media education as an academically emotive space about what it is, what it should and shouldn't be, both internally, as ongoing philosophical and pedagogical debates about the subject between media educators and academics, and externally, with influences of opinion from the world of politics and the media.

Two of the most notable voices in the development of the subject, Len Masterman and David Buckingham, act as useful counterpoints to frame the conflicting debates about 'what' media studies is or should be. In Len Masterman's seminal text 'Teaching the Media' (1985), written at a time when the subject was at its germination stage for study in secondary schools, Masterman goes beyond pedagogy to advocate for a philosophy for media education and discusses the terrain of the subject's burgeoning identity and some 'guiding principles to a complex process' of developing a curriculum for it. In what we can now view as portentous and pre-emptive of the future attacks on the subject, he calls for teachers to advocate for their subject and for:

> "Advancing its cause, whenever we can within our own institutions, amongst parents and with colleagues and policy makers. Our reasoning will need to be compelling and persuasive, as well as plain and intelligible" (ibid, p. 1)

Masterman also identifies a significant challenge for the subject, in that the fast-paced nature in which the media industry changes means that media education has difficulty matching this pace - a challenge that has not abated since but it is a key aspect in how the subject and its contested 'identities' get instrumentalised in schools. Moreover, as Masterman posits, it is precisely this challenge that renders it necessary for media education to be the business of a wide range of invested groups, from broadcasters themselves, those involved in political activism to all media educators, not just "a small band of media 'specialists".

In setting out his vision for the future of media studies, Masterman creates a paradigmatic rendering of "the expansion of critical consciousness" which he essentially propounds as the central tenet of his rationale – a rationale that he also uses to foreground the urgent prioritisation of media education in the mid to late eighties. Rooted in cultural studies and

the study of semiotics, his approach emphasises the deconstruction of texts and the meaning in them so that they can be "demystified" to reveal their underlying power constructs and ideologies. In the contemporary context, Masterman's discourse on its own may seem outmoded, but it does effectively lay down a blue print for what many contemporary media studies educators still recognise as the key conceptual imperatives underpinning the subject's delivery within the post-16 framework today.

Buckingham's own position, however, sits counter to this and is critical of what he believes to be Masterman's overt scholasticism and promotion of "systematic forms of analysis which … expose the 'hidden' ideologies of the media" (Buckingham 2003, p. 9). Just as Masterman (1985, p. 2) invites his reader to "delete, augment or amend as they think appropriate" that is exactly what David Buckingham does in his rebuttal a year later with 'Against Demystification: A Response to Teaching the Media' (1986) and again, in 'Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture' (2003), Buckingham reasserts his own critical position of Masterman's approach. An approach he believes to be unduly weighted towards a 'fundamental aim' to reveal:

> "The constructed nature of media texts, and thereby to show how media representations [reinforce] the ideologies of dominant groups in society." (Buckingham 2003, p.8).

Masterman's ideas require, as Buckingham states, the value of the subjective response to a media text to be subordinated or suppressed in favour of privileging more systematic forms of analysis to reveal the constructed nature of the text and to make transparent the 'hidden' ideologies. The corollary of this then would lead to 'liberation' from these influences. Whilst this represents a shift from the 'discrimination' to a 'demystification' paradigm, Buckingham also frames the complexities of media studies within a contradictory binary of what he calls "democratization and defensiveness". This research continues on to use these competing ideas as important contextualise further discussion of the subject identity of media studies.

The Influence of Cultural Studies

To understand the wider context and origins of these debates, it is necessary to go back before the incipient media studies curricula of the 1980s, to its beginnings in cultural studies. Itself an overlap of the development of the symbolic interactionism of the 1950s (Hall 2003,

p. 33), cultural studies represented a rejection of the Arnoldian/Leavisite tradition of the privileging and preservation of a high intellectual cultural elitism which consciously eschewed the perceived barbarism of an encroaching mass popular culture, and which Leavis saw, in his book, 'Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture' (1930), as a 'levelling down' of society. Far from the protectionist standpoint that Leavis and Thompson take in their work 'Culture and Environment' (1933), in which they declare "If anything like a worthy idea of satisfactory living is to be saved, [the citizen] must be trained to discriminate and to resist", cultural studies not only embraces, but valorises contemporary mass culture to counter the elitist doctrine of the Leavisite school of thought. Cultural studies sought to reframe mass popular culture and 'the ordinary' to flatten cultural hierarchies, and to bring a class consciousness trained on social transformation. Kellner (1995) states that cultural studies:

> "….analyzes society as a hierarchical and antagonistic set of social relations characterized by the oppression of subordinate class, gender, race, ethnic, and national strata." (p.11)

The burgeoning influence of Richard Hoggart's 'The Uses of Literacy' (1957), Raymond Williams' 'Culture and Society' (1958), EP Thompson's 'The Making of The English Working Class' (1963) and their collective focus on popular culture began to imprint cultural studies on the British academic landscape and, in 1963, following Hoggart's inaugural lecture at Birmingham University, his intention to formalise the study and research of popular culture was realised by Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). The CCCS marked a shift of academic attention to the study of popular culture and was a significant turning point in creating an academic discipline that, for the first time, everyday cultural practices and media consumption were being deemed worthy of study. Hoggart's work was fundamentally based around a critique of the ways in which mass media and popular culture both shape and mirror social identities, especially their impact on working-class life and values. His critiques also extended to viewing popular culture as a force that homogenizes and diminishes cultural traditions, and these critiques, alongside his investigation into how literacy and media assist individuals in navigating their lives, were the founding principles of cultural studies from which media studies later emerged.

Cultural studies represented a significant and progressive change in trajectory for how culture in society was viewed. In the cultural studies schema, cultural forms operate on two

levels: the first is that they serve to describe and reveal how social domination is constructed; and the second, that they present opportunities for people to "resist and struggle against domination" (Kellner 1995). It is within this double discourse that the foundations for what media studies, and the internal conflict and discourses previously described, are set, but, perhaps more significantly, it is the recognition of the democratising nature of cultural studies that bears further exploration within the context of this literature review.

Popular Culture Goes to School: Media Education and Democratization

Buckingham regards media education as holding an important democratic function and which has contributed to the development of progressive education by attempting to address some of the inequality experienced by many working class students in the traditional education system. It does so by creating a curriculum that validates the students' own personal spheres and cultures, rather than "merely impose the values of 'high' culture'". Bolas (2009) echoes Buckingham (and, indeed, Masterman) with the observation that the study of such texts within media studies is an important facet of developing "a corresponding suspicion of elitist assumptions and indoctrination" that makes "many traditional educators, broadcasters (and politicians) not just merely uncomfortable but ferociously angry". This line of argument is still evident more recently, in Burn's view of the intrinsic nature of popular culture in media education and how it plays an essentially democratising social function:

> "Education in new screen media, then, has the potential to pay proper attention to popular culture, to explore cultural taste and value, and to productively erode old polarities between elite and popular cultures". (2016 p. 6)

The recurrence of this discourse over time up to the present day, points to the fact that is not only considered an essential aspect in the study of media but also that it suggests there are unresolved elements in the subject's consolidation, or characteristic of, as McDougall suggests, "unconnected practice" (2004, p. 16).

The work of Sefton Green's longitudinal study in 2015 revisits his earlier work with Buckingham in 'Cultural Studies Goes to School' in which they attempted to "provide valuable arguments for moving beyond simple axioms about the power of literacy" through the pleasures of "the reading and writing forms of popular culture" (1994, p. ix) and the exploration of production-based pedagogies with 'real' students, and in doing so, situates the

influence of a media education in a much more 'lived' sociological context. Sefton Green's interviews with three of his ex-students explore the legacies of a media education, twenty years on. These personal, often poignant, and what Sefton Green, to a large extent, calls "sobering", accounts, yield some surprising findings.

There is none of the lofty, emancipatory hopes of a 'critical consciousness' espoused by the likes of Masterman liberating them from class inequality implicit in the interviews, but, crucially, the "critical distance" that Sefton Green (ibid) says that all three interviewees display, has made them 'self-conscious' and 'reflexive' about their media tastes and that of others. It has also served them, in differing ways to "claim membership of an elite" whereby they take a critical, sceptical position as an individual looking at mass society, and, thus, as Sefton Green finds, this still comprises a part of their continuing identity. Whilst evaluations and overviews of media education are more prominent in the literature over the last twenty years, 'micro' longitudinal studies of this kind do not figure elsewhere in the literature reviewed, not least any macro ones. This thesis presents research rooted in real classroom practice.

Media Education and Defensiveness

Alongside the 'emancipatory' position linked to the democratising nature of media education, there co-exists a rather more a negative approach to media education, and one that is founded on a deep suspicion of popular culture and its pervasive influences (Lusted 1985, in Buckingham 2003). This approach takes a defensive, protectionist line, originating in the assumption that audiences are in need of a media education in order to understand, 'inoculate' and protect themselves from the harmful, manipulating effects of the media (Halloran and Jones 1968; Masterman 1980). Buckingham (ibid) identifies that this defensiveness takes three forms: cultural, political and moral, and that the notion of empowering students to be critics of the media installs the idea that the media itself is a 'problem', and that media education is the 'antidote'.

These emancipatory versus protectionist positions have been two of the dominant and largely defining discourses shaping the development of the different media studies curricula over the last thirty years and the identity of the subject itself, how it is taught by educators and perceived in wider society (McDougall 2012). However, in acknowledging these

positions, Buckingham seeks to assert his own position, one that he describes as rather more 'neutral' and rooted in a student-centred approach than those described above. He advocates eschewing a paternalistic style of pedagogy, whereby teachers, as 'holders' of the knowledge, seek to transmit this to their passive students, in favour of one that begins "from young people's existing knowledge and experience of the media" (2003, p.4) so media education is a form of 'preparation' rather than protection. In doing so, Buckingham provides a more nuanced facet to the 'emancipatory' definition, emphasising both the roles of understanding and participation in the media culture that surrounds them (Bazalgette1989, in Buckingham 2003) as well as the important, but often disparaged, aspect of student pleasure and enjoyment. This is also echoed by Sefton Green reflecting on the ambitions of his education project with Buckingham in 'Cultural Studies Goes To School' (1994) to explore "the nature and meaning of the pleasures and significance [the students] derived from appropriating and identifying with these texts". The idea of deriving enjoyment from studying the media has been a double edged sword in the development and perception of the subject. On one hand, it has undoubtedly served to boost its popularity amongst students, but on the other, it has also played into the hands of its critics, who perhaps wedded to a more traditional, purist notion, feel that pleasure and popularity equate to a subject that has negligible value.

Buckingham restates his hopes for an evolving media curriculum responsive to the ever-changing nature of the media itself and that teachers will respond to these challenges in a reflective but also 'playful' pedagogic way. In doing so, he returns to the matter of the subject's 'identity politics' stating that 'their emphasis on rationality and 'realist' conceptions of representation need to be questioned as does the rhetoric of 'democratic citizenship' on which they are also based'. Returning to the idea, originally evident in his work with Julian Sefton Green, Buckingham envisions technological developments will narrow the traditional distinctions between critical analysis and creative production.

Production Vs Theory?

This shift of emphasis, from critique to production, in the first decade of the millennium, denotes another stage in the evolution of media studies and is variously returned to and further explored in the work of Burn and Durran, who declare their position as being the successor to Buckingham and Sefton Green's 1994 book. Whilst Burn and Durran, in 'Media Literacy in Schools: Practice, Production and Progression' (2007) do not explore the post-16 media

studies curriculum specifically, their focus on creativity, experiences and the possibilities of a creative curriculum in a real school – Parkside Community College - highlight a shift away from media studies' traditional position as an adjunct to the English department in UK schools to a more arts-facing one. Burn and Durran's work is also contextualized by the time in which they were writing, which was characterized by a distinct incongruity between the government's annexing of media literacy in its espousal of the creative industries, and its far more restrictive policy regarding media education in the curriculum.

Their own position is very different and they posit that media literacy does not exist as a part of media education, but as a separate occupation that engages students with media practice in learning 'through the media' in a creative way. They also concur with Buckingham that media literacy is a product of media education. Indeed, Buckingham's earlier hopes for "playful pedagogic practices" manifest in Burn and Durran's work, who not only restate the case for popular culture in the curriculum, but actively celebrate practical pedagogies, such as simulation and ludic design, in the conceptual exploration of popular culture texts.

In linking back to Buckingham's concern about the privileging of critical understanding over the pleasures of the creative production process, Burn (2016) discusses the "history of unease amongst media educators" when these two elements are isolated from one another. He acknowledges that the UK public exam system at A' Level (and GCSE), which often assesses conceptual and critical understanding through essays and examination, may create "decontextualized, dutiful rehearsal[s] of what the student imagines the teacher or examiner wants to hear" (Buckingham et al 2000, in Burn 2016). In doing so, he highlights one of the key issues for the subject in its translation from 'spirit' to its assessed form. Indeed, this sentiment is reiterated by Ian Wall, former media teacher and founder of Film Education. In an interview with Terry Bolas in The Media Education Association's journal, PoV (Point of View), he talks about how this translates to the approach of the teachers,

> "The only continuing professional development that teachers will go to now is the exam board provision, so they will learn the 'right' answers. What concerns me is that there are many new people coming in to teach film and media who only know what the exam board wants". (2009, p. 5)

Regarding the concerns that Wall expresses, this research will explore the impact of the introduction of set texts and theorists and more rigid practical production briefs to the new

curriculum and how this might change the way media teachers teach and media students study the subject.

Production and Theory

In 'Teachers Talking: Ten Years On' (Grahame and Buckingham 1998) their review of the subject early on in the development of the subject, relatively speaking, captures the view of a number of different media teachers. They make the observation that often the primary driver for students on a media studies course is the practical production element but there is a disconnection between this on both a teacher level and an institutional support level. Whilst the practical component of media studies is recognised as "a defining characteristic of the subject", the report also acknowledged there was often an imbalance between that and the level of practical expertise of the teachers delivering the course. This feeds into a larger issue of the 'type' of teachers who teach media studies. Historically, media studies has been taught predominantly by English teachers and with that carries a range of issues (Goodwyn and Branson, 2005). Goodwyn and Branson insinuate, in their handbook for English teachers, that often media studies is taken on as an unwanted extra or as a timetable filler to satisfy the popularity of the subject with students at post-16 and the likely 'bums-on-seats' agenda of a school. They issue a warning to new English teachers:

> "As a beginning teacher, you may well find yourself teaching it in the near future" (2005, p. 91)

This is a far cry from Masterman's call in 1985 for teachers to be passionate and ambitious advocates for the subject. The assumed reluctance of certain quarters of the teaching profession to teach media (and still evident on social media networks for media teachers in the familiar cries of help from teachers who have 'just had media put on their timetable' and evidenced in the data from this study) points at a wider problem inherent in the teaching of the subject, and therefore in the efficacy of the delivery of its curriculum. The tension between the theoretical, academic side of the subject and its practical one is a well-trodden discourse and is reflected in Buckingham and Grahame's research in which one of their participants, a teacher, talks of the "danger" in media teaching because this "could end up split into people who are practically confident and people who are concept confident" (1998, p. 4)

Interestingly, Buckingham and Grahame contemplate a future where both elements of the

subjects become institutionalised as separate disciplines – something which has certainly come to pass in more recent media education history, with the bifurcation evident in the current media-related curriculum offer, between vocational and A' Level curricula choices.

However, the institutional support angle continues to be a very pertinent one too, both financially and in perception of status. The review details the matrix of misconception of the needs and validity of the subject by management in schools, a technical support, IT and facilities infrastructure inadequate or inappropriate to facilitate courses (or certainly course numbers) effectively, the lack of budget allocated to courses and, of course, as already mentioned the inconsistency of teacher expertise. This has also been mirrored on a teacher training level whereby the sparse number of subject specialist media PGCEs and sustained subject specific professional development for media teachers has created an erratic landscape of expertise and contributed to a general picture of a subject lacking in cohesion and unified direction (Domaille 2013). The reduction of the practical component in A' Level Media Studies in the new specifications is a radical departure from previous ones and this research looks at the implications of this for the experience, skillset and progression of media students.

The commercial imperatives and 'pulling power' of such a course as media studies on an institutional level, though, as David Buckingham (2017) states, is probably what saved it from being culled when the linear A' Level model was brought in. Most subjects don't have to justify their raison d'etre as much as media studies does, but what is clear from even the early discourses, such as in Buckingham and Grahame's 1998 review, is that its popularity, whilst regarded with suspicion, is also its saving grace. Another recurring oxymoron within the subject is its push-me-pull-you perceptions at a governmental level, evident from the 1998 review and reappearing in various other contexts in later literature (Eg. Buckingham 2003; Grahame 2013; McDougall et al 2014; McDougall and Potter 2017). Whilst the Conservative government recognised the economic power of the UK's creative industries' exponential growth over the years, as well as attempting to co-opt the subject's 'creative' characteristics for political agenda, it also locked itself into a revulsion of any of its progressive educational characteristics in favour of a more conservative, traditional curricular narrative. Whilst media studies offers an important space within the secondary curriculum to educate young people to become media literate, this has been siloed to other pockets of the curriculum that

occupy a more protectionist e-literacy stance. This was particularly highlighted when the former education secretary Damian Hinds declared at the NSPCC conference in 2019, which accompanied the launch of the government's online safety policy, that young people should be "masters of the machine" but this would be taught with a focus on understanding technology and as "a fusion of parts of the relationships education curriculum, the citizenship curriculum, and the computing curriculum", with no mention of media studies as part of the equation. Whilst not within the main scope of this research, this is an important consideration the way the subject appears at pre-16 also has implications for how the subject is perceived at post-16 study .

Curriculum: Canons, Concepts, Commodification

Media studies appears particularly vulnerable to outside influences and the vocational versus academic debate has had a significant bearing on the development of the subject. Set within the wider educational framework, Bourdieu's (1993) concept of autonomous and heteronomous poles provides a theoretical language that describes the tensions between education as a force of 'good' for its own sake, and that of the commodified variety, operationalised by market needs in the world of employment and answerable to political agenda. In the context of media studies, this tension manifests as the internal debates between academics and media educators (as an autonomous self-regulating discourse) discussed earlier in this review, and the external heteronomous forces from the political arena and the employment economy. This also throws light on some of the reasons why the subject has survived in the face of such scathing criticism over the years. It's natural popularity and ability to create a financial buoyancy for schools, even with its relatively high technical costs, is one obvious facet to this argument. However, Bourdieu's concept, similar to the work of Bowles and Gintis (1976) whose 'corresponding principle' positioned school education as a preparation ground for capitalist exploitation in the world of work, also helps provide a framework to understand why media is subject to the vagaries of economic and political influences because it produces "a student commodity, amenable to the interests of government, business and other heteronomous forces" (Webb et al 2020, p. 109).

Whilst discussing Bourdieu's theories, it is interesting to return to the discourse around the issue of popular culture as an intrinsic aspect of media education. In a media studies context, his theory of cultural capital calls into question ideas about the 'type' of popular culture studied on the courses, the attempts to create a canon of 'high quality' texts (Buckingham 2017) and the power structures deciding what 'counts' as these. Englund et al (in Lilliedahl 2015) outline the complexities of such a task and in doing so raise questions about how this sits in terms of the media studies curriculum:

> ''What counts as knowledge' is also an issue of 'whose knowledge', since knowledge is always 'someone's knowledge'' (2015, p. 1)

In 'Doing Theory on Education' (2018), McDougall discusses, in the context of Bernstein, how the attempts to possess the 'right' kinds of knowledge and impart it to those we educate, plays out on national, institutional and operational levels. Contrary to what might be being exhibited at a national political level or by key figures within the education community on Twitter, McDougall restates Bernstein's argument that being able to use and reproduce the 'language' required by formal institutions, in the form of what Bernstein calls 'elaborated codes', is the key determinant of educational success, not the raw acquisition of knowledge itself. McDougall states that:

> "The denial of the restricted code used by students with less 'cultural capital' (from Bourdieu) is a form of 'symbolic violence' – this runs all the way through education and into academic research". (Ibid, p. 47)

This concept, then, could be applied to the prescriptive 'canon' of texts and one of the features that the DfE and Ofqual required for the new specifications for each exam board to be approved. Determining the 'right' kinds of texts and therefore 'knowledge', if using Bernstein's ideas, means that it is the elaborated codes inherent in the study of the texts, not the 'raw' texts themselves, that are reinforced and reproduced thus embedding another form of 'symbolic violence' into the curriculum.

Another lens with which this could be viewed is that of Gidden's theory of 'structure' and 'agency' (1979). Although working at a wider educational level, this theory, in the context of the media studies classroom, presents a polarity between an individual's agency – in this case, the teacher's ability to have autonomy over how and what they teach – and the

structural forces that impose parameters and restrictions on this 'freedom' through such things as institutional and educational policy. Given media studies has undergone radical curricular change and entered a particularly turbulent period in its history, this lens seems all the more pertinent given that the agency of debates around the media studies curriculum has been plucked away from educators and schools delivering the subject, on both a micro- and meso-level, and firmly situated in the structural forces of educational policy and wider political agenda.

When Bourdieu's further theory of cultural reproduction is added to this idea, the discourse becomes even more layered. Bourdieu's (1990) theory of cultural reproduction states that inequalities are reproduced in schools through the influences of the dominant, predominantly middle class, culture, and the iterated beliefs, values and views held by this class serve to lock students, schools and curriculum into an education system which defines achievement, academic and career success by a restricted range of 'middle class' skills. McDougall posits that, in the context of media education, this reproduction can be evident in the difference between the comparative status and connotations of the theory 'lecture' and the vocational 'workshop', with the 'symbolic violence' reproduced by the perceptions of the formal academic lecture led by someone of high academic standing versus the more 'casual' vocational workshop, often 'run' by lower paid instructors or technicians.

This difference is encoded through the institutional organisation around the staff who teach on the different courses and the way in which the physical learning environment is arranged –all of which is decoded by the student who enrols on a course so that they have "an ingrained sense of the difference between work and education, scholarly activity and making, the organisation of learning around such binaries provides a barrier to integration of hands and minds" (McDougall 2018, p. 48). In turn, the 'pedagogical matching' inherent in these inextricably linked notions further reproduces the binary and has implications far beyond the seed of the operational educational environment.

This 'symbolic violence' may also be evident not only in the institutional infrastructure governing curriculum delivery, it may also be the selected content. Whilst students may feel like media studies has the hook of 'popular culture' for them, the reality may be very different as the texts they end up studying are determined by varying factors from a

governmental level right down to the individual teacher level, and in all likelihood, this 'filter' creates the kind of cultural reproduction that Bourdieu talks about.

Bourdieu's concepts of capital, field and habitus are useful lenses with which to view the positioning of media studies and its students in a post-16 educational setting. As outlined in this review, the 'fields' which Bourdieu (1993) describes as "a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions" go some way to explicate the tensions within the subject that arise from the intersecting and competing external and internal agents, and as Larson et al (2009) state:

> "The field is a field of struggles aimed at either maintaining or transforming the existing configuration of power within that field" (p. 1)

Furthermore, Bourdieu's connected approaches (1993) to mapping the field in terms of power relations between agents and institutions, who lays claim to legitimate authority within this structure and the habitus of each of these agents and "the different systems of dispositions they have acquired by internalising a determinate type of social and economic condition' (ibid, p. 105), provide a framework for analyzing the way in which the subject has changed and how the agency of media educators has been significantly reduced whilst the authority of wider educational agenda has become more prominent. The concept of habitus is particularly pertinent, too, when considering the different agents involved in the subject. Both Buckingham (2017) and Connolly (2018) in their discussion of the reform of the Media Studies A' Level outline the conflict between the educational vision of the government and the subject itself. Therefore, using Bourdieu's concept, it could be said that the collective habitus of agents like Gove and Gibb, where the doxa is very much based around neo-conservative traditionalism, is very much at odds with those delivering and studying a subject where the symbolic capital inherent in its study is essentially deemed valueless. Media studies stands in the heat of this conflict as it, by its very nature, forces agents such as Chris Woodhead, a prominent detractor of the subject in his tenure as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools between 1994 and 2000 (Berger and McDougall 2012 p. 9) to articulate fears of the traditional body of knowledge because the subject, with its attendant popular culture content and popularity, threatens this status quo (Moore and Maton 2010). Connolly and Bates (2024) tackle this area again through primary research of how cultural capital is

being taught in schools. Beginning with how Ofsted view and inspect cultural capital in their inspection framework, they explore how this is being conceived of in schools. They posit that "policy-makers and regulators views of cultural capital are both narrow and perhaps, in some senses, deviate from both traditional and contemporary definitions of the term" (ibid, p. 1350) but go on to describe how the teachers in the research are actively engaging with and interpreting cultural capital in broader, more flexible and more innovative ways – both within the curriculum and as extra-curricular activities - which, in a sense, demonstrates a form of resistance to the narrow vision of cultural capital that exists in the National Curriculum (NC). In their critique, they suggest that the conception of cultural capital that proliferates in formal frameworks such the NC and Ofsted's Inspection Framework is more akin to Matthew Arnold's concept of culture as "the best that has been thought and said" (1869), than the Bourdieusian view, but which is criticized for being selectively applied and potentially overlooking broader, more inclusive definitions of culture – as well as achieving the opposite intended effect of reinforcing the cycle of reproduction, rather than breaking it. Describing the work of a media teacher, responsible for whole school initiatives relating to cultural capital, and who has moved 'beyond the curriculum' to provide richer opportunities of engagement with cultural capital ("reading texts…particularly focusing on perhaps the Black community or foreign—a community of peoples that perhaps [names school] students don't have a lot of interface with, so it was about indulging them in different cultures"), indicates the limitations of the school curriculum. As such, Connolly and Bates (ibid, p. 1357) argue for a broader, critical understanding of cultural capital that aligns more closely with contemporary sociological perspectives.

In this vein, there has been much internal resistance by media educators to the notion of a canon for media studies precisely because it is counter to the relative freedom that teachers cherish in being able to select texts suitable for their own students – a freedom that has been significantly curtailed by the new specifications with the incursion of a limited range of set texts (Buckingham 2017). Writing at an earlier time, where there was comparatively more freedom for teacher choice in text selection than the present day, McDougall (2004, p.36) speculates about the "dangers" of a prescriptive curriculum and "choices which may become in time a kind of canon, not of 'great texts' but of 'concept-friendly' texts, or resource-friendly texts". Returning to the economic opportunities offered to the wider media industries, he also presents the idea about how texts on the curriculum have an additional

lucrative appeal for the media industry and "there is a need for discussion about what resources are and why they are needed and what status they have" (ibid).

McDougall (2018) further explores the "questions of knowledge" issues of curriculum articulating, in his consideration of Bernstein's work in the wider field of education, the debates around how (and why) knowledge is organised and arranged in terms of classification and the power structures this involves. He situates his discussion about how status is conferred to different types of knowledge according to a range of variables at any given point in time, within the debates about curriculum and assessment, and how this, ultimately, translates to classroom discourse. Citing Bartlett, Burton and Peim (2001) and Bernstein (1971) McDougall elucidates this:

> "The curriculum says, in effect, 'this is knowledge, this is the kind of knowledge that really counts, it may determine your social future, your capacity to earn, your right to participate in social institutions at various levels'' (ibid, p.75)
>
> "How a society selects, classifies, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and principles of social control" (ibid, pg. 47)

Here, McDougall outlines the lack of neutrality inherent in any curriculum and its fluid, mutable capabilities, and in doing so infers that the concept of curriculum is both a filter and a mirror for the dominant socio-cultural and political – and sometimes capricious - ideas about knowledge and what should be learned. Moore and Maton (2010) reiterate this sentiment:

> "Canons are seen as arbitrary constructions reflecting no more than the tastes and fashions of dominant social groups or, at worse, as ideological forces that legitimate and reproduce the position and power of dominant groups". (p. 132)

In referencing Thomas Kuhn's paradigm model (1970), McDougall goes on to discuss how, as paradigms shift along with socio-cultural and political change, the perspectives of academics and educationalists become naturalized into this new way of 'thinking' about knowledge. He asserts this process is far from neutral or value-free and, as one way of thinking about knowledge becomes accepted, other types of knowledge become marginalized or excluded – and in the case of media studies, the 'type' of knowledge inherent in it is not conferred much

educational currency.

Media studies with its 'flatter discourse', level(ler) playing field of equal sources of knowledge and 'integrated codes' is very different to the type of subjects favoured in the current 'knowledge-based' educational climate that have the 'collective codes' of a very clearly defined hierarchy of knowledge to be sourced. (Bernstein, in McDougall 2018, p.62). This doctoral research examines how the new media studies framework and specifications alter the this notion of 'flatter discourse' in its newly constructed assessable form and seeks to offer new conceptions of how media studies can be conceived of in a more 'epistemologically cohesive' sense.

Media: Beyond a Manifesto and into a Cold Climate

In 2011, in an attempt to reinstitute the purpose of media education in the UK, a number of media academics and educators from a range of fields were asked to contribute to A Manifesto for Media Education, with some of those authors contributing to the resulting 'Current Perspectives in Media Education: Beyond the Manifesto' in 2012. Whilst a review worthy of such material would be too extensive for inclusion here, the landscape in which it was published is an interesting one. Set on the cusp between, what might be termed retrospectively, as the 'golden age' of media studies and the 'new regime' of the reformed curriculum that came into force in 2017, the authors variously trace such areas as the longitudinal history of the subject (Grahame, pp. 7-23), reinforce the need for a conceptual framework in the curriculum (Buckingham, pp. 24-40), outline the significant issues with teacher training in the subject (Domaille, pp. 55-70), evaluate the impact of what was only the beginning of Gove's reforms, in the context of a school case study (Connolly, pp. 41-54), examine the subject's 'inferiority complex' (Berger, pp. 145- 159) and the case for a relativist pedagogy (McDougall, pp. 175-189).

Connolly went on to evaluate this impact more fully in the context of a report commissioned by The Media Education Association in 2016 on the proposed curriculum changes. In a reflection of this report for NATE's Teaching English magazine, he writes,

> "The interlocking twin pre-occupations of memory and high stakes linear assessment have come to dominate much educational discourse and neither of these phenomena find a comfortable

> home in media and film education". (2018, p. 57)

Like Buckingham, he shares a pessimism over what has since come to pass in terms of the approved curriculum specifications. He details the anachronistic decisions about the study of historical texts and contexts and "the dead hand of history", the arbitrary and problematic nature of how the theorists to be studied were chosen and even more significantly the underlying imperative to impose a 'canon' of 'high quality' texts which Connolly says "are largely an attempt to impose cultural preferences on young people" (ibid).

Back to the Future

However, Connolly, rather than seeing the future for media studies as a gloomy one, sees the new specifications as an opportunity and a "site of resistance'" for media teachers to "re-engage with the foundations of media education" and to embrace the interdisciplinary nature of the subject and its capabilities to offset the "mono-modal pedagogic approaches" that dominate the present education system:

> "Telling students that media studies was considered so dangerous that the government had to prescribe what could and couldn't be studied will, I suspect, also have a significant appeal" (ibid, p. 59)

Taking up the mantle of advocating for media education in 2018, Buckingham, too, once again offers his 'The Media Education Manifesto'. As he states, it is a manifesto, "not an academic text", but the academic arguments he makes earlier in his academic career are restated here but now in the context of a vastly different media landscape. Media literacy, here, takes centre stage and Buckingham asserts it is "a fundamental life skill: we cannot function without it" (ibid, p. 30). This skill is vital for "a healthy democracy" which "requires well informed, discriminating media uses: it needs active citizens, who will participate in civil SoC; And it needs skilled, creative workers" (ibid). In order to achieve this, he states that media education "that is systematic well supported programmes of teaching and learning for all" is key and rather than the risk/benefit approach that is often taken, which he says is only a "quick fix" solution, he claims that the type of media education he is advocating - one that is founded on a commitment to critical thinking - is altogether "more coherent, more challenging and ultimately more empowering" (ibid, p.39).

As he argued in his earlier work, Buckingham (2003) states that this critical framework

coalesces round a set of key concepts (media language, audience, representation and production), rather than round 'a body of content or knowledge' (ibid, p. 58) and claims that this approach has afforded teachers a "considerable amount of autonomy when it comes to choosing particular objects of study; and it has thereby enabled them to be more responsive, both to the needs and interests of their students, and to new developments in media". He also asserts this is ever more crucial in the relation to teaching about the rapidly changing digital media landscape – a poignant statement in the current prescriptive curricular framework that resembles nothing like this.

Nevertheless, Buckingham once again takes up the case for a critical, creative pedagogy, not least because it offers opportunities to students to "explore their own pleasures in media" (ibid, p. 73) but because this provides "a space to reflect…and feedback to their own critical analysis". Returning to the notion of the critical framework, he supports a conceptual approach to pedagogic practice, rather than a text-based one because this provides "coherent set of principles, rather than just an arbitrary list of content" (ibid, p. 90). In addition, and which are all issues addressed in this thesis, he identifies and advocates for three key things that would support the development of the above in the future: in-depth, high quality teacher training and subject continuous professional development, media as a fundamental entitlement in the curriculum for all, and a media education that doesn't just lead to critical understanding but also action.

Existence for Resistance?

This literature review has documented a transection of the evolution of media studies characterised by conflict and resistance. Much of this 'conflict' has been focused on the internal debates within the subject, and whilst media studies has always had to, to some degree, 'resist' negative perceptions, its continuing popularity with students in English schools has meant that this resistance has largely been the thrust to combat the subject's 'PR problem', rather than any serious attempts by external agencies to redefine it. This study enters at a time where perhaps the subject's first 'act' of resistance was simply to survive. However, I also suggest that alongside this, the subject's biggest agitation is its incompatibility with the narrow views of knowledge dominating current curriculum policy. In chapters five and six, I return to this problem in more detail to consider some alternative ways of finding a coherent, agile epistemology that goes some way to address this.

Firstly, however, this study moves to examine my own relationship with the research, and the next chapter details my positionality as a teacher-researcher embedded in the area under research.

Chapter 3: Positionality

Introduction

My perspective as a researcher, the questions I ask, the methodologies I choose and, ultimately, the contribution to new knowledge I produce in this thesis are all informed by my own beliefs and experience as a media studies teacher. To some extent, the seeds of this research began twenty-two years ago when I first began teaching media studies at the time of the last significant curriculum change of Curriculum 2000. The length of time teaching the subject has given me a longitudinal view and, in 2014, with the subject undergoing a seemingly rubicon moment, the disputation between parties around the consultation and exam specification development, and the subsequent burgeoning of online professional communities of practice, provoked the kind of research question that asks 'what is going on here?' (Agar 1986; Geertz 1973; Wolcott 2002); the kind of question that compels getting in closer to a richer level of lived detail within which deeper understandings of the particular situation in question are promised. It is worth stating at the outset that an autoethnographic approach has been rejected in favour of researching the collective lived experiences of those enacting the reform - the media teachers and other actors invested in the teaching of the subject - because they provide a more stereoscopically rich site for a study of this type than my own singular individual experiences. Similarly, whilst there has been significant appetite for quantitative research-based evidence in education in in recent years, particularly in the government's drive for school improvement, quantitative research cannot adequately reflect "that educational institutions and the individuals who are involved in and with them are a heterogeneous bunch with different attributes, abilities, aptitudes, aims, values, perspectives, needs and so on" (Sikes, in Pole and Morrison, 2003 p. 10). As such, this research takes the position that interpreting the impact of the curriculum reform lies not within statistical proofs or objective 'truths' but within the variegated accounts, narratives and perspectives of those involved in the chalk-face, quotidian delivery of the subject, and the rich insights they proffer.

However, whilst the lived experiences of the research participants have been foregrounded in the study, my own subjectivities and experiences as a teacher of the subject have inevitably informed and shaped the research design. I do not attempt to erase my own subjectivities from the research, but instead operationalize them, to better understand the

complexities of experiences, opinions and insights of others impacted by the reform, and in a way that is adjacent and complementary. To maintain research integrity, it is important to make researcher bias transparent, and I go on to outline how my own position and standpoints, as a media educator, have been constructed since I began my teaching career.

From Ontological Imperative to Epistemological Stance

Denzin states "interpretive research begins and ends with the biography and self of the researcher" (2001, p. 12) and in keeping with the hermeneutic phenomenological 'attitude' this research takes, it is important to begin from the position of how the world is disclosed to me as a researcher. The perceived ontological 'realities' of teaching Media Studies A' Level under the reformed curriculum – my own and those of others - provided a catalyst for this research and, as such, I wanted to explore in more research-driven detail the causes and effects of these experiences of curriculum change.

Whilst there is well documented methodological validity for embracing researcher bias in academic work, particularly qualitative research of this nature, the word 'bias' still carries with it negative associations and an implied intractability that the bias-holder generates skewed data or interpretations. Whilst I view my own biases and assumptions as a 'good' thing, as it was these that initially spurred this research, I prefer to view them as autoethnographic starting points to explore the research object rather than as fixed, incommutable 'truths' to be proved or disproved. The importance of the research lies in the complexities, heterogeneities and contradictions of its landscape, and what this discloses, rather than the search for any kind of positivistic outcome or vindication of a particular ideological position.

Subject to change - 'What is Media Studies?'

The perception of subject identity is always an important aspect of a teacher's professional life. In the busy life of a teacher this may not always be consistently at the forefront of their day-to-day working life, but it is embedded in everything they do from the jobs they choose, the students they teach, how they teach, the professional relationships they build through to how they view their own teaching identity. Brooks (2016), in her research into the relationship between teacher identity and subject specialism, states that "a teacher's subject story can play a key part in professional identity, bringing coherence to professional

practice". She introduces the notion of a "professional compass" (ibid, p. 116) to describe how teacher identity needs a sense of rootedness or purposeful direction in its formation, but that it is also may oscillate according to intrinsic and extrinsic influences at any given point. Brooks states that "having a detailed understanding, through the lens of a discipline, changes how one views and values the world and undoubtedly in the case of teachers will affect how they teach about it" (ibid, p.130). As outlined in the introduction, perhaps the fact the media studies is a much maligned subject, that it belongs to a subversive academic tradition or that, in some institutions, it does not carry the same value as other more traditional subjects, brands it with a very particular identity, and one that appears to inspire a many of those who teach it a strong set of values, beliefs about and loyalty. All of these factors described have, at various points in my teaching career, influenced my own teacher identity and some orientation to my own background and context bears further exposition here as it helps explain the origins of my epistemic position and methodological decisions.

One of the strongest illustrations of this is the way in which I and my colleagues responded to the most common question asked by prospective media students – 'What is media studies?'. The answer might have varied slightly according to the year, the specification/subject content changes or what vocational media courses were also being offered as options at the time, but, ultimately, the ways we ('we' being my colleagues and I) answered this question were representative of a curriculum underpinned by relative teacher autonomy and student agency in both textual choice and how the subject was taught. We talked about the importance of being able to understand and think critically about their complex media-saturated worlds through the study of a diverse range of historical and contemporary texts that we, as their teachers, could choose and adapt to suit current issues and debates, and of the creative freedom, technical skills development and practical application of theoretical understanding in production work.

However, when the reformed A' Level Media Studies curriculum was brought in, the way in which we were able to answer this question discernibly changed. The specifications were still organized around the same four key concepts of Media Language, Representation, Audiences and Institutions used by the previous specifications, but the concepts became renamed as (somewhat confusingly) 'the theoretical framework' and these could now only be taught through compulsory set texts, theorists and inventory-style practical briefs. Of course we still

extolled the virtues and importance of studying media, but making the course sound appealing to prospective media students became a much more conscious effort because the new specification felt very different to what had gone before, and indeed what was felt to be the 'spirit' of the subject. The feeling of this dissonance and the disappointment (and occasionally anger) that accompanied it, adversely impacted professional morale for both me and my colleagues. This feeling was further reinforced by the posts and comments that began to appear on the Facebook groups, much of which pointed towards a groundswell of opposition to the curriculum changes. It was at this point that I became interested in the impact of the curriculum reform from an ethnographic research standpoint.

A Democratic Subject

Having completed a PGCE in English and Communications (a course that no longer exists), I began my teaching career in 2000 in a large sixth form college in Leicester, one of the most multiculturally diverse cities in the UK and moved on a few years later to a similarly diverse, non-selective, inclusive sixth form in inner London which was set up, under a Labour government as the first sixth form school in the country, to originally serve five local 11-16 schools. A' Level Media Studies in both colleges was a popular option and, at the time, made buoyant by a curriculum that balanced practical and theory equally. My own school education was diametrically opposite to this - as a 'scholarship girl' in an all girls' church school, traditional subjects and progression routes comprised the curriculum and 'new' subjects like media studies were not only not available to study, but also disapproved of. These elitist ideas most certainly had a bearing on why I later pursued a career as a media teacher, even if I was not completely conscious of this at the time.

Perhaps what subconsciously appealed to me as an individual before I became a teacher, and then more consciously once I was a teacher, was the democratic power of a subject that appealed to young people through its contemporary, relevant nature. It validated my students' experiences and reflected their lives in a way most other subjects did not. Its cross-disciplinary characteristics stretched understanding and it taught students the power of critical thinking through current examples of the world they inhabited. In A' Level Media Studies, texts could be chosen according to what the teacher thought would best suit each particular student cohort; teaching could respond and incorporate media events and news as they happened and be recognized in assessment; the practical component was substantial, at

50% of the overall grade; and group collaboration and creativity was rewarded. Even if the they did not go on to study the subject at university it still provided students from all - and significantly non-traditional and/or disadvantaged - backgrounds an important education experience and progression route. The relative autonomy of this curriculum stands in stark contrast with what exists now. Whilst there could be some legitimate criticisms levelled at the former specifications in terms of its inconsistencies of assessment and lack of standardization, the pendulum had swung in the opposite direction in the government's pursuit of rigour, and this appeared to be having, from mine and my colleague's standpoints, a damaging effect on the very bones of the media studies curriculum.

Relationship Status: Media and English

The historical relationship between media studies and English bears some consideration here not least because the long held curricular connections between media studies and English have been fundamental to the evolution of media studies in UK schools, and to the formation of its subject identity more generally, but also that my own positionality is shaped by the fact I taught both subjects alongside each other for much of my early career.

The place of media in English has been discussed by others at length elsewhere (see, for example, Connolly 2021) and considered further in my literature review, but it is worth pointing out that whilst the two subjects have enjoyed a close alliance in schools, media studies has never enjoyed the same status in the curriculum as English. English has a longer history, is more established in the curriculum and, until the classification was disbanded in 2019, it was classed as a 'facilitating subject' for students applying to universities (Russell Group, 2019) - none of which media studies has or been. Unlike at higher education level, where media studies has existed as a degree subject since 1975 (Golding 2019) and occupied a much more diverse cross-disciplinary academic space, media studies teaching in schools largely originated with English teachers and within English departments. This is also reinforced by sporadic provision of subject specialist initial teacher training nationally, with entrants to the profession commonly arriving via the English PGCE route with little or no media study at undergraduate or postgraduate level. For those that do come with subject specialist training, it is still often, like my own training, only a 'bolt-on' to an English PGCE course. In addition, whilst it is hoped that teachers teaching media do so out of a passion and an affinity to the subject, this is not always the case. Whilst I actively chose to pursue a path

in teaching media, I have encountered a number of 'reluctant media teachers' over the years – English teachers who, due to hours or staffing issues, found themselves with the odd media class on their timetable, just as Goodwyn and Branson recognised in their own 2005 research. Generally happy to teach the media language aspects of the course, but for anything else that required a more subject specialist knowledge – media ownership or video editing, for example – they often felt out of their depth and uncomfortable at having to teach something that was discernibly different to their usual English classrooms. Most ably took the challenge on, and some (like myself) developed a lasting affiliation to the subject, but ultimately, as Shulman (1986) asserts, the subject is best taught by teachers who can deploy their subject specialist knowledge effectively.

Chasing Status

Like many teachers of media studies who began in the late 90s/early 2000s, English teaching comprised a large proportion of my timetable. Even in my teaching training year, the differences in perceptions and status of media studies and English became conspicuous. As trainees, we followed exactly the same PGCE course curriculum as those on the Secondary English PGCE except for an additional weekly subject specialist session and the opportunity to teach media studies on placement. There was an implicit sense that the subject was not conferred as much status as English by the university, and even though the study of media was a compulsory part of the GCSE English coursework, there was no shared training in this area for those who had undertaken the 'pure' PGCE in English.

Despite this, or perhaps because of this, and as soon as I entered my first teaching position, my allegiance to the subject only grew stronger, as did my understanding of its history, purpose and importance in the curriculum. In my second role, and the college I ended up spending eighteen years of my career in, I advocated for media to be a separate curriculum area from English and, with a supportive principal and an enhanced budget, I was given the task of growing a separate media department to over 150 students taking a range of level 2 and 3 vocational and A' Levels. Part of my mission was to also raise the status of the subject both for students and institutionally. One of the ways we did this was to start the annual tradition of a media showcase, first held at The Riverside Studios until it closed for renovation, and then The Lyric in Hammersmith, both well-known venues in the arts and media world. We used everything within our capabilities to find media studies-sympathetic

public figures, media companies and alumni as hosts, awards presenters or sponsors, securing a range of people from actor James Nesbitt to the head of UKTV, to our very own former media students working in a variety of media-related roles to create a 'red carpet' style event that students would feel excited and proud to attend. The reason I include this information is to show how important raising the status of the subject was and also to highlight how much harder this became when the specifications changed. In fact, the reforms, with their cull of the Applied Media and Communications A' Level (which we also offered) and the significant reduction of the practical component in A' Level Media Studies meant that there was far less practical work to showcase, and even that was created around the same limited briefs set by the exam boards.

As I continued to teach the subject when the reforms were first announced, approved and then implemented, my own ontological 'reality' as a media teacher and 'insider' also seemed to align with the apparent consensus of other media teachers I talked to, read about or communicated online with in subject-specific social media forums. Contextualised by the "discourse of derision" that media studies has been subjected to over the years (Barker 1997; Buckingham and Sefton Green 1994; McDougall 2003; Laughey 2011; Buckingham 2017), the premise of this thesis, came from the desire to "[uncover] knowledge of relationships among phenomena and social behavior" (Mack 2010, p. 2). The "phenomena and social behaviour" (ibid) derives from the perceived collective insecurities held by media teachers rooted in fears that A' Level Media Studies was not going to make it through the reforms as a qualification, the palpable disdain for the subject that emanated from Gove and other drivers of policy, and the devitalization of a historically popular curriculum.

A Discourse of Discontent and Cultures of Connectivity

Whilst it is acknowledged that not all voices may be heard on an equal platform, it cannot be denied that for those who were involved in the consultations over the reform have not welcomed the changes (Buckingham 2017), and there has been evidence of a strong 'intuitive' feeling from 'on the ground' media teachers that the reforms are somehow 'wrong' (Eg. Rustin 2016).

But how can I truly 'know' that the new curriculum is as problematic as the initial negative reaction that teachers and other media educators have vocalised online and in person? The

best and most authentic way of doing this is to capture, describe, interpret and find meanings in the impact of the reform through the conflict and resistance expressed by media educators and their own lived experiences – and arguably the best way for me to find this is through the open and democratically evolved spaces of online professional communities of practice on social media (Grudz et al 2012) because they provide "digital spaces within which to share experiences, ideas, artefacts, whilst celebrating, informing and discussing in a rich social milieu" (Wheeler 2015, in Kucirkova and Quinlan, 2017, p. 21). Additionally and most significantly, in the context of this research, it is the best way because, in coexistence with my role as researcher, I am also a practising teacher and have the authentic access to research the community in which I am embedded, allowing me to explore my "situatedness" as an ethnographer (White 2018, p. 2). To do this requires a methodology that can embrace, harness and do justice to this particular combination of emic/etic, teacher/researcher characteristics. Best positioned to achieve this is a branch of digital ethnography called netnography – as I go on to elucidate in the next chapter – because whilst precise in its toolkit of methods, it offer fluidity in its application. Something which also has important compatibility with *the dynamic episteme*, the theoretical concept I later propose as an alternative conception of knowledge.

I also propose that in terms of my positionality, focus on qualitative lived experiences and deliberate choice of netnography in order to derive meaning from these data, this research is not simply an 'update' or 'reappraisal' of the next genealogical stage of media education, it is an indication that research of this type now needs to be conceived of differently – online communities of practice have fundamentally changed education because they offer an alternative means of generating, constructing and sharing knowledge that challenge and disrupt traditional hierarchies of knowledge production. This shift calls for research methodologies that are flexible and responsive enough to capture these dynamic environments and what new understandings they bring about.

Chapter 4: Methodology and Methods

Introduction

The research area required an approach that was interpretive in nature and a methodological framework that was able to coherently reticulate the multiple aspects I deemed contingent to building a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of the research area. Therefore, my research takes a multi-methodological approach which, framed by a hermeneutic phenomenological 'attitude', encompasses both critical discourse analysis (CDA) and netnography as complementary methodologies that sit within the hermeneutic tradition, and outlined as follows:

- CDA of policy documents and speeches (Fairclough 1995)
- A netnography (Kozinets 2020) of the lived experiences of media teachers as disclosed to me by field observations of the online media teachers' communities of practice and individual participants (media teachers, academics, other key figures involved and/or vested in the reform) via qualitative, semi-structured, one-to-one participant interviews.

This pluralistic, multi-methodological approach, which I make the case for further on in this chapter, is cohered by an hermeneutic phenomenological 'attitude' (Suddick et al 2020), as outlined in Figure 3 in Chapter One.

The multi-methodological choice was also motivated towards addressing my four research questions as, in combination, these components have allowed me to analyse policy documentation at a forensic level (CDA), ethnographically explore and interpret the impact of reform through online communities of practice (netnography), and interrogate issues of subject identity, teacher identity and how knowledge 'works' both within the immediate context of the research area, but also more broadly within education at both a practical and epistemological level. Whilst there is not the space to expand further here, there have been some convincing cases made for the use of a multi-methodological approach within education elsewhere (see, for example, Justesen et al 2013; Kahlke 2014; Essén et al 2017; Tierney et al 2019).

It is also worth noting at this point that this research is the product of a number of variables which gives it its substantive and unique 'character'. Whilst any academic or teacher-researcher could choose to undertake research into the curriculum reform of their subject in similar ways as I am doing, it would not be *the same*. Similar themes, issues or ideas may arise from similar studies, but the means by which they are uncovered, the characteristics of the methodological path travelled and the way they are necessarily interpreted will not be *the same*. As insider-researcher and a member of the groups under research, I have been able to leverage this to capture the early impacts of the reform from a unique vantage point. Additionally, as a practising teacher, I also hold an authentic role within and access to these communities, as well as an enhanced reason to want to research it. In the time of the last significant curriculum reform of media studies (2000), these online groups did not exist and, similarly, by the time the next curriculum reform of the subject takes place, the landscape of media teachers' communities of practice may (or may not) look very different again.

The Methodological Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis

I was interested in how the various texts – reports, speeches and policy documents – disclosed how they "mediate[d] and sustain[ed] particular discourses and power relations" (Lankshear 1994, pg. 10) in the context of the curriculum reforms and CDA provided an appropriate framework for the in-depth critical scrutiny of this.

Fairclough views language as "a site of struggle" (1989, p. 239) and conceptualisation of 'discourse' as part of a process (1995, p. 136) in which 'discursive events '– the written and spoken texts – are the linguistic manifestations of the network of practices, ideologies and relationships involved in their production and interpretation, chimed with the aims of this research. Fairclough emphasises that there is no hard and fast 'blueprint' to CDA (1989) and it offers a flexible methodology to examining texts and an in-built intuitive fluidity for analytical interpretation. For example, evidence of production processes can be identified as "traces in the text, and the interpretative process operates upon cues in the text" (ibid). Such discursive practices are intertwined with social practices, and the power dynamics embedded within these texts can exert influence far beyond the "immediate context of situation" (ibid) in which the discursive event occurs. Thus, the use of CDA as an approach helps this research

examine the power and dominant relations within key texts ('discursive events') around the 2014 reforms and to provide contextual insight, before entering into discussion of the netnographic and participant research data.

The fluid, interpretative capacities of CDA also align well with the hermeneutic 'attitude' adopted throughout this research. However, as a starting point, Hyatt 's Critical Policy Discourse Analysis Frame (CPDAF) (2013), which draws on Fairclough's approach, offers a useful heuristic to examine the policy texts of the 2014 reforms. The two key documents primarily focused on in the critical discourse analysis are:

1. Written statement to Parliament: GCSE and A' Level reform Delivered by the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, April 9th 2014
2. GCE Subject Level Conditions and Requirements for Media Studies, Department for Education, May 2016

The first was selected as it is the initial announcement of the new reforms and the second is the outcome of the reformed curriculum for A' Level Media Studies and the document upon which the new examination specifications were based. Other documents referred to in the analysis include:

- Michael Gove's, Secretary of State for Education, speech at the first Education Reform Summit in London, 10th July 2014
- 'How E. D. Hirsch Came to Shape UK Government Policy' by Nick Gibb MP and Foreward by Natasha Porter and Jonathan Simons from Knowledge and the Curriculum: A collection of essays to accompany E. D. Hirsch's lecture at Policy Exchange, 2015
- 'The Importance of Teaching' Speech by Michael Gove, Education Secretary, Policy Exchange, London, 5th September 2013
- What does it mean to be an educated person? Speech by Michael Gove, Education Secretary, at the Brighton Conference 7th May 2013

Appendix 1 demonstrates how Hyatt's CPDAF provided a starting point for analyses of these key documents and a full discussion of the analyses follows in Chapter 5.

Netnography

The appeal of Kozinets' netnography (2020) lies in his motivation for a workable, practical methodology that offers "an instruction set, a body of knowledge" and one that is clear enough to be ethically robust. It also offers, in such a varied digital landscape spanning multiple Facebook groups and the voices, experiences and perspectives of educators in both on- and offline spaces, a structure and routine with its specific data collection, analysis, ethical and research procedures that can be applied to multiple and varied contexts. For example, the lexicon Kozinets frequently employs to describe his approach includes pragmatic metaphors such as "nuts and bolts", "workbench" and "recipe", and for the researcher aiming to bring methodological order to the "mess", netnography offers a clear approach – and also pre-determined methods. Indeed, netnography was borne of Kozinets' frustration at the lack of specificity, direction and precision in the way ethnography was done online so for a research area concerned with the 'mess' of complex, qualitative interactions, connections, interfaces and typologies of communication online, netnography presented an apt choice.

Whilst some key researchers in this area such as Postill and Pink (2015) and Hine (2000, 2015) tend to focus more exclusively on the quality of socialities exhibited online, a particular benefit of Kozinet's netnography is the focus on the communities and their cultural meanings embedded on the internet that, he says, "are reflected within the traces, practices, networks and systems of social media" (Kozinets 2020, p. 14), and thus, much like CDA, netnography is closely aligned to the hermeneutic 'attitude' that underpins this research. Whilst there is no space here for a fuller description of its methodological relevance to education, netnography has already been shown to have significant value as a methodology within education research, as demonstrated in recent research by education researchers such as Janta et al (2014), Kulavuz-Onal & Vasquez (2013), Kulavuz-Onal (2015), Wallace et al (2018) and Tremayne (2022) thus, this research sits within a developing tradition of education netnographies.

A Procedural Approach: Adapting the 'Movements' and 'Phases' of Netnography

Over the three main iterations of Kozinets' development of netnography as a methodological framework (2010, 2015, 2020), he maintains his approach should be "open source and crowdsourced, as a scientific technique should always be" (2020, p. 14) and characterized by both structure and research autonomy, encouraging self-reflexivity and sharpened thinking in the research process. My approach is structured around the 'six procedural movements' outlined by Kozinets (2020) and onto these are mapped the twelve temporal research stages (Kozinets 2015). Appendix 2 outlines this in detail.

The First Research Phase

The first phase of data collection was carried out between the months of February and March in 2019, just before the first examinations of the new A' Level Media Studies specifications were sat by students. This provided an ideal point in time to capture a valuable qualitative snapshot of how the new specifications were being delivered and experienced by teachers and students of the subject at this comparatively early stage of delivery. After identifying and "siting" the bounds of the research as an "intentional research act" (Kozinets 2020, p. 139) which comprise Kozinets' first two 'movements' in his netnographic methodological toolkit (ibid, pp. 139-140), the first phase of data collection represents Kozinets' third movement of immersion. Following an initial period of 'online lurking', which Kozinets recommends as a preparatory action to ascertain prospective prior to commencing data collection, immersion involves 'div[ing] deeply' into the 'cultural pools' of the research domain and provided a perfect tool for eliciting key themes and recurring sentiments. In order to gain this "deep cultural sense of 'what is going on'" (Kozinets et al 2014, p. 134), I chose to gather all posts systematically from a seven-day period on one of the groups, followed by a small sample of individual interviews with media teachers who were members of the same Facebook group.

The 'Eduqas GCSE & A' Level Media Studies Teacher Sharing Group' was selected as the focus for the research because it had the highest number of teachers, greatest 'traffic' and widest geographic and institutional spread of all the three groups. In addition, it was also the group I had the most knowledge of since my own institution had chosen to follow the Eduqas specification and had used it myself in the capacity of a practising teacher. It was also my

observations about the growth and interactions of this group that gave rise to this doctoral research so it seemed an appropriate place to start.

Within this seven-day first phase time period, eighty-five posts (and associated interactions) were generated. The themes and sentiments that arose from this period of systematic immersion confirmed some of the broader themes I had expected to find from my own prior use of the group but also it revealed themes that presented new lines of enquiry in my research. In line with the recursive approach that Kozinets advocates, these themes helped shape the qualitative questions used in the subsequent individual interviews with teachers.

From my knowledge of those interacting the most productively on the group, I decided to ask eight specific individual teachers in this initial data collection stage to take part in my study, contacting them via direct messages on Facebook, rather than put out an open call on the group for participants. This follows Kozinet's methodological approach to "purposively sampling data to confirm a researcher's feelings of what is going on in the field site" (2010, p. 92) more closely and I also believed this was a more targeted way of gaining a representative spread of participants. Kozinets is also critical of "involvement data operation collections" (ie. researcher posts and comments on the Facebook sites) as although they do not violate any ethical rules, he claims they are "disruptive to the normal business of the people using these sites". Although, as I employ in the second research phase, Kozinets does support researcher intervention in certain research contexts.

Seven interviews were conducted as recorded telephone interviews and one was an email response to the same set of questions used in the other interviews. Due to the geographic spread and time constraints of participants (all participants and the author were teachers working in a variety of locations around the UK), in-person interviews were not a viable option. Whilst Kozinets advocates the use of online audio-visual methods with a recording capacity, video calling software with the capacity to record calls (such as Teams or Zoom) only came into widespread usage in the summer of 2020 towards the end of my second phase of data collection, almost a year later than my first phase. The use of Skype, which was more commonly used before this time period, was also investigated but as many of the interviews were conducted on school/college premises, the likely prospect of unreliable technology and slow internet connections made this a problematic option. Therefore,

telephone interviews recorded via a smartphone app ('TapeACall Pro') were chosen as the preferred, pragmatic and most available option to engage the time and investment of time-poor, busy teachers. MP3 audio files of each interview were then transcribed verbatim and uploaded to Nvivo for coding. In comparison to the telephone interviews, nuance, tone and detail were harder to ascertain in the written email response, therefore this mode of data collection was not pursued for second phase.

The telephone interviews were semi-structured with open questions, and covered five main areas:

- General questions about the teacher's media studies teaching context, background and length of experience
- Experiences, opinions and sentiment about the new curriculum
- Changes to curriculum offer
- Experiences of the teaching and delivery of the new A' Level
- Experiences, use and impact of the Facebook group and other forms of resources, support and CPD

For the interviews with the two 'admins' of the Eduqas group, additional questions were asked regarding their motivation for setting up the group and general opinions and experiences of the group.

Striking the balance between my role as a teacher and a researcher was something I had to be very aware of throughout the interviews for both phases of the data collection. Kozinets advocates that where there is interest in "deciphering already-discovered languages and meanings", the 'insider-researcher' approach is preferable (2020, p. 253). However, if the researcher is "still mapping out the general contours of the phenomenon of interest with the aid of the interview participant" then the 'outsider-researcher' approach is preferable. In essence, I was inhabiting both concurrently because, on one hand, it was important for the participants to view me as a fellow teacher as it increased connection and created a more comfortable and open space for them share their experiences. On the other hand, I was aware I had to take a more objective stance to ensure my interview questions did not lead participants to giving skewed or biased answers. To mitigate for this, I sought to always ask open questions to protect the integrity of the process whilst engaging in dialogue with the

participants, where appropriate, so they opened up more honestly and reflectively. Occasionally, this led onto various unexpected tangential lines of discussions, some of which provided insight into my study that I had not previously considered (which are returned to in the following section), and some which did not, but were useful for building researcher-participant dynamics. I tried to be as sensitive and aware as possible to the constraints of the participants' time whilst ensuring my questions covered all the main areas as far as possible (Tomlinson 1989).

The Second Research Phase

This was conducted over a longer period of time (February – August 2020) and, as such, required a more selective approach to data collection than the first phase which took place in a shorter, more delineated time period. The second phase opened out to all three Facebook groups, nominally associated with but not officially endorsed by the three main examination boards. These were:

- EDUQAS GCSE & A' Level Media Studies Teacher Sharing Group
- OCR A' Level and GCSE Media Teachers
- AQA A-Level Media Studies Teachers

This research stage represents the move to Kozinets' interaction stage which, he says, should involve "searching…observing…downloading parts…analytic and observational fieldnotes" (2020, p. 130). He suggests that at the outset of this stage that the researcher presence is "largely unobtrusive and non-invasive" (ibid) therefore, other than the initial ethics notification post to notify the three Facebook groups about my observation of the groups as part of my research, I chose to not interact further by either posting or commenting on the posts of others during the majority of this period. Posts for inclusion in the data were selected on the following basis:

- High level of interaction from members (comments/likes/reactions)
- Significant expression of sentiment (positive or negative)
- Content of interest that corresponded to themes established in the first phase
- Content of interest that contradicted themes established in the first phase
- Content of interest that suggested new themes not found in the first phase

However, unfortunately, within a month of this data collection period beginning, the first lockdown of the pandemic in 2020 happened and shortly after all formal examinations were cancelled for the summer exam period. The posts and interactions on the Facebook group that would have taken place normally did not happen as discussion on the groups turned to predominantly matters of online teaching, centre-assessed grades and other pandemic-related issues. Whilst this raised other interesting points about the nature of the course, pedagogy and curriculum policy, these lay outside the scope of my study. In line with Kozinets' recommendation to take a more explicit interactive approach when "particular nuances or even large themes still elude" (ibid), I did not feel that anything was still 'eluding' me from the data already collected from netnographic observations and participant interviews, as such, but I did feel that more deliberate interaction on the Facebook group would be useful to test and triangulate my initial findings. In order to achieve this, I decided to post a question on the three Facebook groups which drew on both the initial findings of the CDA and some of the key themes that came out of the participant interviews. The question was as follows:

> The intentions of the A' level reforms were to 'introduce more rigorous content' and create qualifications that were 'more ambitious' and that 'will prepare young people for the demands of employment and further study' (Gove, 2014). To what extent do you think these intentions have been achieved in A' Level Media Studies so far?

This post garnered excellent engagement and sixty-nine comments containing some valuable data from the Eduqas group, including the opportunity to conduct one further interview with a university media studies lecturer for an alternative perspective.

The Participant Interviews

The benefits and best practice techniques of semi-structured qualitative interviewing for education research have been well-documented and too numerous to detail here (for a useful overview, see Hobson and Townsend (2010)). For this study, as outlined in the first phase to some success, the one-to-one interview was the method continued to the second phase. The one-to-one interview was chosen because this approach seemed all round more appropriate given the shared background and experience of me, as the researcher, with the participants in the research. Hobson et al (ibid, p. 233) recognize this approach allows for more prominent interpersonal dynamics of the role of the researcher, rather than the more

facilitative role in group scenarios. The decision was also supported by the practicalities of access to the research participants as engaging teachers with varying time and location constraints in an extended research interview scenario would be far more problematic in a group arrangement, and for no discernible additional benefit than conducting them individually.

Twenty-five semi-structured interviews with individual participants were conducted in the second research phase over a seven-month period spanning just before and after the 2020 lockdown (February - September 2020). This included interviews with eighteen media teachers and seven who work or have worked within the media education field in either academia, teacher training, exam boards or organisations related to media education. The majority of teacher participants (sixteen out of the eighteen) were sourced via a call out on the three Facebook groups and these teachers represented a good variety of geographical location, school and college context and length of experience (ranging from early career teachers to twenty-five years of teaching experience). However, I also wanted to gain the perspectives of either newly qualified or trainee media teachers so two PGCE trainees, Rae and Amina, were sourced in the later stages of the data collection period through Kate and Raph (also participants in the research) who both run media studies PGCE courses in higher education institutions.

The call-out generated a lot of interest and thirty-two teachers contacted me for the participant information sheet. Whilst the number of OCR and Eduqas Facebook group respondents was fairly equal, the response from those on the AQA group was much lower and despite repeating the call out on this group, there were no further respondents. This was likely to do with the much smaller numbers of centres opting for AQA's specification and therefore the much more modest membership and activity on the associated Facebook group. Additionally, I sought to include a range of other key figures involved in media education to provide a wider perspective on the reformed curriculum. These included (and anonymised where requested):

- David, Emeritus Professor of Media Education, who had played a key role in the consultation process and meetings with the Department for Education, alongside Professor Natalie Fenton

- Marianne, former teacher and media education consultant at The English and Media Centre, and erstwhile editor of Media Magazine.
- Raph and Kate, both course leaders of media studies PGCE courses and former media studies teachers
- Emma, senior lecturer in media studies in a higher education institution and former media studies teacher
- Oliver, a senior education figure in a UK based film and media education organisation
- Terry, a media studies subject officer for an examination board and former media studies teacher.

A range of other figures were approached including two other academics who took interest or an active part in the reform process, the government subject advisor involved in the development of the new framework and specification approval, and the subject officers for the two other examination boards. The requests made for their participation were either declined or not responded to. A full list of anonymized participants can be found in Appendix 3.

The majority of the individual interviews lasted, on average, forty-five minutes although some extended well beyond the hour, where participants had the willingness and capacity to do so. Many of the participants wanted to ask me questions about the motivation behind my research and my own background as a media teacher, but I was mindful to not disclose specific personal opinions or information that would potentially lead participants to respond in a certain way, or create an acquiescence response bias (Lelkes and Weiss 2015). It was beneficial for interviewer-participant dynamics, however, for participants to know I was a fellow media teacher and the impetus for the research as it gave me more authentic credibility, so a careful balance was aimed for.

Using the questions and findings from the first phase as a starting point, I made amendments to the question list to ensure it focused in on and drew out more fully all the key themes and lines of interest that had come out of the first phase of research. In addition to asking participants about their background and context, the key areas covered by the questions were:

- Experiences, opinions and sentiment about the new curriculum

- The influence and impact of the new curriculum on engagement, pedagogy and perceptions of the subject.
- The role and impact of the Facebook group(s) in their teaching and on their professional identity.
- Thoughts about the future of media studies

In the early part of the participant interviews, prior to the pandemic lockdown, it was challenging to find suitable interview times for busy teacher participants. Most interviews took place at the end of the working day, or in the evenings or weekends, according to their availability. Interviews conducted by telephone did have the benefits of flexibility and accessibility as teachers were able to do the interviews in a variety of locations such as at their school or college workplace, at home or, for one particular participant, in their car in a carpark. These challenges lessened when the first lockdown of the pandemic happened as teachers were able to be more flexible with their time because they were working from home and, at that point, most were not engaged in the kinds of live remote teaching that became the norm later on in the pandemic. Towards the end of the data collection period, the interview with Raph was conducted via Zoom which had a recording and transcription facility. In terms of consistency and using a different approach to conducting the interview, there was no discernible difference in terms of quality of data gathered between the telephone and video calls. Whilst transcription quality on video calling software such as Zoom and Teams has vastly improved since 2020, this particular interview transcription was poor quality, and a separate transcription of this interview was still required.

Interview Transcription

I began by transcribing all interview audio myself, as I did for all the first research interviews, but now aided by an early version of the application of what is now called *Otter AI*. This allowed me to listen, pause the audio and type all in one window without having to navigate back and force between different applications. Whilst this was timesaving, and preferable to the painstaking process of transcription for the first phase, the process was still very lengthy and with over thirty hours of audio to transcribe, I decided to outsource this to an acquaintance who, serendipitously, was on parental leave from an academic professional services role and in the process of setting up a freelance transcription service.

It was important to maintain the integrity of the process so once the transcriptions were returned, I checked them against the audio recording for accuracy. This also was a useful process because it provided further familiarity with the data for the coding process. Kozinets recognises that the lines between data collection, interpretation and analysis are 'amorphous' and iterative processes, calling this stage integration, the fifth of his six 'movements (2020, p. 132). The overlap of transcription, coding, and data collection allowed for a reflexive approach, where later interviews were shaped by earlier ones. For example, new participants like Raph and Emma were identified based on insights from previous interviews. This approach to data collection is essentially 'micro-genealogical' and reflexive, representing what Kozinets advocates as a process of "decoding, translating, cross-translating and code-switching between parts and wholes, between data fragments and cultural understandings" (2020, p. 142).

Being able to begin the coding before the data collection phase completed was particularly useful because it allowed me to recognise gaps in my data (for example, trainee and new teachers, and names of other individuals involved in the reform consultation process and/or who had broader or counterpoint perspectives to offer). After eighteen interviews with teacher participants, I also recognised that there was very little 'new' being discussed in these interviews and whilst each participant recounted their experiences and views from their own particular context, which was interesting in itself, I decided that data saturation had been reached and in discussion with my supervisors, decided not to interview any further teachers. After the final interviews were conducted with the other participants who were not teachers, the data collection concluded and the remaining transcription coding took place.

Data Analysis: Nvivo

Nvivo was chosen as the application for my data analysis as the software aligns well with the iterative and flexible methods of netnography. Indeed, Kozinets recognises that Nvivo can "offer assistance in coding, searching, classifying, and organizing large sets of qualitative data" (Kozinets et al 2014. p. 274).

The Nvivo training course I attended was particularly useful because it integrated research process methodology for coding with the technical training and this helped me establish a

three-phase structure for coding my data. The three phases, with an explanation of the coding process in operation, are outlined in the table below:

1. Open coding ⬇	*132 separate 'nodes' were created through the open coding process and these contained a total of 2298 coded references*
2. Developing categories ⬇	*17 categories were created from the 132 nodes*
3. Developing themes	*Four themes were identified into which the 17 categories were merged. Each theme was linked explicitly to one my four research questions (1) subject identity; (2) teachers' pedagogic lived experiences of the reform; (3) professional identity; and (4) the future of media studies*

Table 1 The Three Phases of Coding

These three phases represent a interpretative coding process which aligns well with Kozinets' netnographic movements and as demonstrated above, the process is one of gradual refinement as individual code 'nodes' are integrated or merged into categories which are, in turn, organised into a smaller number of themes.

Appendix 4 illustrates the Nvivo database architecture of how the three phases were organised as outlined above, and Appendix 5 shows the product of all three stages in codebook format.

Ethical Considerations

To maintain research integrity, credibility, trustworthiness and rigour, I had to ensure the ethical procedures followed throughout my research were robust. My research involved both research into the interactions of members of private Facebook groups as well as individual semi-structured interviews to which participants offered their time and opinions generously. Both require considerations of privacy, accuracy and fair representation but the ways in which I was able to ensure these things differed according to access and context. I gained ethics approval for both my first phase and full study from Bournemouth University's Ethics Committee. I also followed BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018) to guide me in matters of consent, transparency, right to withdraw, privacy, data management and storage and disclosure.

Netnographic Field Observations: Facebook groups

Kozinets (2020, p. 164) warns that netnographers have the potential to "mislead, misquote and misrepresent" when observing and interacting online therefore, like all traditional ethnographers, we must take care to not be intrusive and be aware that "community members may not wish to be subject to public or scientific scrutiny". Kozinets (ibid) also recommends approaching netnography from a place of introspection to consider how I, the researcher, would feel if I were in the position of being observed or participating in the research. As a member of one of the Facebook groups myself as part of my professional life as a teacher, this was easy to imagine. The group is private and moderated by 'admins' who control membership and posts. I expected the admins to only allow research directly related to the group and ensure requests for members' time were reasonable, with clear opt-out options and anonymization. My first step was to contact the admins of the three groups for permission. Each admin received the research information sheet and ethics approval confirmation. After gaining permission, I posted a clear notification of my research with opt-out options, which the admins pinned to the group page during data collection. Significant posts for netnographic observations were stored in a password-protected folder. I limited my interactions and remained a passive observer until the data collection period ended, only asking open questions and not revealing personal opinions. The identities of members cited in this thesis have been anonymized, and any personal or professional references removed.

Semi-structured Interviews

> "The research interview's function is to give a person, or group of people, a 'voice'. It should provide them with a 'platform', a chance to make their viewpoints heard and eventually read… In this sense an interview empowers people" (Wellington 2000, p.72).

This statement has additional resonance here as media teachers have not had much of an opportunity of a 'platform' or 'voice' to talk about their subject in recent times – either in the research context or in the context of education policy, most notably the DfE's A' Level Media Studies curriculum reform consultation, the outcome of which did not appear to accurately take into account the views of media teachers who contributed. Therefore, it was particularly important for me, as a media teacher myself, to ensure that the interviews accurately captured the qualitative detail of teachers' experiences, their views and sentiments

expressed. Indeed, as outlined in the next chapter, some of the teachers declared the experience to be cathartic and therapeutic.

Prior to the interviews taking place, I sought participants' permission to record them and checked again at the start of the interview before recording began. The recording app used also has an in-built notification which sounds before recording starts. Audio files in MP3 format automatically saved to my own phone which I then transferred to my password protected cloud file storage system. I took care to ensure they were not saved to and/or removed from any local or hard drive device so they were only accessible in one location. My transcriber had access to the audio files through sharing permissions which were removed at the end of the process. Similarly, the Word document transcriptions were saved in the same folder by the transcriber which I then checked these for accuracy alongside the audio to ensure the integrity and meaning of the participants' words was preserved. Individual transcriptions were also made available to participants to review.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and quotations used within this thesis reflect the precise words of the participants. Only 'filler' words that reflect natural speech pauses and thinking time (eg. 'umm' or 'err') or any repetition of words that did not change the original meaning of the sentence were removed for clarity. Colloquialisms, swear words and abbreviations were kept in as these often revealed sentiment or tone that provided researcher insight. Ellipses have been used to reflect the reduction of a longer quotation for clarity and parentheses have been used to support grammatical flow, sense and tense agreement. Care has been taken to preserve at all times the meaning and intentions of what participants said. The only redacted information was where participants referred to specific individuals by name or role by which they could be easily identified, and because these named individuals had not agreed to participate in the research, and/or discussion of them was not favourable, their identity needed to be protected. The only exception to this was information relating to individuals already in the public domain and which did not carry the danger of reputational damage.

Pseudonyms/Anonymisation

Unless explicitly stated otherwise, all participants in this research, both online and in the interviews, have been anonymised. To establish the difference between the participants observed on the Facebook groups and those participating in the individual interviews, two

different types of anonymizing identifiers were used. Participants online were allocated two letters resembling initials and interview participants were given first name pseudonyms. Both types were chosen to give the discussion of the data a more 'human' element as potential other choices such as 'Participant X' were considered rather dehumanising and did not fit the qualitative ethos of the research. Pseudonyms were chosen in the spirit of culturally responsive research and, as recommended by Lahman et al (2023, p.682) ethnically identifiable names were given appropriate equivalent names. Without revealing specific methods of pseudonymising, as that may unintentionally mean that participants can be identified, cultural naming practices were followed and all participants given the option of choosing their own pseudonym should they wish to do so (although the majority did not opt for this). Two participants were happy for their real names to be used. The full list of individual participants can be seen in Appendix 3.

Chapter Five: Critical Discourse Analysis of Key Policy Texts

Researchers frequently cite Dye's position that "policy is anything governments choose to do or not to do" (1972, p. 1). This 'choice' is made up of a whole host of ideological and attitudinal drivers dependent on the political mood of the time. In the case of the 2014 curriculum reform, Michael Gove and Nick Gibb, aligned in their strongly held personal beliefs about education, set in motion their agenda to return to what they perceived a traditional, 'knowledge-rich' and more 'rigorous' curriculum, an ideology heavily influenced by the 'Core Knowledge Curriculum' work of E.D. Hirsch. To address my first research question—*How have the knowledge and curriculum discourses and theories that underpin the 2014 education reform impacted the Media Studies A-Level curriculum and perceptions of its subject identity?*—it is necessary to begin with an examination of these discourses to grasp how they are selected, disseminated and framed for the work of education (Apple 1985; Wexler 2017).

The first traces of the discourse around the 2014 reforms lie in, as Fairclough (1995, p. 136) terms, the 'discursive events' that occurred at the time of and following the election of the coalition government. The result of an electoral impasse in 2010, and unable to reach a majority, the Conservatives entered into a coalition with the Liberal Democrat party. As outlined in chapter one, Gove had, prior to the coalition win, declared his educational allegiances to E.D. Hirsch's 'Core Knowledge Curriculum' work, promising to "completely overhaul" the curriculum (2009), and, in the words of Nick Gibb, the Minister for Schools[7] "a year later, that is precisely what we set about doing" (2015).

Initially, Gove envisioned a more radical set of reforms set to replace GCSEs. Following a leak that the qualifications would be scrapped in favour of a two-tier system of O' Levels and CSEs, this then shifted to plans to institute the English Baccalaureate (EBacc)[8]. Clegg and the

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[7] Nick Gibb was appointed as Minister of State for Schools in 2010, remaining in post until 2012. He returned in 2014 until 2016, and was appointed as Minister for State for School Standards in 2020 until he was sacked by Johnson's Conservative government in 2021. He was reinstated by Sunak's Conservative government in 2022.

[8] Introduced in 2010 by the Coalition government, the EBacc was intended to be the English equivalent to the French Baccalaureate, where students were to take a 'broad core' of subjects in specialist strands. However, opposition to this meant that rather than a standalone qualification, it is exists now primarily as a performance indicator. Students are awarded it once they have achieved a prescribed set of GCSEs that include the subject combination of English Language and Literature, Maths, combined or three sciences, a language and either History or Geography. The Department for Education state in their website, the EBacc 'open[s] up lots of doors' and is a tool for social mobility. Whilst citing supporting research for this from UCL's Institute of Education and the Sutton Trust, in 2019, the Department for Education removed from its website reference to the Ebacc's endorsement by Russell Group Universities, indicating a reduction in recognition of its value. The government stated its ambition was for 75% of all students to take the EBacc by 2022, with this rising to 90% by 2025

opposition from the Liberal Democrats stemmed that particular move and Gove's EBacc reform ended up being a much watered-down version and comprised, instead, a very specific set of GCSEs (English Literature and Language, Maths, the Sciences, a language and either History or Geography). This has also led to the marginalisation of other subjects which has been particularly problematic for the value, status and recruitment of creative subjects such as media studies in the curriculum – and ironically antithetical to the 'broad and balanced curriculum' that Gove was so committed to. Indeed, in hindsight, Clegg has since commented that the DfE was subject to "fruit-cakey policy spasms" (ITV news, 7th April 2015). Nevertheless, crucially, the EBacc reform set the stage for the curriculum reforms of 2014 and new discourses around education.

The social policy research of Blakemore et al conducted following the coalition government, makes the point that policy-making is not always transparent in terms of what it declares it "officially" sets out to achieve, and may, therefore, be "designed to promote the power of government (and the political party that runs it)" (2013, p. 32). They go on to assert that the second "face" of policy is often to further the political status of an individual, government department or party - in varying degrees of blatancy – and often to the detriment of the citizens it is designed to benefit. This idea is reminiscent of Muller's prescient recognition that knowledge is deeply embedded within power structures that govern society, whichever political side they might derive from:

> "Knowledge is reduced to the politics of identity and recognition, where knowledge relations are represented simply as power relations between groups". (Moore and Muller 2002, p. 5)

This CDA seeks to examine the ideological impetus of the reforms and how policy is a very particular articulation of wider political ambition and ideologies before moving to a more detailed discussion of the discourses around knowledge that underpin the reform, and then finally setting this into dialogue with the findings from the research.

2025. However, the National Statistics data on the government's website, at time of writing, reports only 38.7% of students took the EBacc in 2021/22, with this figure having stayed somewhere between 38-40% since 2013/14.

Analysing Gove's Written Statement to Parliament

In Gove's initial written statement to Parliament introducing the 2014 curriculum reforms, an example of a "driver" according to Hyatt (2013, Appendix 1), he creates the overarching "warrant" (ibid) for the reforms by presenting education within a deficit model - that qualifications need to be "more ambitious" and provide "greater stretch for the most able" as well as "[preparing] young people better for the demands of employment and further study". The semantic field of words chosen ("ambition", "stretch", "demand") are commonly used in education to construct a discourse of high standards and to leverage a position that is hard to argue with – Fairclough terms this type of warrant "political", where the justification is based on arguments that are for the public good, rather than based on evidence or accountability. The words listed above are not neutral, of course, but the reader is not invited to engage with the nuances of 'how' those ideal standards can be achieved by Gove's educational vision, only that there is an implicit sense that if anyone does question the meaning, they lay themselves open to being accused of what Gove himself previously slated as an "enemy of promise" (Gove, 2012). This is an example of an 'element' of what Fairclough calls "orders of discourse" (1989, p. 28). A term borrowed from Foucault, Fairclough proposes these instances of discursive practices, and the relationships between them, establish discourse conventions that serve to construct and reproduce particular understandings and standpoints of education. Within this, he identified "genre" to describe a discourse type of how certain language conventions become associated with social and institutional practices and, in this case, within education. The language used in Gove's written statement to parliament can be seen replicated and reinforced in a multitude of other educational contexts. The accepted vernacular within education that this evolves into, latently (or otherwise) serves to strengthen Gove's educational ideology and supports the enactment of policy.

To "legitimise" (Hyatt, 2013) this position further, Gove constructs certain 'truths' about the state of education, such as "the pernicious damage caused by grade inflation and dumbing down", as incontrovertible, and that his reform, the obvious panacea to these problems. Thus, he presents his education reform, and himself as the 'fixer', to remedy the issues he asserts and, in doing so, serves also to distance his reform from the policies of the previous Labour government which, he states, "have undermined students" achievements for far too long'. As Fairclough notes, the use of mythopoesis and logical fallacy to present the past (in

this case, the Labour government) in a negative light is a common rhetorical device in politics. Invoking a future narrative, Gove uses words that carry weight and resonance in raising educational standards, such as "integrity" and "reliability", and promises to reinstall greater confidence for those vested in education setting out his audience for the reforms – "pupils, parents, teachers, universities and employers". In his speech at the first Education Reform Summit in 2014, he leverages the notion of a shared moral purpose with his audience which, he states, should be:

> "…liberating individuals from ignorance, democratising access to knowledge, making opportunity more equal, giving every child an equal chance to succeed"

Hyatt (ibid) terms this device, where the notion of 'the public good' is appealed to, as "moral evaluation", and, where Gove justifies the reforms in the pursuit of "world class qualifications…education", Hyatt frames this as "accountability". However, it is interesting that Gove does not mention the main measure of this (the OECD's PISA[9] rankings) and only alludes to other accountability measures such as exam results and student progression to employment and Higher Education in the broadest sense. This could point to a deliberate avoidance in stating specific accountability measures, should they present unfavourable outcomes further down the line. Gove's speeches, like the historical figures he so admires, tend to follow the grand style of rhetoric, with evocations of ambitious claims, the assemblage of clever arguments and obviation of critics through the construction of false binaries (Twilight OR Middlemarch, Angry Birds OR Coding, relevance OR knowledge, in his 2013 speech 'What Does It Mean to be Educated?'). The reform of A' Level Media Studies does not appear anywhere in the initial reform announcements but already implicit in Gove's choice of examples in this 2013 speech is his distaste of popular media texts. The growing sense of disquiet felt by media educators in these early stages, as recounted by David's and Marianne's interview accounts of that time period, appears to not be without foundation.

As indicated earlier, the semantics of word choice reveal much about the intentions of the author or a speech or policy text. Following in the same vein as Fairclough's conception of 'orders of discourse', Hyatt observed that education policy texts tend to use the same lexical

[9] PISA stands for *Programme for International Student Assessment* and measures 15-year-old students' reading, mathematics, and science literacy.

phrases and terminology, constructing a tacit language between policy makers and educators, the instantiations of which can be seen manifested in a range of other domains within education. An example of this is Gove's use of the phrase 'a broad and balanced curriculum' in this 2014 document. Originally appearing in the government's Education Reform Act of 1988, a 'balanced and broadly based curriculum' (Clause 2, Department for Education, 1989), the long term impact of Gove's resurrection of the phrase can be seen, over 8 years later, in its embeddedness in the current Ofsted framework (The School Inspection Handbook 2022), as well in publications such as Impact, the journal of the professional body for teachers, The Chartered College, and the education commentariat (Eg. Didau 2017; Richards 2019; Sutton Reid, in Callaghan, 2020). Indeed, the whole of Impact journal's Issue 6 (2019) was dedicated to and entitled 'Broad and Balanced Curriculum'. This is a prime example of overlexicalisation – or what Fairclough termed "overwording" – and particularly interesting because it breaks the bounds of its original policy context to be used in policy, curriculum and assessment documents and framework right across the domain of education thus solidifying its place in education discourse. Similarly, Fairclough argued that the relationships between discourses and social practices are dynamic and mutually shaping and it could be argued here that Gove's reconceptualization of a 'broad and balanced curriculum' for 2014 carries the insinuation that the preceding curriculum was not, or at least not in the way he wanted, and therefore it has assumed a particular political meaning in its policy context and generated new discourses in and about education.

In a bid to assert the credibility of the reform through academic sources, instances of what Hyatt terms "intertextuality" can be seen in the reference to Professor Mark E. Smith, the Vice-Chancellor of Lancaster University, and the associated, but unnamed, "experts from higher education establishments and subject associations" are also mentioned in the document. Again, the reader is not given information in the document about how this academic was chosen, and who the other advisors were, and, as such, is not given the opportunity to question the nature of this relationship. An uncritical acceptance of the validity of the recommendations is encouraged, but when Gove goes on to say that he accepts all the recommendations given by his academic advisors, it is not made clear that these relate only to the fifteen subjects included in the initial consultation process. Key figures in education (academics, headteachers, teachers, the education commentariat) and schools who offer evidentiary support of Gove and Gibb's knowledge-rich educational

ideology are also frequently deployed elsewhere in their policy speeches and writings. Names such as Dan Willingham, Daisy Christodoulou, Greg Ashman, Tom Bennett and schools such as Katherine Birbalsingh's Michaela, Pimlico Academy, School 21 and the West London Free School are all prominent recurring names. It is interesting to note that all but one of the schools mentioned in that list have since been downgraded from 'Outstanding' by Ofsted, and the one that has not (Michaela) has come under intense scrutiny and criticism (including Birbalsingh becoming the subject of the 2022 documentary 'Britain's Strictest Headmistress'). This is not to suggest that Ofsted grades are a unilaterally trustworthy quality measure of a school's provision, this is to make the point that Gove and Gibb used this measure of schools and key figures as beacons to support their ideological claims - but that these claims have not been proven robust on the basis of their own logic.

Whilst Gove continues to construct himself as the single figure of authority driving through the reforms, he also inserts subtle caveats for their effectiveness ("By placing the responsibility for the content of A' Levels in the hands of university academics") and relocating the emphasis from 'I' to 'we' ("We hope that these new exams will be more rigorous and will provide students with the skills and knowledge needed for progression to undergraduate study"). This achieves the (contradictory) goals of shifting any potential future 'blame' for the reform away from Gove, whilst imbuing the reforms with a perceived sense of credibility.

Examples of over-wording occur again with Gove's repetition of the word 'rigour' or "rigorous" in this policy document. The word appears four times throughout the document and reappears many other times in his speeches leading up to and after the education reforms and has to some degree become synonymous with the aims of the reform. For Gove, it is not simply an evocative term that holds useful function in his rhetoric – it is this too - but it also intimates the much deeper set of beliefs underpinning Gove's personal motivations for reform. The meaning of the word, in the context of the reform, bears some scrutiny in order to better understand how it has been operationalised to justify the reforms. The reader – the educator, the parent, the politician – is expected to share an understanding of what Gove means by 'rigour', yet it is never explicitly explained in the document other than on the basis of what it is not ("grade inflation", "dumbing down"). The document goes on to outline the changes in content for some of the fifteen subjects included in the initial reform, of which the

reader is meant to infer this represents 'rigour' but this only hints at Gove's ideologies of education which run at a much deeper-seated level. A child from a working-class family whose adoptive parents paid for him to attend an independent school for which he latterly gained a scholarship, Gove's own schooling in state and private education has had a profound impact on his views. His conviction politics are a curious mix of a neo-conservative fervency to improve social mobility through education and traditionalist, elitist values based on the Hirschian vision of a knowledge-rich curriculum, and the neo-liberal aim for the UK's education to compete on the global stage. Nick Gibb, the minister for Schools during the 2014 reforms, reiterates this influence that Hirsch had on the drive for reform in his essay for the Policy Exchange on 'Knowledge and Curriculum'. On reading 'The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them', he "had the strange sensation that Hirsch had taken [his] own inchoate and disparate thoughts on education and turned them into an articulate and intellectually robust case for action" (2015). The dual drivers for reform - social mobility and economic development - are illustrated by Gove in his speech at the Education Summit in 2014, where he states that "closing that gap is a personal crusade for me" but immediately followed by the assertion that education is "an economic imperative for every developed nation". It is difficult to align, however, an ostensible concern for driving up educational standards for the working classes when Gove is also known for saying at the 2011 Conservative Party conference that the class system is "what made Britain great" and that private schools were "a priceless asset".

Social mobility in education carries a particular meaning in this context - that mobility comes from achieving rigorous academic qualifications which in turn are predicated on the acquisition of a very defined set of knowledges. Implicit in this is that some knowledges are 'good' and some knowledges are 'bad' – Gove states his intentions are to not just "to close the gap, but to raise the bar" (Education Summit, 10th July 2014). The 'bar', it can be presupposed, means Gove's envisioning of 'good' knowledge as a prescribed, hierarchical and canonical type of knowledge which all students should have access to and be assessed on in a standardised way, reiterating his alignment with E.D. Hirsch's "education thoughtworld" (1987, p. 8). Gibb notes this in his essay for the Policy Exchange that Hirsch, in his work 'Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know', advocates for the canonical approach. Citing Thorndike and Baker's 1917 school book 'Everyday Classics', an elementary schoolbook which aimed to introduce American schoolchildren to the canon,

Hirsch presents his case for implementing such an approach that determines a curriculum comprised of what is "indisputably 'classic'" and "what every child in the land ought to know, because it is good, and because other people know it. The educational worth of such materials calls for no defence" (E.D Hirsch, 1988, citing Thorndike and Baker, 1917, in Gibb, 2015, p. 10). However, the consequence of holding up certain types of knowledge up as the gold standard means the curriculum inherently privileges subjects that have a 'vertical discourse'. For these subjects, determining a canon or body of 'accepted knowledge' may be less disputable or problematic, but, for a subject like media studies, which is organised around a much 'flatter' discourse, the valuing of culturally and socially relevant 'everyday' knowledge and relativist pedagogies, it is not only more difficult but also not desirable. Denuding the curriculum of this reduces the opportunity for students, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, to engage with knowledge in an academically democratic way.

It is worth pointing out at this point that whilst social justice is claimed to be at the heart of E.D. Hirsch's and the government's education ideology, in the fourteen years of Conservative government, at the time of writing, the most recent research on social mobility shows that there has been no progress made to that effect. Published research from the Institute of Fiscal Studies' Deaton Review of Inequalities reports that "education in the UK is not tackling inequality" (Tahir, 2022) and the disadvantage gap between children eligible for free school meals (FSM) and those who are not has remained constant over a long period of time. Statistics from 2019, prior to the pandemic, show that for 19-year-olds in education, those eligible for FSM were 25% less likely to leave school with two or more A' Levels. Further data from research conducted by the IFS Deaton Review into the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic (2021) suggests that inequalities in education have since widened. In addition, the ability to reliably measure this over time has become more problematic due to the reported grade inflation resulting from the exam cancellations of 2020. The lack of formally assessed student work available to grade students when the exams were cancelled caused problems for the integrity of how students were assessed and, ironically, the things that could have reduced this issue - modular assessment rather than terminal exams, and a higher proportion of coursework – were removed by the reforms of 2014. Writing for the Sutton Trust in June 2024, Cullinane also recognises the lack of progress made by the Conservative government in terms of social mobility in education in their incumbency. In short, there is a

growing body of evidence that Gove's conception of a "rigorous', knowledge-rich" curriculum has not been successful in raising standards and addressing inequalities as were the promises in the early policy announcements and in the justifications for the reform's implementation in the first place.

Analysing the New Subject Content Framework

To return the focus to Gove's conception of 'rigour' in the context of the media studies curriculum, it is necessary to turn this CDA to the Subject Content Framework published by the Department for Education. This document set the blueprint for the subject at A' Level and outlined the parameters and scope of the curriculum content from which the examination boards developed their individual qualifications. It was this document that was the key site of conflict in the curriculum reform process for A' Level Media Studies and the official Subject Content Framework document published by the Department for Education (February 2016) was the outcome of a protracted and discordant consultation process.

On the surface, the aims and objectives of the subject content framework align with what one might expect the majority of media teachers and academics to agree is a fairly standard, unproblematic - welcome, even - encapsulation of what a media studies qualification at advanced level should 'do', with multiple references to the skills of criticality, the application of theory to practice, the dynamic nature of the subject and its interdisciplinary characteristics relating to social context:

> "AS and A' Level specifications in media studies must enable students to:
>
> - demonstrate skills of enquiry, critical thinking, decision-making and analysis demonstrate a critical approach to media issues
> - demonstrate appreciation and critical understanding of the media and their role both historically and currently in society, culture, politics and the economy
> - develop an understanding of the dynamic and changing relationships between media forms, products, media industries and audiences
> - demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the global nature of the media apply theoretical knowledge and specialist subject specific

terminology to analyse and compare media products and the contexts in which they are produced and consumed in order to make informed arguments, reach substantiated judgements and draw conclusions about media issues

- engage in critical debate about academic theories used in media studies appreciate how theoretical understanding supports practice and practice supports theoretical understanding
- demonstrate sophisticated practical skills by providing opportunities for creative media production"

The subject content framework then outlines what is termed the 'theoretical framework' into four areas:

- "media language - how the media through their forms, codes, conventions and techniques communicate meanings;
- representation – how the media portray events, issues, individuals and social groups
- media industries - how the media industries' processes of production, distribution and circulation affect media forms and platforms
- audiences - how media forms target, reach and address audiences, how audiences interpret and respond to them and how members of audiences become producers themselves"

In media education literature and the pre-2014 reform A' Level specifications, the four areas, as outlined previously, have more commonly been referred to as 'key concepts' and may therefore have been better termed 'the conceptual framework' to avoid confusion with the newly instituted set theorists. An explanation for this may lie in the consultation process. David Buckingham, who was one of the academics involved in this process and the development of the subject content framework, noted in his research interview that one of the drafts came back with the comments "The minister (Gibb) doesn't like concepts" (2017, n.p). In Gibb's essay for the Policy Exchange, he outlines his aversion to "concepts" through

his comments about the geography curriculum. Of the concepts studied in the legacy qualification, he says:

> "This was a curriculum which was actively hostile to teaching prescribed knowledge, and sought to minimise the importance of subject content wherever it could" (2015, n.p).

It is thus more apparent why the key concepts in media were rebadged as 'the theoretical framework' as this terminology avoids the issues of being rejected on the grounds of being 'conceptual' by the Department for Education policy makers. However, it is worth pointing at this point that 'theoretical framework' proposed by the reform is actually something more akin to a conceptual framework but this word was, to all intents and purposes, 'banned' from being used in the new subject content framework. However, because essentially media studies is conceptual, it ends up being called the 'theoretical framework' to satisfy the narrow criteria imposed on the new curriculum's development. What is apparent though that the minister (Gibb) who "doesn't like concepts" probably does not like them because their fixity means that the texts that are studied within these concepts remain agile – and therefore cannot be prescribed. This points to the fact that it is the level of prescription and control that is the priority in the reforms, and not the quality of texts.

Regardless of the nominal change, there is no serious contention over this as a working framework, as it is understood as and follows the concepts of past media studies curriculum frameworks. However, where this framework begins its deviation from the pre-2014 reform specifications is in its reference to the different media forms students cover in their two-year study of the course. The nine media forms appear in the framework are as follows:

- television
- film*
- radio
- newspapers
- magazines
- advertising and marketing
- online, social and participatory media
- video games

- music video

Instead of teachers and students being given a choice over the selection of forms to be studied over the duration of the course, as they were in previous specifications, the framework states students must study "age-appropriate examples of the media from all of the following media forms" (emphasis my own), thus increasing the breadth of content to be studied. In the pursuit of 'rigour' and a broad curriculum, this directive for more comprehensive study may appear to be a laudable addition to increase the students' exposure to a wider range of media. However, if we compare this to the reformed A' Level Sociology curriculum, comparable in terms of its interdisciplinary cognate nature, whilst still broad, there is no equivalent compulsion for such content coverage. The A' Level Sociology specification for AQA, for example, requires students to study two core compulsory topics and two optional topics of which teachers can choose from a selection of eight. The content coverage appears 'rigorous' but, crucially, there is a level of optionality and a more streamlined set of topics which makes the teaching of it more manageable.

Analysing the Notion of 'Rigour'

This raises some key issues regarding the pursuit of a more 'rigorous' media studies curriculum. Reducing optionality and choice, particularly when this is something clearly afforded to other subjects such as Sociology, does not automatically mean that the 'rigour' of a subject will increase. Similarly, the compulsion for students to study all nine media forms may not allow adequate time for meaningful, in-depth study of each form and puts unnecessary pressure on teachers to cover content, with the outcome of students achieving only superficial knowledge and understanding. This also raises a broader question about why the reform of media studies was more stringent and prescriptive than other subjects in the same arena. Were these tight prescriptions of the reform process axiomatic of the DfE's conception of academic rigour? Because if they were, they were not being applied equitably in other cognate subject reforms. Or was it more to do with the latent suspicions of the education policy officials about the validity of media studies as a subject, and that a more prescriptive reform was a response to impose tighter restrictions on a subject that was already considered too 'soft'? What is clear is that the reform of media studies A' Level was not a neutral process and that significant changes to its curriculum were being imposed by policy makers.

In addition to the increase in content, the level of prescription also extends to changes to how forms can be studied. Whilst the framework still acknowledged that "film is an inextricable part of the wider media landscape, which is intimately connected with other media, such as television, video games and online media", the study of film can now "only occur in the context of cross-media study, which explores the convergence of media platforms and technologies, or in the context of the study of media industries". Similarly, for the practical production component (known as the Non-Examination Assessment or NEA), this cannot be "a film opening, film extract, complete short film or film trailer". Prior to the reform, film could be studied for language, representation and audiences, but this significant break from the past could be seen as an attempt to delineate the two subjects in very different ways, despite the similarities between them. Similarly, in this new move to delineation, and in contrast to media studies, film studies were able to retain a greater level of optionality within its specifications and as a result, became a more attractive option to teachers than media studies. The agenda is subtle, but it does indicate a deliberate move to define the two subjects with distinct characteristics, resurrecting older discourses about Film Studies being afforded a higher cultural and academic status than media studies (Bolas 2009; Buckingham 2013). It also recalls an earlier point made in the literature review chapter about how the formation of media studies in the 1980s was subject to internal debates and conflicts about what it 'was' as a subject, but relatively free from external interference, yet it has become clear that government policy is now playing a much more deliberate part in the way subjects are defined and perceived.

The subject content framework then moves on to set the parameters for content to be studied. Again, the various criteria listed are not particularly unexpected or contentious and the requirements for what students must study are culturally, socially and historically diverse For example:

- at least one media product produced before 1970
- at least one media product produced for a non-English speaking audience
- at least one media product produced outside the commercial mainstream
- at least one media product targeting, or produced by, a minority group

Where it becomes more ambiguous is the criteria specifying that texts "must possess cultural, social and historical significance" with the further clarification that the significance of these texts "may be reflected in critical acclaim and/or audience popularity". In addition, these must possess a "perceived quality" that offers "rich and challenging opportunities for interpretation and in-depth critical analysis". In addition, choices of text should "cover examples of media students would not normally engage with". The operative word here is choice as where it does get contentious is that all these criteria can only be satisfied by the introduction of set texts – i.e. the removal of choice for teachers. This one, but significant, break from the pre-reform specifications (when teachers had the agency to choose the texts they taught to their students) represents a bigger set of moves to impose a much more rigid stricture of what media studies 'is'. Words and phrases like "quality" and "rich and challenging opportunities", in the Govian reform context, take on additional, particular meanings that recall and evoke the 'knowledge rich' ideology of education of E.D. Hirsch that Gove and Gibb are so influenced by.

Subject Identity: A Question of Knowledge

Whilst the views of those experiencing the reforms on an everyday level are the key to this discussion, and which the next chapter goes on to discuss, I wish to frame and contextualise them by first considering the education discourses and ideologies that govern the kind of knowledge production that is valued in the reform, and the impact that this has had on the subject identity of media studies in the school curriculum. Threaded through this is the premise that the curriculum reform is incompatible for a subject such as media studies and in conflict with its identity as a subject.

It has been frequently noted that media studies is a 'site of struggle' (Alvarado and Boyd 1992; Quin 2006; Connolly 2018) and this has never been more starkly highlighted than what was precipated by the 2014 reforms. These marked 'a knowledge turn' (Hoadley et al, 2019) in education, and an ideological break from the competencies and skills-focused curriculum prevalent in the first decade of the 2000s to a renewed emphasis on 'knowledge' - what it is and how it is transmitted – in the curriculum. This shift has had a profound impact on media studies as a subject as conceptually it does not 'fit' the kind of tight, bounded parameters of disciplinary knowledge required for the government's conception of a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum.

To Gove and Gibb, 'knowledge' means the Hirschian 'core-knowledge' of tightly defined facts, principles and ideas and a conception of cultural literacy predicated on a strong sense of what is 'worthy'. For Gove, this upholds the Arnoldian view of 'the best of what is thought and said' (Gove, 2014) and provides young people the right to a 'cultural inheritance' (Gibb, 2021) comprised of great literary works, historical facts of 'our island story' and rote lists of Kings and Queens. Hirsch terms this 'communal knowledge' and asserts that to bridge the disadvantage gap, schools should ensure all students have access to the same knowledge. However, there is no real argument put forward of why this type of knowledge is more important than other types of knowledge, or of the hegemonies it suggests, and the inherent difficulties that this presents between and within subjects in their curricula formation, particularly for subjects such as media studies, which resist hierarchical knowledge structures. Quin states:

> "The school subject Media Studies is not, and has never been, a cohesive or stable body of knowledge, articulated in a syllabus and realised in a classroom. Its subject knowledge has been produced, negotiated and changed in response to changes in the education system, the society and the power relations which reach across schools and their communities" (2006, p. 92)

Similarly, and to return to Bernstein, for subjects that have a 'strong grammar' and the hierarchical structure of a vertical discourse, these are less contestable to frame in terms of knowledge because they have unifying, stratified principles of knowledge that apply to and explain a wider range of other theories and sub-topics within the subject. The theory of evolution or cell theory in Biology, for example, underpin the study of phenomena in other areas of the subject and are integrated into the hierarchy. However, for a subject like media studies, which is epistemologically constructed with a flatter, segmental discourse and cumulative 'new' knowledges that arises from constantly evolving media forms, it is difficult, if nigh on impossible, to define "the best of what has been thought and said" if there is a rolling litany of contenders for new 'bests'. Media studies, thus, falls outside of these curricula visions and a dissonance develops between the aims of reform and the epistemological integrity of the subject.

However, Young and Muller's conceptualisation of three curriculum 'futures' (2010) offers a useful framework to consider this further:

- Future 1 represents a traditional, conservative view of knowledge as static, absolute and "under-socialised", focusing on teacher-led transmission of "core knowledge" and emphasizing the elite Arnoldian ideal of 'the best of what is thought and said' (1869).
- Future 2 shifts to a competence-based, constructivist model centred on student development of generic skills through experiential learning. This approach views knowledge as fluid, with boundaries blurred and drawn from everyday experiences and "over-socialised"
- Future 3 proposes a knowledge-led curriculum that provides access to disciplinary knowledge while acknowledging it as fallible and open to change. (However, its reliance on specialist communities raises concerns about excluding students, especially in media studies education).

As such, Future 1 represents the context in which A' Level Media Studies was reformed but it is important to note that Gove was also heavily influenced by the work of Michael Young, most notably, his work with Johann Muller on 'powerful knowledge', described above as 'Future 3'. Deng (2022) notes that Young and Muller's work here can be seen as 'a correction to Hirsch's core knowledge' but whilst their work relocates curricular thinking to be more reflective of the work that goes on in classrooms, Deng also notes that subjects such as literature and the arts are subordinate to subjects such as mathematics and science in terms of focus, and there is "a tendency to soften if not obscure issues of power and social control inherent in all knowledge" (2022, p. 602).

Powerful Knowledge vs 'Knowing' and 'Becoming'

Deng's critique of Young and Muller's conception of 'powerful knowledge' and the Future 3 curriculum lends a useful syntax to discuss the problems that media studies encountered in the reform process. Deng's central issue with Young and Muller's conception of 'powerful knowledge' is that it doesn't deal with 'human powers' which Deng proffers as "understanding, capabilities, dispositions" (2022, p. 600), and that he says, citing Hamilton (1999, p. 136), the preoccupation of the curriculum has been more about "what should

students know?" rather than the more transformational question of "what should they become?".

Young's focus on the transmissive view of teaching, which Deng describes as "one-way" and "distant", is also critiqued for not taking into account the transformative capabilities of inter-personal dynamics of the classroom. This "top-down" approach is also mirrored in the way that Deng sees teachers have been reduced to "curriculum-deliverers" rather than "curriculum makers" (Deng 2020, p. 603). Deng suggests that the work of Lambert and *Bildung-centred Didaktik* could offer a way of reframing Future 3 and reconceptualising what "knowledge-rich" is.

Lambert, informed by Sen and Nussbaum's 1993 work, which advocates for a more holistic view of education that emphasizes the cultivation of capabilities, goes beyond Young's conception of a Future 3 curriculum to move to an emphasis on the notion of 'becoming' (and not just the 'knowing') as the central purpose of education through what he terms as "[the development] of human agency and potential"(Lambert 2017, p. 141). Here teachers are positioned as agentic curriculum makers who actively deploy their subject specialist expertise to push beyond the bounds of the prescribed curriculum "to create 'educational encounters' that can take students beyond their everyday experience and develop their capabilities" (Lambert, 2014b). Eschewed by the likes of Gove and Gibb, the "naïve knowledge" and '"everyday experiences" that students bring to the classroom carry value and meaning in Lambert's conception of powerful disciplinary knowledge (Lambert et al, 2015). This latter point is key in epistemic discussion about media studies because it proposes a very different understanding of what powerful disciplinary knowledge is to the one Young theorises. Deng, in his discussion of Lambert's critique of Young and Muller's model, asserts the inadequacy of the 2014 national curriculum, heavily influenced by E.D Hirsch and its "low epistemic quality". It is clear to see why Lambert also draws on *Bildung/Didaktik* as it shares much common ground with Sen and Nussbaum's work as they share principles such as an emphasis on the intellectual, moral, social emotional growth of students and meaningful, active learning which engages students through their own experiences, interests and real-world contexts in an autonomous way.

Deng's same criticisms of "low epistemic quality" can be transposed to the case of media studies. Tackling the utility of social realist principles in media education, Connolly (2020) makes a robust case for the epistemological incompatibility between the reformed curriculum and the aims and purpose of the media education classroom. His argument is contextualised by acknowledging that , whilst there have been attempts over the years regarding what Connolly terms as "ideal curricular content", the subject, until the 2014 reforms, has always resisted the imposition of the kind of rigid prescription it is in now in thrall to. Connolly orients his argument from the central locus that media studies, as a subject for study in UK schools, "has coalesced around a number of key ideas which mean that knowledge can neither be fixed in one place nor ignore the knowledge and experience of the student" (Connolly 2020, p. 2). One of these ideas is that media studies, since the eighties, has been arranged around key concepts, as outlined earlier, which despite some expansion to reflect the advances in forms and technology, has broadly remained the same since that time. This approach provides an epistemological 'coat hanger' to support students' analysis of and understandings about the media they study – an approach where the key concepts drive the study of media texts, and not the other way round. Fundamentally, this presents one of the key reasons for the subject's incompatibility with the imposition of set texts because instead of applying "conceptual knowledge to the unfamiliar" (ibid), Connolly asserts that the set text approach reduces intellectual challenge through its encouragement of a reductive repertoire of rote learning and memorisation of facts, a view also supported by David Buckingham in his essay 'Ticking the boxes: What's wrong with set texts' (2019).

Connolly goes on to propose that Heron and Reason (2008) provide a more accurate and expansive account for media studies. Citing Willingham (2017) and Sweller (2016) and the narrow parameters afforded by the cognitive scientists' view of education, Heron and Reason, in contrast, offer a disciplinary space for not just the key concept model of media education but "also the idea that media education is about both popular culture and production" (Connolly 2020, p. 3). Comprised of an "extended epistemology" divided into four main areas (experiential, the presentational, the propositional and the practical), their theory encompasses and describes more comprehensively what goes on in the media studies classroom, making connections between the theoretical and the practical, the abstract and the real world, and inviting students to engage with the familiar and the unfamiliar through the key concepts.

When a subject doesn't appear to fit within policy vision, and that policy vision centres on the reproduction of knowledge, a more helpful, alternative way to consider reform of subjects might be to consider that knowledge in some subjects "behaves differently" (Connolly, at the launch of Evaluating Media Literacy with a Theory of Change [11], 25th May 2023) or that they do not create certain types of knowledge at all, at least not within the tight parameters of what the policy makers designate. A possible, alternative conceptualisation of knowledge in media studies is that the subject, instead, produces 'meanings' because this conjures a more progenerative, dynamic type of knowledge production than the more traditional conceptualisation of knowledge associated with Hirsch. Whilst these meanings might begin from the more commonly accepted 'key concepts', they are created more flexibly from the new texts or evolution of media forms over time. In turn, these cumulative meanings, in accordance with the horizontal discourses Bernstein describes, cultivate a more flexible type of 'knowledge' encompassing not only higher order skills such as critical thinking but also practical skills and, in turn, creating more new meanings. I draw on these defining principles to propose an alternative conception of knowledge, which I later present in this thesis as my theoretical contribution, termed *the dynamic episteme*.

Media Studies: Towards a 'Signature Pedagogy'

To examine these principles and 'meanings' in a more focused way, Shulman's concept of 'signature pedagogies' (2005) provides a useful framework for considering the subject identity of media studies and the kind of knowledge (or 'meanings') it values. Shulman's theory is premised on the idea that every academic discipline has its own distinct methods and approaches to teaching which are organised around the specific knowledge and ways of thinking valued by the discipline. Signature pedagogies emerge from a combination of deep understanding of subject knowledge that teachers possess ('Content Knowledge') and their ability to deploy this knowledge through effective teaching methods specific to the discipline ('Pedagogical Content Knowledge') that develop the requisite knowledge, skills and expertise in the students of that particular discipline. Shulman proposed three 'structures' - *Surface, Deep* and *Implicit* - to describe how this works in a subject.

[11] Launch of the Evaluating media Literacy with a Theory of Change event, Bournemouth University and media Information and Literacy Alliance (MILA), held at The English and media Centre, 23rd May 2023

Surface structures are the visible and explicit instructional practices and activities that comprise the teaching and learning of a subject. For media studies, it could be proposed this includes the kind of instructional classroom activities in lessons where the teacher introduces students to key concepts, theories and frameworks and the activities which follow where students engage in applying this knowledge to critically analyse media texts, which might include the examination of such things as cultural, social and political context and the conditions of production and distribution. *Surface structures* also include practical and collaborative activities involved in production work, such as filming and editing, and the explicit technical training required for these. For example, several teacher participants in the research, such as Christine, Ben and Pritesh, make reference to deconstructing texts such as music videos, print advertisements and film posters through the key concepts, starting with media language, then moving to incorporate discussion of audience, representation and audience, and drawing in reference to theory. They talk about scaffolded examples, dialogic group discussion, creative activities and practical production filming and editing tasks that incorporate the students' own knowledge and interests.

Shulman's *deep structures* relate to the organising principles and core ways of understanding and approaching knowledge within a specific discipline. If this is applied to media studies, the accepted, shared 'language' of the key conceptual framework (ie. generally framed as media language, audiences, audiences and industries) by media educators is perhaps the most visible indication of these deep structures but there are other, perhaps less explicit but still discernible, unifying epistemic approaches and shared ways of thinking about the subject, which Shulman calls *implicit structures,* a more nebulous concept, and which has elsewhere in this thesis been termed the 'spirit' of the subject. The exposition of this will be given in more detail in the next part of the chapter, in the discussion of the participant interviews and Facebook group data as evidence for the points outlined below, but for the purposes of constructing a line of argument at this point, I propose they might include shared understandings that:

- The media studies curriculum should include the study of texts that reflect contemporary society and the conditions in which they are produced
- Teachers should be given the professional autonomy to choose texts appropriate for their students and that best facilitate critical analysis

- Historical texts are of value, as is the study of socio-cultural, political and economic context of texts, but the subject is or should be resistant to creation of a canon, and that knowledge is more democratic in nature with a flatter hierarchical structure than other more 'traditional' subjects such as science or maths
- Production work is an essential aspect of the subject and provides students important opportunities to apply theoretical understanding and develop technical, creative and interpersonal skills.
- Social constructivist methods of teaching, which might typically include collaboration, discussion and co-creation of analysis and production work, are the pedagogical hallmarks of the media studies classroom.
- A teacher-led enthusiasm for media that assumes the importance of its study is inherent and self-evident but also facilitative of progression paths to further study and employment.
- The subject holds a wider emancipatory purpose that enables students to develop powers of critical thinking and media literacy in order to understand better the media landscape in which they inhabit and foster active civic participation.

These must not, of course, be taken as neutral assertions and there will be media educators who do not agree or wish to propose additions or alternatives, but what these attempt to do is offer ways of thinking about subject identity, and it is to the voices and experiences of these educators to which this thesis now turns.

Chapter Six : Discussion and Findings

Part One: Subject Identity and Knowledge Discourse

As Bowe and Ball articulate (2017), the relationship between subject identity and knowledge is not neutral:

> "Practitioners do not confront policy texts as passive readers, they come with histories, with experience, with values and purposes of their own, they have vested interest in the meaning of policy. The simple point is that policy writers cannot control the meanings of their texts".

This was particularly foregrounded through the online communities of practice in which teachers revealed their thoughts and experiences about the reformed curriculum. In these rapidly growing online communities of practice, to which I was myself an early adopter, I became alert to what was also being revealed about subject identity and the relationship this had to knowledge discourses.

One striking example of this that appeared to crystallise many of the salient elements that arose from the media studies reform process is - and as outlined in the previous chapter – that of Gove's original policy meaning of 'rigour' and how this has been understood, interrogated and, in many cases, challenged by media teachers through the lens of their own lived experiences of the reform. In essence, the mention of 'rigour' became almost a byword for teachers to mean the wider principles of Govian reform. The mention of 'rigour' recurs frequently throughout the research data and offers a useful entry point for discussion of the thesis that the 'knowledge-based' principles of the 2014 reform do not fit well with the media studies curriculum, and to what extent this has, in turn, impacted on the subject's identity.

Emerging early on in the coding of the first phase interviews and again throughout the individual participant interviews of the second phase and in the Facebook post comments, these instances demonstrated that all teachers had at least a tacit, if not explicit, knowledge of Gove's use of the word 'rigour' in its policy context. In total, participant discussion relating directly to 'rigour' was specifically coded sixty-five times in Nvivo – a significant number in context. Initially, nearly half of these emergences in the data collection were entirely

naturalistic, with research participants typically using the word 'rigour' or 'rigorous' within their wider descriptions of or opinions about the new curriculum, or more intentionally as a policy concept to critique. However, as I began to note the frequency with which 'rigour' was mentioned by the participants in the individual interviews, I became interested in exploring this avenue in a more focused way. In order to do so, I posted the following question to media teachers on the most active Facebook group, Eduqas GCSE and A' Level Media Studies Teacher Sharing Group:

> 'The intentions of the A' level reforms were to 'introduce more rigorous content' and create qualifications that were 'more ambitious' and that 'will prepare young people for the demands of employment and further study' (Gove, 2014). To what extent do you think these intentions have been achieved in A' Level Media Studies so far?'

This post was fruitful for the research, garnering over thirty-five comments and strong sentiment from a range of teachers as well as one academic, who, as a result, became an additional interview participant. Combined with the other qualitative data from the participant interviews, this provided a useful starting point from which to present and discuss the research findings.

The vast majority of the comments or discussions about 'rigour', both in the interviews and in the Facebook post comments, were critical, and in some cases, scathing, of the way it has manifested in the curriculum, taking the view that the policy makers' idea of 'rigour' simply equated to the addition of set theorists, set texts and the coverage of the nine media forms. Many teachers believed that the policy makers' attempts of creating a more rigorous media studies curriculum has, paradoxically, not meant a more ambitious curriculum but rather one that has simply more content to cover and a restricted level of choice for teachers - a sentiment that underscores many of the comments made by teachers critical of the curriculum. For example, AE, a teacher on the Facebook post commented:

> "The A' Levels have more content, but they are no more rigorous. Providing a list of products alongside a distilled canon of theorists (with very strange choices) is the antithesis of 'ambitious'. We're training students to regurgitate information, learn how the examiner will give marks and provide some dead-end discussion on how some soundbite from a 'theorist' might relate to a product that someone else has decided

> to be worthy of study. Pretty worthless skills, unless you want a career teaching media studies post 2017"

A curriculum that is more prescriptive and content-heavy may therefore encourage homogenous responses from students and be counterproductive for them to demonstrate, what the Subject Content Framework states, 'a critical approach to media issues', to 'engage in critical debate' or have an 'understanding of dynamic and changing relationships between media forms, products, industries and audiences'. This sentiment is further echoed by KR, another teacher on the same post, who questions the ambitious and rigorous nature of the reformed curriculum:

> '[It may be rigorous], but this is juxtaposed by a need to do what is little more than teaching to the exam. With so little time in the curriculum to test said rigours of set texts, contexts, theorists etc…the necessary critical thinking required to provide 'ambitious' analysis [is] curtailed. What we're left with is heavily prescriptive, overloaded with content and a ludicrous 'holy 19' list of theorists, although each one is comically reduced to a three bullet point summary of their entire body of work.'

Sarah, one of the teacher participants interviewed as part of the first phase, and KB, a teacher on the Facebook group, both comment in a similar vein:

> 'I think that making us teach a set number of theorists to a set number of texts does not make things more rigorous - it makes it more prescriptive and less responsive to current theoretical debates.' (Sarah)

> 'The new specifications serve the purpose of handcuffing teachers to a narrow, homogeneous and disconnected idea of what a media education should involve.' (KB)

Other teachers talk in the same terms about how the new curriculum is reductive and disconnected in nature:

> "Overall, I feel like media as a subject is becoming more and more fragmented and is sinking under a plethora of tick box components…. death by homogenous prescriptive content." (PW)

> "What I've noticed is that a lot of it they've tried to treat the subject a little bit like it's a facts based subject… its very sort of, you know 'this is the correct answer' heavy and that's not what media is about." (Adam)

> "The sheer volume of content required inevitably leads to a reductio ad absurdum for often complex ideas; assessment which rewards theorist spotting over considered response is bound to result in detached nuggets of misquoted 'fact'." (Seamus)

The negative ramifications of this being linked to assessment criteria have clearly also been felt in Higher Education, as Emma, a lecturer on a media studies undergraduate programme, comments:

> "Some [media studies undergraduate students] have felt bemused about why they can't just add in the theorists and the theories as if they add up to a points system that equates marks. This is particularly an issue at foundation degree level."

One of the main criticisms by teachers who noted the contradiction between the 'rigorous' intentions of the curriculum and the realities of what it achieves is that, whilst it has gained breadth through the compulsory coverage of nine media forms and the addition of set texts and theorists, it has not become more rigorous in terms of depth. This in turn has resulted in a superficiality compounded by the nature of its assessment:

> "There is more theory to make it seem more rigorous, but the actual analysis and application of the theory is actually more shallow than the old spec" (MG)

> "It makes me really sad. It might cover breadth, but not rigour." (Emma)

> "Like a lot of the A" Levels and GCSEs it's become about the breadth of content rather than depth really." (Matt)

> "[This is] the result of years of govt [sic] pushing narrower horizons through narrowing the focus to bitesize theory and specific popcorn texts chosen for us. Yet, at the same time as becoming ever more narrowly focused, we are told not to teach to the test and to provide a broad and expansive education. It doesn't go unnoticed by the students." (PW)

The latter two comments also point to a wider concern about the curriculum reforms in general and imply a scepticism about the policy makers' drive to implement a 'knowledge-rich curriculum'. Political sentiment about the reform was certainly not absent from

comments from other teachers too. There was a strong sense from the teachers interviewed and those who commented on the Facebook groups that they were highly critical of not just the reforms, but also of Gove's and the government's broader political aspirations. As outlined earlier, Gove's use of the word 'rigorous' has taken on a particular political meaning in the context of the reforms which some of the teachers, particularly those who have taught media studies for a long time, articulated strong sentiment about. George, a teacher with over twenty five years of media teaching experience, voiced his disdain for the use of the word 'rigorous' in discussions about the new curriculum because "it's all very Gove-like". Seamus, another media teacher of long service, was equally disparaging of the Education Secretary's reforms and with sarcasm, commented that "Gove said [the curriculum] was ambitious and Gove is an honourable man". Another teacher commenting on the Facebook post made links between the reforms being a manifestation of the personal preferences of Conservative politicians:

> "My understanding is that Michael Gove (and his then puppet master, Dominic Cummings) wanted to take A' Levels back to when they did them. Ie. When they had 'rigour' and were linear, with no coursework. They did it for English and other GCSEs and tried to do the same for media studies." (CH)

Other teachers expressed their concerns about media educators not being involved in a meaningful way in the reform process and how this meant that the reforms lacked the rigour of authenticity provided by subject-experts and classroom practitioners. One teacher, KC, commented that it was "another typical Tory/Gove move to bulldoze their way through without any attempt to truly listen to respond to those with relevant experience". Many teachers shared the collective belief that the complicated and knotty reform process was also a deliberate attempt to 'kill' the subject. KB articulates this fear in his comments, but also the possible reasons for this:

> "It was clear that a certain minister of State at the Department for Education had absolutely no desire for media studies to continue as a subject, possibly because it actually encourages students to challenge what we see and hear from our power brokers and policy makers. Consequently the exam boards were put under great duress and forced to create specifications that are over burdened with too much unwieldy academic theory at the expense of exploration and topical debate"

Comments like these were quite typical in the research and there was a clear sense that, like KB's comment above, there was deep scepticism about not only the nature of the reformed curriculum's 'rigour' but also the reasons for the radical changes to it. Discussion of this will be returned to in more detail later in the chapter in the context of the other research questions but it is important to mark at this juncture the emerging themes of political sentiment, and the latent cynicism expressed by a significant number of teachers, that run through the research.

Some teachers viewed 'rigour' as synonymous with simply raising the level of difficulty faced by students studying the qualification, and, for many of these teachers, this raised serious questions about issues of inequality and progression for students taking media studies. Some teachers reported that in their school or college there had been a history of students with lower GCSE scores being encouraged to take media studies and when the curriculum changed, this created a cohort of students taking the subject but not doing well. Maxine, a teacher at a school that has traditionally encouraged students with low GCSE scores to take media studies, notes the discrepancies that can occur in the recruitment process between the needs and expectations of senior leaders in a school or college and the suitability of courses for students. Of the new media studies curriculum, she says:

> "It is more 'difficult' and students have inevitably not been performing to the best of their ability because they shouldn't really be on the course"

Adam, another teacher in a similar position, talks of the challenges around changing the perceptions of the course and its entry requirements to avoid the issues that Maxine outlined above:

> "Over the two and a half years that I've been here I've managed to sort of lift the reputation a little bit more…it's a heavily academic subject, there's a lot of writing especially at A' level, and you can't just chuck [this] at kids who are doing resit Maths or resit English, or lower levels of English, because it just won't work like that. There is the assumption that media studies is a practical subject".

Implicit in this is the view, even amongst some of the media teachers who teach it, that a practical subject is not perceived as holding rigour and that students with lower GCSE scores

have been pushed towards it because 'doing practical' is somehow easier than writing about nineteen theories and set texts in a terminal exam. There is also the double impact here of, in the short term, not only having students coursed 'wrongly' meaning their chances of success on the course are not only reduced, but also that, in the longer term, students of a similar academic profile may not want or be encouraged to take the subject in the first place, thus contributing to the decline in number taking the qualification. The problem around perception of media studies as a 'soft' subject is also bound up in issues around the role qualifications play in the progression of students.

When considering progression, the irony of reducing the practical element of the media studies curriculum was noted by some teachers too. LK states:

> "It's interesting that 'more rigorous content' and meeting the 'demands of employment' actually means less practical work. It is a shame that practical skills are so under-rated, bearing in mind these are what employers want."

On one hand the intention of the policy makers is for a rigorous curriculum that sets up young people with the foundations for employability, and if employability is viewed through the government's economic lens, that, in reality, translates to the creative sectors in which there is a skills shortage. This sets up a clear tension between Gove's 'knowledge-rich' curricular ambitions and his visions to provide an education that prepares young people for employment because, in quite crude terms, the two things again don't match up. Perhaps this is because media studies was never meant to fit Gove's and Gibb's tight curricular vision for A' Level reform and that it was simply meant to exist in vocational form, which again fits in with the government's move to create academic and vocational pathways clearly distinct from each other. Many teachers participating in the research said they were fearful that, because media studies did not appear in the first two rounds of reform, as an A' Level subject it was not going to survive. When the subject's reform was eventually announced, the resulting framework appeared to many as a clumsily constructed retrofit to comply ideologically with the reforms rather than as an ambitious move to provide a qualification that sets up young people for a career in the creative and media industries.

In addition, several teachers noted that not only was the practical element reduced in terms

of weight, it was also reductive in terms of how it nurtured and assessed creativity and technical skills. This paradox between the rigorous intent of the curriculum and the realities of its enactment is demonstrated by LM's comment:

> "They even went and ruined the coursework by setting ridiculous briefs that aren't even appropriate and again feel very dated. The mark schemes that reward ticking off brief requirements rather than creativity and technical skills pains me every time I mark them."

One of the key changes to practical work in the new curriculum was the removal of group work, something that had figured prominently in the legacy specifications. KR views this as a negative move as it impinges on the level of productive challenge experienced by students of media and he also goes on to highlight how regressive the new curriculum is in terms of its capacity for affording students relevant and challenging opportunities in their practical work:

> "We have lost the collaborative part of coursework which was one of the most challenging aspects of the legacy specs.' and also the challenge of making real, actual online texts such as blogs for students to submit their coursework and evidence of planning. The briefs seem frozen in time, too (DVD cases - in an age of streaming...)"

Lack of practical opportunity also features in LM's discussion about how many of her students want to gain employment in the media industry, particularly the film and TV industry, but are not being equipment to do so because "the coursework element is only a third and we are under huge time pressure to deliver the theory". Several teachers also bemoaned the erosion of practical work in the new curriculum, articulating not just dissatisfaction of its reduced weighting and content, but also the lack of relevance to their students' future careers. For example, Bruce comments:

> "So they may know some stuff, some facts, some figures – I'm not quite sure that knowing those facts and figures is necessarily going to be readily transferable to the kind of jobs which I've seen some of the people who I've taught over time graduate on into over an extended period of time."

GG reiterates this view and challenges the very definition of Gove's vision of the curriculum as a basis for employability, particularly in light of the pandemic:

> "What are 'the demands of employment'? Not sure that media studies (or any other subject for that matter) is keeping up with the needs of young people as they try to navigate their way around future careers and the rapidly changing quagmire that is employment."

Employability is a useful lens to critique the reformed A' Level curriculum through as it also points to the broader ontological impetus for media studies to remain contemporaneously agile, dynamic and responsive - something that many teachers felt that the new curriculum failed to do in a meaningful way. Much of the data collection for this research took place during the intense media coverage of first UK national lockdown of the pandemic[12] as well as the Black Lives Matter protests and civil unrest following George Floyd's murder in May 2020. For many of the teachers who participated in the interviews, this crystallised in their minds just how difficult it was for their teaching to respond to current events within the confines of the curriculum, particularly those that had such a profound, direct impact on the students themselves. CT comments:

> "The reactive nature of media studies, the ability to make a SoL [Scheme of Learning] on a pressing issue of the moment (e.g. Covid or BLM), was removed and instead of being able to keep the case studies fresh and relevant, a selection of texts was imposed on us instead."

Echoing these comments, like many others in the research, LM also states:

> "The old specifications allowed us to teach contemporary issues and events, changes in all areas of media, exciting content…When we think about the teaching and learning opportunities that 2020 alone has provided, it's such a shame that we're talking about Late Night Woman's Hour (which isn't even really on anymore), Assassin's Creed on the PS Vita (which no one cares about) and newspapers that are about Theresa May's election. Oh, to be able to cover Black Lives Matter, Covid-19, live concerts in video games, interactive shows like Black Mirror!"

This issue certainly speaks to the ideas discussed earlier in this chapter about the incompatibility of the reform with media studies as a subject. As illustrated by the above comments by teachers, the reformed media studies curriculum values the acquisition of

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[12] The first lockdown regulations in the UK were announced on 23rd March 2020 and lifted on 11th May 2020.

knowledge that is tightly defined, measurable and standardised but leaves very little room for the 'becoming' - the development of individuals as critical thinkers and well-rounded, socially responsible beings - that both Lambert's curriculum theory (2014) and the *Bildung-centred Didaktik* propose is the central purpose of education. Considering the oft-repeated protectionist concerns about young people's excessive exposure to social media and the call for media literacy to address societal issues, it is ironic that the curriculum best placed to address this is restricted in its ability to do so. Whilst this does not mean to suggest that media studies' sole purpose is a project of wider social responsibility, a more holistic approach to what the subject can achieve and offer to its students is surely one of the most desirable outcomes of its study – or as Deng put it, to develop "understanding, capabilities, dispositions" (2022, p. 600). This has wider reaching effects, too, in the bigger project of media education and the drive for other such important projects as anti-racist pedagogy and sustainability, for example, because the need to cover the set curriculum in the time allowed removes the space and freedom for teachers to autonomously and responsively build this into their teaching – and the rest of the school curriculum does not provide a coherent or adequate space for these things to take place elsewhere. Discussion of these issues in a more detailed capacity is beyond the scope of this thesis but it important to acknowledge that the issues with the reform of media studies can be seen as just one part of other erosions of its teaching in the curriculum. The EBacc, as outlined earlier, is one example of this, but the removal of the compulsory media coursework element from GCSE English Language is another (see Connolly 2022) as is the fragmented and uneven approach to media literacy that currently exists in UK schools, which only formally resides in online safety via the citizenship, computing, health and the relationships and sex education (SRE) curricula ('Teaching Online Safety in Schools', Department for Education 2019).

In addition to the anachronistic elements endemic to the set text approach, it is interesting also to pick up on the phrase "imposed on us" used by CT. It was noticeable how common the construction of an 'us and them' discourse by teachers was throughout the research. Words and phrases such as "handcuffed", "forced", "made to" and "inflicted" were often deployed to denote the strong sentiment around the reform process and resulting specifications. This also implies a power dynamic where policy makers do not seek the voices of teachers in a meaningful capacity and, in the vicissitudes of the reform process, teachers thus feel divested of agency. In a culture of accountability and league tables, this is certainly

not an observation – or issue - exclusive to media studies, but when the aim of the policy makers appears so inconsonant with the aims of those who teach the subject, it does bear particular scrutiny, particularly when so much of the reform appears to be predicated on individual preference ('the minister doesn't like concepts') and a disdain for subjects containing a strong practical element. Media studies, at its essence, needs to remain current and responsive to changes in contemporary society to offer a challenging and meaningful curriculum to its students, however, the set text stipulation hog-ties teachers to texts that very quickly render the curriculum outmoded and irrelevant. In addition to the examples that LM outlined previously, CT points out some particularly problematic examples of this too:

> "So students have to study texts that have passed their peak popularity a long time ago (Zoella), are unknown to them due to their age (Assassin's Creed) or are no longer available (I, Daniel Blake website)."

JE, again on the Facebook post, notes that this also extends to the set theories, and not just the texts:

> "There is little time to add more recent theoretical discussions. I feel the same about the lengthy list of texts for Component 1 which inevitably feel dated (especially the newspapers) from the moment we start teaching them."

LM, too, is critical of the set theories:

> "The new specs are like teaching a safe history of media. I like some of the new theories but it definitely feels very feminine with a tiny bit of Gilroy thrown in for 'diversity'."

Even more pointedly, David Gauntlett, one of the named set theorists in the framework, publicly critiques the inclusion of set theorists on his own blog:

> "In the media studies specification it pinned down not only the general concepts that should be looked at, which might be reasonable, but also what media examples should be studied – which is silly because they become dated almost immediately – and which theorists you should use to think about them with – which is also unnecessarily inflexible. So if you want to apply new ideas and new thinkers to new things, well, you can't. Or at least, you can only do it as an engaging aside which hopefully will delight rather than displease your examiner." (Gauntlett 2020)

Gauntlett states that he felt compelled to make a video for A' Level Media Studies students to clarify his theory and it is interesting to note that, in the context of discussing the 'rigour' of the reformed A' Level curriculum, he also critiques the validity of including his early theoretical work rather than his more recent publications:

> "The way that the media studies exam boards talk about 'identity' seems confusing, and then they want you to take in 'What Gauntlett has said about identity', which is a few different things at different points in time… Therefore my book 'Making is Connecting' (2011, second edition 2018) is much more relevant in terms of media and identities today." (ibid)

For a named theorist on the curriculum to be questioning the rationale for his own inclusion within the framework, on the basis that it is outdated and lacking in flexibility, seriously undermines the notion that the reformed qualifications will achieve the 'rigour' that Gove and Gibb intended. Moreover, it is interesting to also note the obsolescence of certain set texts such as Radio 4's Late Night Woman's Hour (Eduqas) and Radio 1's 'The Surgery' (AQA), for example, as well as the changed guidance around the study of the You Tube vlogger, Zoella, due to her shifting audience demographic, indicates the problematic nature of having a static framework of set texts that are only updated every five years. The announcement of new texts for first assessment in 2024 continues to demonstrate the issue presented by the inclusion of set texts. For example, JJ Olatunji, better known as KSI, the You Tuber and rapper, and one of the new 'set products' has already announced a break from social media, following controversy over a racial slur in one of his (now deleted) 'Sidemen' videos. By the time first assessment takes place for the new set products, the majority will already be at least three if not four years old and if the same timescale for review is followed as before, then they will be eight years old by the time they are changed again – perhaps less impactful for subjects like English or Drama, but for a subject predicated on the rapidly changing landscape of popular culture, media industries and technology, this impacts significantly on the ability of the subject to keep pace and stay relevant. The exam boards, too, recognise and mitigate for this with perfunctory guidance:

> "While all resources were correct at the time of publishing, teachers

> should be aware that things move quickly in the media industry and should therefore check that the information is still current and correct."

This illustrates here Bernstein's conception of a subject comprised of 'horizontal discourses', where hierarchies of knowledge are much flatter, more dynamically open and characteristic of 'everyday' discourses predicated on communal and contextual knowledge. However, the ideologies underpinning the reforms are more akin to the vertical discourses that Bernstein describes which are characterised as more hierarchically delineated, fixed and objective. It can be surmised that the source of much of the discontent around the reform of the A' Level media studies curriculum can be put down to the fact that this subject, characterised by its propensity for horizontal discourses[13], has been made to fit a framework of vertical discourses – a square peg in a round hole, to use an epithet.

Concerns about canonical restrictions on media studies, however, is not a new issue for the subject. Influenced by Peim's work in English, McDougall (2004) raised similar tensions with his conceptualisation of 'Subject Media' and how this is often at odds with the 'spirit' of media studies. McDougall describes 'Subject Media' as:

> "..the official versions of the discipline at work in exam boards and the effect of this on teaching and learning… in its institutional forms, such as specifications, question papers and mark schemes, assessment criteria for coursework, examiners' reports and exam board-generated 'support materials' (a form of teacher-training)." (McDougall 2004, p. 94)

However, the crucial difference between then and now is that 'institutional forms' now incorporate much more concerted interference at national government level than ever before. The concerns raised by McDougall about the institutional practices of the past creating "a preferred, sanctioned range of approved approaches to teaching" has moved from being an arbitrary, cumulative and tacit process to a very direct, clear and resounding ideological edict at national education policy level – and one that does not sit comfortably with the views of many of those who teach it or invested in its teaching. It can be inferred from the discussion so far that much of the discontent expressed by the teachers about the

[13] I frame it like this with some caution, as it could be argued that the 'key concepts' (Media Language, Representation, Audiences and Industry) that have, and continue to~~, underpin (western) media studies, could be~~ conceived of by some regard as vertical discourses as they represent the strong organisational principles of 'official' knowledge within the subject.

reformed curriculum arises from the perceived dissonance between the government's thrust for a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum, with its vertical discourses of measurable facts and canons, and the flatter democracies of media studies. Seamus states this is an more explicit way:

> "The only rigour I can see is rigor mortis. Gove and Cummings dictated a shift towards a Gradgrindian approach to fixed 'knowledge' (based on a random selection of googled 'theorists') rather than a competing narratives and exploratory one, which is a massive error, especially in an ever-changing field. What will the media look like next year? Later today?"

The epistemological purpose of what some media teachers state they wish their subject to have, too, is addressed by many of the research participants. In this context, critical thinking was frequently cited as a key 'purpose' of what teachers wanted to develop in their students. PW sums this up with his comment on the Facebook group post:

> "What I WANT to be able to do is engage the students in more generic critical thinking skills and use media as the playground to do that in. But the disconnectedness and bittiness trend puts a lot of obstacles in the way of teaching students good use of skills rather than just lots and lots of not very connected content bits [sic]."

All the discussion so far helps build a picture of how teachers think about the identity of their subject – a subject that empowers students to be critical thinkers and media literate in not just theoretical ways but practical and technical ways too, and a subject that retains the agility to 'keep up' and be responsive to emerging media texts and forms. However, this is also often calibrated by teachers identifying what the subject is not, as well as what they think it is. For example, Bethany said she feels like she is teaching "a different subject" because it is "[no longer about] skills anymore, it's knowledge and ..a huge shift for teachers who have been teaching a long time." Adam reiterates the view that the reformed curriculum is incompatible with how he perceives the subject identity of media studies:

> "They've tried to treat the subject a little bit like it's a facts based subject… it's very 'this is the correct answer' heavy and that's not what media is about."

However, as raised earlier, issues of accessibility and inequality are bound up with the type of knowledge that the new curriculum values and rewards. KR states:

> "It is quite exclusive in terms of accessibility for those of lower levels of entry - one that is characteristic of 20th century attitudes towards academia but not effectively serving the needs and interests of a diverse and media literate group of 21st century students."

This recalls the deficit model perspective that Gove's reforms take, where there is the implication that the thrust of the curriculum is based on what students cannot do rather than what they can, and assumes a remedial position through the acquisition of rigidly defined knowledge that is objective in nature. What can also be inferred from this is that the knowledge – the everyday experiential type of knowledge - that students already possess does not carry value and that, from Young's social realist perspective at least, knowledge needs to be highly objective and independent of their everyday life. Young is explicit about this and states "the curriculum cannot be based on everyday practical experience. Such a curriculum would only recycle that experience" (2008, p. 89). Clearly this view of education, and one that carries so much influence in current policy making, is problematic for media studies.

One of the key ideas that Fairclough incorporates into CDA is to determine what is what is omitted not just what is selected. Gove and Gibb 'selected' E.D. Hirsch's and Young's ideologies of education as they resonated with their own political sensibilities and views of education. Both are firmly wedded to ideas of social mobility and social justice, but these are based on the knowledge as set out in Hirsch's 'Core Knowledge Curriculum'. There is no consideration or interrogation of alternative perspectives, such as the theories of Deng, Lambert and *Bildung/Didaktik,* as outlined earlier in this chapter, and all of their policy documentation and speeches reference only those (academics, educators and schools) who support their educational vision. However, there are other research-informed positions which sit counter to this.

One of the themes that teachers commonly referenced in terms of subject identity was that of their concern about the poor perception of media studies as a subject and their wish for this to be raised. Many expressed this as the desire to improve the curriculum by making It more explicitly 'rigorous' and, counter to the teacher comments cited so far in this chapter, it is important to note that some teachers expressed positive sentiment about the reforms in this regard, even if they were critical of the curriculum in other ways. JL was very clear in his

favourable views of the reformed curriculum:

> "[The curriculum] is much more academically rigorous and underpinned by solid theory. Excellent development and starts to make it a brand of A' Level worthy of respect rather than derision."

It is not clear whether JL means 'solid' as in substantial, familiar or significant quantity but it can be inferred that he views it positively as he goes on to suggest this perceived rigour provides "an excellent foundation for any undergraduate course in the Arts or Humanities [and]…certainly prepares students for further study" which is a view that contradicts the view that Emma, the media studies undergraduate lecturer, holds, as stated earlier in this chapter, as she felt that the knowledge of set theorists that students arrived at university with was incongruous to what they were expected to learn as an undergraduate. However, whilst KR is critical of the reforms in other ways, he, too, considers that the "new specifications are without doubt more rigorous and have increased the breadth and depth of the subject's academic weighting" which echoes comments from other participants such as Adam, for example, who sees the benefits of the new curriculum as improving the perception of the subject:

> "It's actually probably made it more academically accepted outside of teaching. I think maybe once people stopped seeing it as the classic soft subject and other, well, I don't know if that will ever happen, but I think by having it much more academically rooted has been a good thing."

Teachers' awareness of how their subject is perceived by external eyes is clearly an important factor in how they see themselves in their roles as teachers and the professional pride and identity that they derive from that. For some, such as Bethany, the idea of making the subject more 'rigorous' has its benefits.

> "I'd like some middle ground. I'm enjoying that its seen now as an academic subject a little bit more I'm enjoying the credibility, I'm enjoying students going round going; 'Everybody says media's really hard' I am enjoying the credibility that comes with that."

It is also interesting to note that interview participants, Terry, an exam subject officer for media studies, and two course leaders of PGCEs in media, Raph and Kate shared the sentiment that, whilst critical of the rigidity of the reformed curriculum in other ways, the

requirement to cover all nine media forms has created a more rounded and balanced curriculum coverage which removes the chance of teacher bias. Terry states:

> "[Students get a] more rounded exposure to different types of media rather than just the media forms that, I as [their] teacher, felt the most confident at delivering."

In the same vein, Kate also noted that, whilst she was very much against the imposition of set texts in general term, they do ensure a more inclusive approach:

> "At least the set texts are not the horrendous, canonical middle class set texts that some teachers were getting away with."

Likewise, Raph expresses the desire for the "peripheral status of media" to be raised and that set texts can create a more standardised way of doing this:

> "I always found it slightly problematic that teachers had such a degree of freedom to choose the text - and also the theoretical models with which to analyse those texts. I felt that was all well and good if you already had the knowledge or some real interest in the subject, but if you didn't you were kind of on your own."

Several teachers also identified elements of the course that they particularly liked and whilst personal preference is implicit in this, the favoured elements were usually couched in terms of what they perceived as 'rigorous'. For example, the new framework's stipulation of historical texts was viewed positively. Christine, a frequent commenter on the Eduqas Facebook group and a participant in the interviews, noted her and her students' enjoyment of teaching the historical texts largely because "the passage of time" helps create more "critical distance between text and audience". She sees this as an integral part of the subject's rigour and that "it certainly adds another knowledge base, [is] ambitious and certainly prepares students for further study". This echoes the words of Sarah, one of the original interview participants of the first phase, who also noted appreciation of the insertion of historical texts into the framework but, as with the majority of the teachers who identified positive aspects of the new curriculum, she also notes the rigidity of the contemporary set texts as more problematic:

> "I do think the historical context focus is really useful but then the fact that we cannot then compare to more recent contemporary media is also frustrating… the outdated newspapers are incredibly hard to teach and we should be able to choose our own, more relevant and interesting editions."

So far this chapter has introduced the position, through scholars such as Bernstein, Deng and Connolly, that the way knowledge is produced in media studies is not the same as how knowledge is produced in other subjects and that the epistemological makeup of the subject is not well suited to the types of knowledge valued by the reform. This position is at the crux of the research, and this 'knowledge disparity' serves an important purpose in this context. On one hand, it begins to explain why such discord and discontent was felt and expressed by the teachers who participated in the research, and on the other, it invites this research to consider - at a much deeper interrogative level - alternative theoretical viewpoints that may better authentically represent the epistemic characteristics of the subject.

Part Two: The Pedagogic Lived Experiences of Media Teachers

The absence of teacher voice in the reform consultation process has precipitated the deliberate aim of this research to not only take the opportunity to understand and learn from their experiences but to consciously feature them prominently so they are reinstituted into the subject discourse. Teacher voices appear in this research through the observations of naturalistic communications on the online media teachers' communities of practice on Facebook, interactions between the researcher and teacher participants on these same groups and in-depth one-to-one interviews with a wide range of media teachers, academics, teacher trainers and other key figures from media education form part of the research – and to these ends, this part seeks to address my second research question 'What impacts have the curriculum reform had on the 'pedagogic lived-experiences' of media studies teachers?'.

Function, Content and Sentiment

The initial phase of data collection began in 2019, in the period of time leading up to the first round of examinations of the new specifications. Initially, the study of the Facebook group was simply intended as a vehicle to observe the lived experiences of the reform from the teachers' posts and comments, but it rapidly became apparent that membership of the Facebook group itself also became an integral facet in the professional lives of those who had chosen to be members of it. Therefore, in all discussion that follows, the Facebook group(s) should be viewed as, in the first instance, a useful methodological means of capturing the on and offline subjective experiences of teacher members, but also, and importantly, a phenomenon that emerged from a need created by teachers' lived experiences but which now exists as an integrated and prominent part of teacher members' lived experiences that has influence in its own right.

The initial phase of data collection provided what Kozinets (2020) determines as an important 'entrée' into observing and capturing the early stages of the teachers' lived experiences of the reform in the months prior to the reformed curriculum's first exam sitting and a basic analysis of the statistical coding data provided an interesting overview of the main ways the group was being used by teachers and for what purposes. Each code was assigned to one or more of three categories: *Function, Content* and *Sentiment. Function* (F) relates to the posts that directly or indirectly indicate the main ways the group is used; *Content* (C) relates to posts that are focused on specific discussion around subject matter

such as a text, an issue or a shared article; and *Sentiment* (S) relates to posts which encapsulate the different feelings expressed on the group. Figure 4 illustrates the findings from the first iteration of coding:

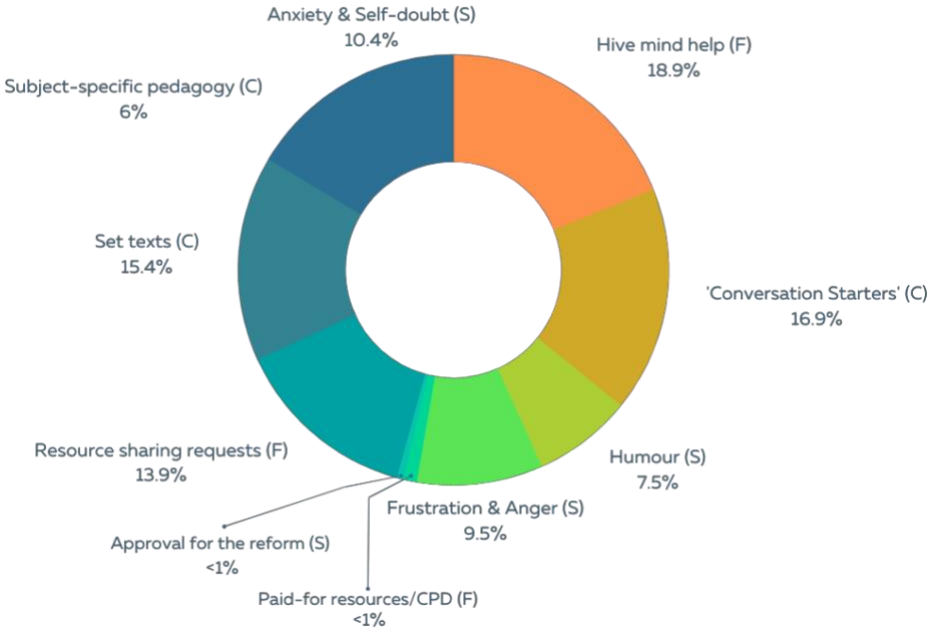

Figure 4: Findings from the First phase: Facebook Interactions Coded for Function, Content and Sentiment

The most numerous types of posts found over this initial data collection phase related to queries and those seeking advice or clarification about the new specification and, in total, thirty four references out of the eighty posts were coded to the node originally called 'Advice/Queries/Seeking Clarification' which was eventually redefined as 'Hive mind help' as a more succinct representation of one of the predominant functions of the group. This data, perhaps unsurprisingly, acknowledges what appears to be the main reasons members use the group – to increase their understanding of the new specification, and to seek advice to support their teaching of it.

This was also reinforced by the percentage of posts and comments relating to discussion of the set texts, of which there were seventeen at the time of the study, and whilst the majority of these posts related to teachers seeking advice or information about a particular text, or expressing negative sentiment about their selection, some of the posts and comments demonstrated teachers sharing their own subject knowledge expertise and engagement with the texts. For example, one teacher shared an image of an old vinyl of the musical 'South Pacific' they had found in their record collection to illustrate the intertextual reference to the

set text of the music video of Dizzee Rascal's 'Dream', which includes references to the song 'Happy Talk' from the 1949 film. Another teacher shared an article that appeared in one set text (The Big Issue) about another set text (I, Daniel Blake).

There were also several posts discussing issues related to the teaching of the set texts such as the ethics of the selection of Michael Jackson's 'Black and White' music video as a set text, as well as which music videos, not specified as set texts, but could be used as comparative examples for the teaching of representation, postmodernism and intertextuality. Examples offered were an eclectic range that included Pink's 'Beautiful Trauma', Ariana Grande's 'Thank you, Next', Wunder Wunder's 'Hail the Madmen' and Childish Gambino's 'This is America'. These, I suggest, are good examples of how teachers are using the online communities of practice to informally 'knowledge build' - a relatively naturalistic, unconscious act of iteratively determining texts of 'significance' to the subject and exercising teacher autonomy. This is an instantiation of what I propose is termed *the dynamic episteme*. I define this as a concept that emphasises the fluid and evolving nature of knowledge and posits that knowledge is not static or fixed but continuously changing and developing. *The dynamic episteme* requires an ongoing process of reflection, inquiry, and co-creation by educators. It suggests that knowledge should be persistently and consistently interrogated, adjusted, and collaboratively curated to stay relevant, accurate and open to new developments and advancements in the subject.

One of the ways *the dynamic episteme* operates is through interactions between educators as members of a community of practice, and netnographic observations offer a prime way of capturing this. For example, a significant number of the posts and comments on the Facebook groups were coded as 'Conversation Starters', a label borrowed from what Facebook uses to describe posts by members who frequently initiate debate about topics, events, people, issues or articles, and recognised by the multiple number of 'likes' and 'comments' these receive. Netnographic study of these interactions for the full study revealed that these types of functional and discursive usages of the group prevailed and the daily ebb and flow of these posts revealed the group as the kind of "a living, breathing, thriving cultural community" Kozinets' (2011). Rather than seeing each post on the group in isolation, the cumulative and social nature of Facebook constructs an online community of practice that gains its own character and purpose over time, with the social aspect

galvanising the group's purpose, and vice versa, making it a key source for observing the lived experiences of teachers who are members of the group, as well as how they are building and shaping their own 'knowledge communities', as a part of *the dynamic episteme*.

The positive and supportive community spirit that was found to be characteristic of the group provides a good example of what I have termed the social/purpose symbiosis. None of the groups showed signs of negative interactions that can skew, derail or shut down discussion or, as Suler (2004) posited, the effects of 'online disinhibition'. Conversely, what the observations highlighted was a burgeoning community of practice highly engaged and invested in not only the teaching of the subject at A' Level, but also in themselves as a body of professionals. This is evidenced by the discussion coded for 'subject specific pedagogy' in the data, where teachers contemplated not just what they were teaching but how they were teaching it. Two of the conditions that Suler states contributes to the propensity for negative interactions online are the anonymity of actors and a lack of empathy. Neither of these conditions apply to the Facebook group members as whilst anonymous posting is now available as a function on Facebook, it was not at the time of the data collection. Moreover, the nature of the group meant that individuals primarily interacted regarding shared issues related to the new specification therefore identifying or private details about individual members was not required or significant and anonymity unnecessary. This shared experience also meant that the level of empathy between members was greater and, in combination with the quest for support, this could explain the sustained positivity (and humour, as evidenced in the figure above) of the group, despite the disquiet and negative sentiment that the reform provoked. The notion of 'shared reality' lies at the heart of this research as the reality it captures allows us to understand much more than just arbitrary sentiment felt by teachers at a time of curriculum change – this is important too – but it facilitates consideration and analysis of the political context of education and the issues that raises. It also provides important opportunities to consider the epistemic compatibility of media studies with its formally assessed incarnation as well as the professional identity of its subject teachers. Tory-Higgins et al (2021) state that 'shared realities' emerge from a fundamental human desire to connect to others and to find a 'perceived commonality of feelings or beliefs about a target referent'. In this case, we can view the target referent as the curriculum reform of media studies. Whilst space does not allow for a fuller discussion of this psychological theorem relating to the development of social groups and online networks, it is

interesting to note Tory-Higgins et al's (ibid) conception of 'shared reality' which they propose lies at the intersection of two synergistic motivations: a *relational motivation* to connect to others such as family, friends or like-minded others, and an *epistemic motivation* to understand something new, complex or in flux. This rather neatly encapsulates the tenor of the Facebook group, which brings together like-minded professionals who are motivated to find new understandings in a context of change and uncertainty. However, I suggest a third motivation be added to this 'shared reality' – that of, *contextual motivation*. Whilst the online community of media teachers existed prior to the reform, it only existed in the form of the group 'Media Teachers UK', a generic group for all media teachers, regardless of exam board or qualification followed. This original group represents Tory-Higgins et al's conception of a shared reality, as it does also that of Lave and Wenger's communities of practice (1991), as outlined earlier, but I propose that it is the unique political and educational context of the reforms, and the strong sentiment generated by these, that instigated the creation of three separate, informally exam board-affiliated, Facebook groups in and around the Spring of 2017, adding a third and more compelling *contextual motivation* for teachers to commune online with other teachers for professional purposes.

The health and success of an online community of practice, as Gibbs at al propose, relies on "a combination of supportive communication and a powerful system of peer-based concertive control and normative influence that develops over time, and that both processes contribute to members' Sense of Virtual Community" (2016, p. 1). Again, this represents the Eduqas media teachers' Facebook group well as it can be observed, at least in the earlier stages of the group's existence, that there was no discernible hierarchy of status between teachers on the group and that it very much demonstrated egalitarian values in the communication between members on the group.

Whilst one of the key uses of the group was an outlet for sharing experiences and emotions about the reform and that the interactions on the group constructed a positive, supportive community, much of this was predicated on negative feeling about the new curriculum. Twenty-one posts were initially coded for containing an 'apologetic tone' or a poster lacking in confidence about their subject knowledge or grasp of the new course in some way and there were nineteen posts coded as members explicitly 'venting frustration or struggle'. Many of these posts were specifically related to the volume of course content, subject

knowledge and assessment. An analysis of word choice used revealed a higher frequency of words like 'struggle', 'desperation', 'stressed', 'help' and 'anxiety' and, although there is inevitably some anxiety about implementing a new course and that teachers who hold negative opinions may be more vocal and active on the group, the large proportion of posts expressing these views presents a theme that the new course carries a lot of negative feeling with it amongst its teachers, a sentiment that echoes the views expressed by Connolly in his article 'Media in a Cold Climate' for NATE's Teaching English magazine (2018).

One post which stood out in this first phase of data collection was a teacher, LM, who posted about her deep anxiety and frustration about the impact of the course on her students:

> "Just looking at some recent questions about different set texts and exam areas and I've realised I'm completely giving up. I am fully prepared for the worst results of my teaching career. Absolutely no energy to do anything about it. Feel sad for my students but at a loss as to how to help them do well in the exams this year. There's just [too] much content to remember and confusion around exams for my brain to handle, my 17-18 year old students don't stand a chance."

The post itself generated over sixty-six member comments within a twenty-four hour period, all concurring with the thoughts expressed in the post, ('It's become more [of] a chore to teach than the pleasure it used to be') with the vast majority also expressing sentiments of solidarity and support. These types of posts have a manifold significance. Firstly, the comments they generate demonstrate burgeoning evidence that the new curriculum's 'rigour' has taken shape only in increased content and a complex matrix of assessment criteria relating to the set texts and theorists rather than the intended 'rigour' of improved academic quality. The dissonance that has been created by this has also created anxiety for teachers and thus an increased need for emotional support as they navigate the unfamiliar territory of content and assessment.

The group's primary function and original raison d'etre as a teacher-generated shared free resource was a theme that came out consistently strongly in all of the first phase interviews. The interview with the original creator of the group, Alina, and who was also one of the admins interviewed, summed up why the group was set up in the first place and essentially why and how other members were attracted to the group:

> "I set up the group when the new spec was coming out because I was a one-man band and Head of media studies. There was no one else teaching media so I needed some support in terms of networking with other teachers to see how they were approaching it. And obviously with all the new resources there was going to be stuff from the exam board and what you could buy online but it was really expensive to just buy resources so I set it up knowing a new spec was coming. I just wanted to collaborate with some of the teachers to see if we could kind of share the workload in planning for when the spec changed."

This view was fully supported and reinforced by the other teachers interviewed and it can be interpreted from this data that the educational context of budget cuts, small or reduced media departments, many with non-specialists and a course loaded with new subject content, theorists and prescribed set texts, has had a significant bearing on why the groups have played such an important function in the early stages of the teaching of the new specification. Interestingly, the function of the groups, as the implementation of the reforms has embedded, appears to have not discernibly changed over time. Members have continued to still display the same types of interactions and usages of the group.

The Consultation and Accreditation Process: From Gallimaufry to Compliance?

It is interesting to note how the Eduqas Facebook group had and continues to have a much more active membership presence than the groups linked to the other exam boards, as the delayed specification approvals of OCR and AQA, meant that many centres opted for Eduqas as their chosen specification. Eduqas was the new 'English' version of WJEC, created so that WJEC could remain in the English market, comply with the government reforms but retain the freedom afforded to the Welsh curriculum, which was not bound by the reforms. This impact of Eduqas as the first board to be approved is further explored later in this chapter in the context of the main study but some precursory insight was offered by the first phase data. One of the teacher participants, Seamus, an erstwhile head of media at an established sixth form college in the south of England and principal examiner, had attended one of the early consultation meetings involving representatives from the Department for Education, the three exam boards and a variety of academics, media educators and other media education related stakeholders. Whilst an anecdotal observation, his interview appears to captures the feeling of discord and competing interests between the various parties. He says:

> "It was crazy, it was full of people and someone from the government taking notes not saying anything. There were HE teachers making insane observations about the ability of the students, begging for research projects… there was an obsession to get critical research back in. A woman from [exam board name redacted] was trying to railroad all this stuff through. Basically, there was this inflexibility mainly around the non-examined assessment." (Seamus)

These observations also very clearly mirror what Alvarado and Boyd-Barrett observed when the first media A' Level was brought into the curriculum:

> "The genesis and development of any new subject is in part a history of contest for curriculum space and of struggle between competing traditions and ambitions. media education is no exception" (1992, p. 9)

The negative feelings about the course found in the Facebook group observation data were also present in the interviews. Whilst some teachers expressed anxiety about work load and the quantity of the course content, concerns surrounding resource creation or understanding the structure and assessment of the course, some teachers also expressed more ideological concerns about the curriculum and its reduced practical component as well as the prescriptive nature and number of set texts and theorists.

This circles back to the ideas set out and discussed in part one of this chapter with the proposition the reform is epistemologically incompatible with the subject. What also emerges from this one observation of the consultation meetings is the inchoate manifestation of previous academic debate about the democratising social function of media studies in the context of the imposition of elitist assumptions and another example of conflicting ideological positions in education (Lusted 1991; Buckingham 2003; Bolas 2009; Burn 2016). Returning to the earlier discussions in this chapter, some of the ideological concerns about the reform expressed by the teachers in the first phase were couched specifically to the current political context of education. Two teachers specifically posited that the government wanted to get rid of the subject entirely:

> "When the subject went on to consultation, I was dead sure that it was going to go, that we were going to lose the subject." (Ben)

> "They wanted to kill off the subject because they don't want young kids, young adults 'knowing'…Politically, I think the course has been set up to fail." (Pritesh)

Michael Gove, "his cronies" and "all of Ofqual" were blamed by Megan who stated she felt "dread" about the inception of the new specifications and thought them "awful". This again further informs the debate surrounding the conflict between autonomous forces (media teachers and academics) and heteronomous forces (politicians, quangos and exam boards) and the contested space of media education (Moore and Maton 2010).

Yet, in all of this seeming despair and negativity, what comes out very strongly from it is a group of committed teachers, passionate about and invested in their subject. There were over a hundred comments from the interviews that were coded as relating to the teaching and learning of the subject as 'subject specific pedagogy', which is perhaps not surprising given the nature of the research, but on closer analysis a great deal of these comments either implicitly or explicitly refer to how the new specifications have necessitated a different pedagogical approach from the previous specifications. This can be largely attributed to the reduction of practical work and the introduction of compulsory prescribed set texts and theorists and there is evidence in the interviews and Facebook posts that points to teachers changing their practice to how they feel media studies 'should' be taught. Evidence indicates that teachers are attempting to adopt the 'reflective' and 'playful' pedagogical practices that Buckingham advocated. This approach also resonates with Shulman's concept of signature pedagogies and aligns with the propositions for this in the context of media studies I presented in chapter 5. For example, Ben recounted how he was inspired by another teacher creating Snapchat profiles for each of the named theorists and states:

> "My kids absolutely loved this idea…so they said to me, why don't we each have a theorist name in class. So I'm not going to go and ask 'John what do you think about that?' I'm going to say 'Stuart Hall, what do you think of that question?' And when they answer, they have to repeat their theory back – so the kids are literally being cultivated, if you like to use George Gerbner. They've even done a family tree! Stuart Hall is the dad, Laura Mulvey is the mum and Jean Baudrillard is the weird uncle, which I love."

Given the history of media studies and how it has had to struggle for its development as a subject and a place in the curriculum, I wondered, at the outset of the research, whether this

would be something that would emerge from the data, and whether the Facebook groups would act as an explicit 'site of resistance', effectively claiming back media studies for its students and teachers in a similar way to what 'The Manifesto for Media Education' aimed to do in 2011. Whilst the data did not explicitly support this, what emerged was a different kind of 'resistance' in the form of growing body of evidence that teachers were striving to make the best of the curriculum as it stood and, within this, semblances of a re-energised professional inquiry, commitment and productiveness. From the creation of the Facebook group in the first place, by resourceful teachers, to the buoyant use of the shared drive and the multiplicitous references to teaching and learning and collaboration, evidenced in the interviews and Facebook posts the group was clearly not just simply a transactional resource one-stop-shop, but an evolving, dynamic and active community of practice that utilized the critical and collective intelligence and motivation of a 'hive mind' as affirmed by Buckingham, in his essay 'The Strangulation of Media Studies':

> "Media studies has been strangled, although it continues to draw breath. Committed, creative media teachers will still engage and challenge their students – although now they will be doing so despite the framework of assessment, rather than being enabled and supported by it." (2017, p. 6).

The second phase of the data collection took place over a six-month period between February and July 2020, however, much of the interaction on the Facebook groups became concerned with the logistics and challenges of moving to Centre Assessment Grades[14] (CAGs) and with the focus turned away from the experiences of the reformed curriculum in its usual everyday context, a passive observational approach was no longer suitable to obtain the qualitative data the study required. As noted in part one, the interviews yielded valuable data that was further enriched by a more active engagement approach on Facebook. This approach proved valuable in the consolidation and synthesis of the themes and ideas that had emerged throughout the interviews and Facebook post observations, and helped me to, as Geertz outlines, "first grasp and then render" a "thick description" through the ethnographic interpretation of a "multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knitted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular,

[14] In the summer of 2020, due to COVID-19, GCSE and A' Level exams were cancelled in England. Instead, students were assigned grades by schools and colleges based on their assessments, called Centre Assessment Grades (CAGs). Originally, CAGs were meant to be part of a broader grading and standardisation process, but this approach lost public confidence. In August 2020, a policy change awarded students the higher grade between their CAG and the standardized grade.

and inexplicit". (1973, p. 10). As outlined in chapter four, this enabled me to refine my coding from categories into themes.

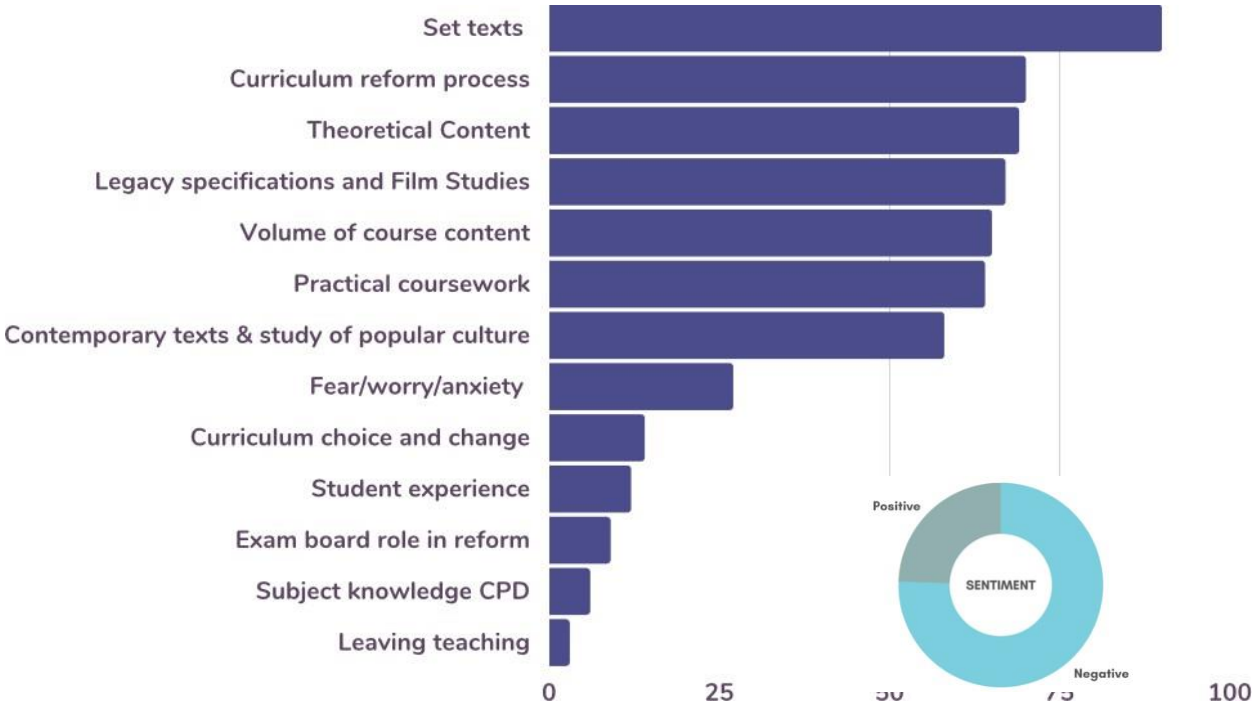

Figure 5: The Third Stage of Coding: Coding Themes

The third iteration of coding from categories into themes is depicted in Figure 5. The X axis number for each theme denotes the frequency of 'coding events' where a participant makes a comment specifically related to that theme. Whilst some comments inevitably overlap in terms of themes, and thus coded for more than one theme, the illustration gives a useful overview of the key discussion points across both the interviews and the interactions on the Facebook group posts. Also integrated into the chart is a representation of the proportion of the overall negative and positive sentiment expressed within the interviews and Facebook posts, with the overriding sentiment noted as being negative, at 75%.

An obvious place to begin is with the curriculum reform process, the consultation and the lead up to the implementation of the new qualification. As has been outlined in part one of this chapter, there was very real anxiety and fear amongst the media teaching community that when media studies was not listed in the original subjects up for reform that it signalled the 'death' of the subject. A key part of my second phase of research was to gain a wider

range of perspectives of the time period leading up to the implementation of the curriculum in order to build a more comprehensive understanding of the context of the reform process and its impact. This time period is particularly interesting because the negative feelings that it induced appeared to resurrect anxieties about the status of the subject that had been lying comparatively dormant for a while. Interestingly, for the participants, it appeared that fear of the subject's potential demise tapped more into feelings about their identity as an educator, passion for the subject and recognition of its importance in the broader curriculum than the more tangible potential realities of role redundancy.

Adam, one of the teacher interview participants and a subject specialist in his third year of teaching at a school in Greater London, recalls his anxiety about the possibility of the subject being removed from the curriculum entirely and the impact it might have on entering the profession as a media teacher:

> "It was worrying because the year before I applied for my PGCE there was talk that media was going to get scrapped at a national level and that really scared me at the time, and I was, you know, 'I really want to go into teaching and media's my passion, like, damn, where do I go?''

Bruce, an experienced teacher in further education, also echoes these fears, worrying that the subject's development was on a "knife edge" and, once the reform was approved, it was "death by a thousand cuts". This was a sentiment reiterated by Ellen, another experienced subject specialist and head of department at a large sixth form college in London. Ellen was also someone actively involved with media education projects more broadly, had an examining teacher role for one of the exam boards, and had attended the very first consultation meeting run by Ofqual and attended by representatives from the three exam boards, academics and media education-related organisations such as The Media Education Association and The BFI. She says she was initially open to the idea of reform and welcomed more formal recognition of theoretical content in the curriculum but during the first meeting it rapidly became apparent that there was a much bigger agenda at play and this, she suggests, was "a way of trying to kill the subject". Asked if she felt that other subjects also in the same round of reforms were impacted in the same way, she believed that this was not the case and that "there was something else going on with it as well, and that was specific to media studies".

This scepticism might naturally be felt by experienced subject specialists who have the long view – and experience – of the subject's history, but this has also been noted by those outside of the subject. Alan, a head of department at a Catholic secondary school, recounts showing his assistant principal, a non-subject specialist, the reformed subject content framework, and who, from a more objective standpoint, also took the view that the reform was 'killing' the subject. Miles, another experienced subject-specialist at a high performing secondary school in London, and in attendance at the same consultation meeting as Ellen, was more direct in his view of the reform:

> "There was a bit of trepidation about whether it was going to be in there at all which would be fucking insane given the amount of media that people consume."

Maxine, an experienced media teacher in a sixth form college in the north west of England, says that the fear she felt about media studies being 'scrapped' was also shared and compounded by exam board representatives at a training meeting she attended:

> "Honestly I thought, because there were rumours coming around that they were going to scrap the media A' Level course, and actually having gone to an [exam board] training session … they did actually confirm that."

Shruti, a teacher with a PGCE in media, working at a large converter academy in London, was involved in the consultation process in her first years as a teacher and she recalls being 'quite on top of what was going on', pragmatic but also powerless. From discussions with other media teachers, she believed that if media was to survive as a subject, teachers had no say in the matter and exam boards had no choice and 'it was just you either teach media [as they say], or they get rid of it'. Matt echoes this sentiment and fears regarding the future of media in the curriculum:

> "I honestly thought it was for the chop …I thought it just didn't fit in to what, kind of, the model of education is at the moment. I was obviously relieved that it survived and I kind of viewed it [as] a bit of a stay of execution and a bit of a temporary 'can we get through this bit' and live to fight another day…But to be honest without being too dramatic about it, I was devastated at the idea of that disappearing."

Similarly, Raph, an experienced media educator, PGCE tutor and senior leader, couches his fears in the perceived incompatibility of the subject with the ideological thrust of the reform. He says:

> "I was really worried about the subject itself. The changes from 2010 - the coalition government and then into the Conservative government - meant that there was a radical revision of education policy …media didn't really have a natural place within this new worldview … so I was concerned that maybe this was an attempt to get rid of it really, because it didn't really particularly fit in with the more Hirschian knowledge driven, high culture version of what constitutes as effective knowledge."

This also explicitly supports the overarching thesis of this research which argues that media studies as a curriculum subject does not epistemologically align with the knowledge ideologies espoused by the policy makers and what both Raph and Matt articulate here, too, also reflects all of the tacit anxiety and discomfort expressed by media educators elsewhere in this chapter.

Negative sentiment about the reform predominates in the reporting of the lived experiences of educators in this research, and whilst there is some emergence of positive sentiment about the curriculum (although even these are often presented as 'chinks of light' as part of a more negative commentary), discussions about the restrictive subject content framework, the incompatibility of media studies with the reform, perception of the subject's stigma or its and the enervation of professional autonomy and trust in teachers at the hands of the Department of Education all coalesce to create a discourse that indicates the challenges and complexities faced by educators in navigating these changes. The negative sentiment expressed tended to be characterised in two main ways:

(1) Resistance; expressed through anger/frustration/desire to subvert
(2) Pragmatism; expressed through an acceptance of the new framework but a desire to innovate within its limitations

Participants reported oscillating between the two but their experiences of the consultation period tended to elicit visceral sentiment regardless, as the following sections go on to document.

As Seamus recounted his experiences of the chaotic nature of the consultation process in the first phase of the research, I wanted to gain a more rounded picture of this for the second phase. Of all the interview participants in the research, Professor David Buckingham had played the most visible role in the consultation period of the reform. Together with Professor Natalie Fenton, he was instrumental in the development of the subject content framework and whilst the final version of the DfE's framework was a distorted representation of what Buckingham and Fenton originally presented to the DfE, their efforts to create a coherent framework, according to Oliver, a senior officer at a UK charitable media education organisation, and the chair of one of the early working parties in the consultation process, 'averted a much bigger disaster'.

In his interview, David recounts this time period as a chaotic and difficult experience:

> "All this process of the drafting and the re-drafting and the re-drafting, this endless cycling round with these more and more stupid stipulations being placed just to make life difficult basically, often with no coherent sense of 'what is the agenda' really it was actually very hard to work out what the agenda was, you know, because it wasn't consistent it was just being difficult for the, part of it was being difficult for the hell of it, I thought."

Perceiving a more heavy-handed approach than that applied to other subjects, he also highlights the lack of equitable treatment compared to other subjects, such as film studies, in the reform:

> "Media studies was singled out in this process and I'm not a paranoid person, you know, but it was very clear to me that in the bit of it that I was involved with, film studies was being treated differently from media studies… And then you look at what's happened in other subjects and, you know, much more light touch; you look at the equivalent documents for sciences – I mean the subject content document is two or three pages and it's all very general. Whereas the ones for media studies are much, much more specific".

Oliver, as chair of the media studies working party meetings, encountered "uncannily similar experiences' to David's. He also had a clear sense that film studies was given preferential treatment because he believed it was being considered by the policy makers as more "elite" and they were more "comfortable" with it as a subject. Oliver also subscribed to the sentiment that the reform was "a definite attempt to get rid of media studies". His account of his experiences of chairing these meetings offers fascinating insight into the frustrated nature of the process and a valuable reference point for the experiences of others involved in those initial stages of the reform consultation process:

> "The [working party meetings] were meant to be a neutral holding space to try and get stakeholders to reach consensus. I don't think we were ever going to argue that scrutiny wouldn't be valuable in subjects and we entered into what we hoped it would be a proper review in good faith. However, it was clear that there was a civil service shadow process that the DFE was doing. We were not sure whether the lead civil servant was in direct contact with Nick [Gibb], but we were always just second-guessing and trying to anticipate what the minister wanted. The phrase kept cropping up 'The minister doesn't like concepts'. Civil servants, by sheer virtue of their role, do not hold expertise and it was clear that there was going to be a foundational change to the subject…In one of the review meetings there were these two guys - we didn't know their names but we called them Rosencrantz and Guildenstern because they seemed quite out of their depth and didn't really know what was going on. Their job was to report back but also felt that it was giving people a sense that they were being watched. David and Natalie made a huge fuss and went in with hobnailed boots - they are essentially recuperated subject content and averted a much bigger disaster. When the review documents came back they were over one hundred tracked changes. There was a lot of filibustering going on and we felt this was done to take it beyond the deadline that we could make meaningful change that people thought we would. There was a feeling we were being spun out by Ofqual".

Like Oliver, many participants in the research recollected feeling that political agenda and interference played a firm part in those early days of the reform and consultation process. Raph, who also attended the initial consultation meetings, believed "those media ones had to have literally, you know, ministerial sign off". Will also glibly recounts Nick Gibb's , the minister for schools, role in the reforms and the decision to have set theorists:

> "I think Nick Gibb said that there had to be nineteen theories, simply because he liked the number nineteen really. There was no real thought beyond that I think, sadly."

Returning to Ellen's experience of these early stakeholder meetings held by the Department for Education, she reiterates the same discordant dynamics as also experienced by Seamus, Oliver and David, and says:

> "It was one of the weirdest experiences of my life. There were people lobbying the DfE really to, you know, 'Don't take away research!', 'Keep the coursework!' and all this kind of business. But I met the Subject Officer from [exam board name redacted] there and I could see the way that her mind worked and the way that she - I could see even at that early stage - that she would basically do anything to get that spec through, and I think when you look at them now, I think that is the one that makes such little sense."

David also recounts his own involvement in working to assist the subject officers at OCR during the accreditation period and just how convoluted and difficult they found the process when trying to meet the requirements of the new Department for Education subject content framework. He says:

> "It was ludicrous, just ludicrous; 'oh we can do a bit of this over here, oh perhaps we'll satisfy them on that if we do this here' and 'oh we can hit, kill two birds with one stone if we do this'. All sorts of kind of bizarre juggling act and my analogy was Twister; so you've got to have a hand on a triangle and a foot on a square and you know and you were contorting yourself basically to fulfil these requirements."

When media studies was finally announced as being approved for reform, several participants articulated the relief they felt and, even though this was tempered by a subject content framework that reduced teacher autonomy in textual choice, they felt it was more important for it still to remain on the curriculum than what could have been the alternative. Miles states:

> "I think there was quite a significant time where you thought 'Well, media studies isn't even going to exist anymore'. So I think when it got through there was an almost a kind of a sense of relief that 'Alright, this isn't maybe what we wanted it to be, but at least it still exists."

However, for Bethany, a subject specialist media teacher at a high performing secondary school in the Midlands, this relief was short lived:

> "I was happy when the reform came through, then I was part of all the Ofqual meetings and we asked; 'what's this subject going to look like?' and, just like everybody else, I became very concerned when it was starting to look like there wasn't going to be a Media [Studies] as we knew it."

This sentiment was also mirrored by Miles who goes on to reflect the sense of relief "sort of coloured [his] reaction to it quite a bit" as the realities of teaching the new specifications didn't fully impact him until later. Three years down the line from first teaching of the new specification, he says:

> "I don't think you really, you don't really, fully understand the implications of what it involves until you actually start teaching it. I think you think 'well, ok, this isn't so bad, well, maybe the idea of set text is ok, I can cope with that' and its only really when you get to actually start doing it, the reality of what it involves really starts to, starts to hit you, I think."

Similarly, George, a media teacher with over twenty five years' experience in further education in the south west of England, reiterates this view and believes "the effects of [the reformed media studies curriculum] are only being felt now rather than straight away as normally happens".

Conversely, for Alex, a subject specialist with over twenty years of experience in sixth form and further education colleges in London and the south, had never held much optimism since the announcement of A' Level reforms and recalls always being "fairly anxious about how the course was going to turn out" with this anxiety only being further compounded by the drafts of the subject content framework which, he felt, "weren't particularly encouraging".

Fourteen of the interview participants in this study had been involved in the reform consultation process in some capacity, with half of those directly and significantly involved in the initial in-person consultation and/or working party meetings with the DfE and Ofqual. Whilst the natural corollary of media educators who voluntarily involve themselves in the kind of activity outlined above might also be for them to offer their time to do interviews for

research such as this, it does also point to a critical core of educators who care about their subject and the negativity and anxiety expressed in the commentary about their experiences is indicative of the commitment they have to its survival.

A large part of the anxiety that teachers felt the reform created was the uncertainty over not only whether the subject was going to be approved for reform, but also the subsequent delays and ambiguities over the exam board specification approvals. This also had significant ramifications on teachers' agency to choose which examination board to follow as each exam board was approved at different times. The first exam board to be accredited was Eduqas (March 2017) followed by OCR (August 2017) and then AQA (September 2017). Even though a few months' time lag between the different specifications being approved may not seem significant, in the context of the academic year, when teachers have a finite window in which to choose, plan and prepare to teach a new curriculum, even small delays can have a big impact.

In the case of OCR and AQA, their specifications were accredited too late in the academic year for teachers to make an informed decision from an equitable choice of all three specifications. With the accreditation of Eduqas taking place five months prior to the second board to be accredited, there was a marked increase in the number of centres choosing to move to Eduqas, WJEC's newly branded English arm of their examination consortium. The full extent of this shift is illustrated by Figure 6 below which represents the shift in exam board choice teachers made between the exam board they followed pre-reform to the exam board they chose for the reformed curriculum. The pre-reform data for WJEC/Eduqas shows a much more even division between the three exam boards but it also must be noted that the number of English centres could be even fewer than that depicted by the chart prior to 2017 because WJEC was the board for both English and Welsh centres and no data is available to verify the exact number of each. There is the potential, therefore , that the shift of centres to Eduqas, in reality, be even more pronounced than that shown by the illustration below.

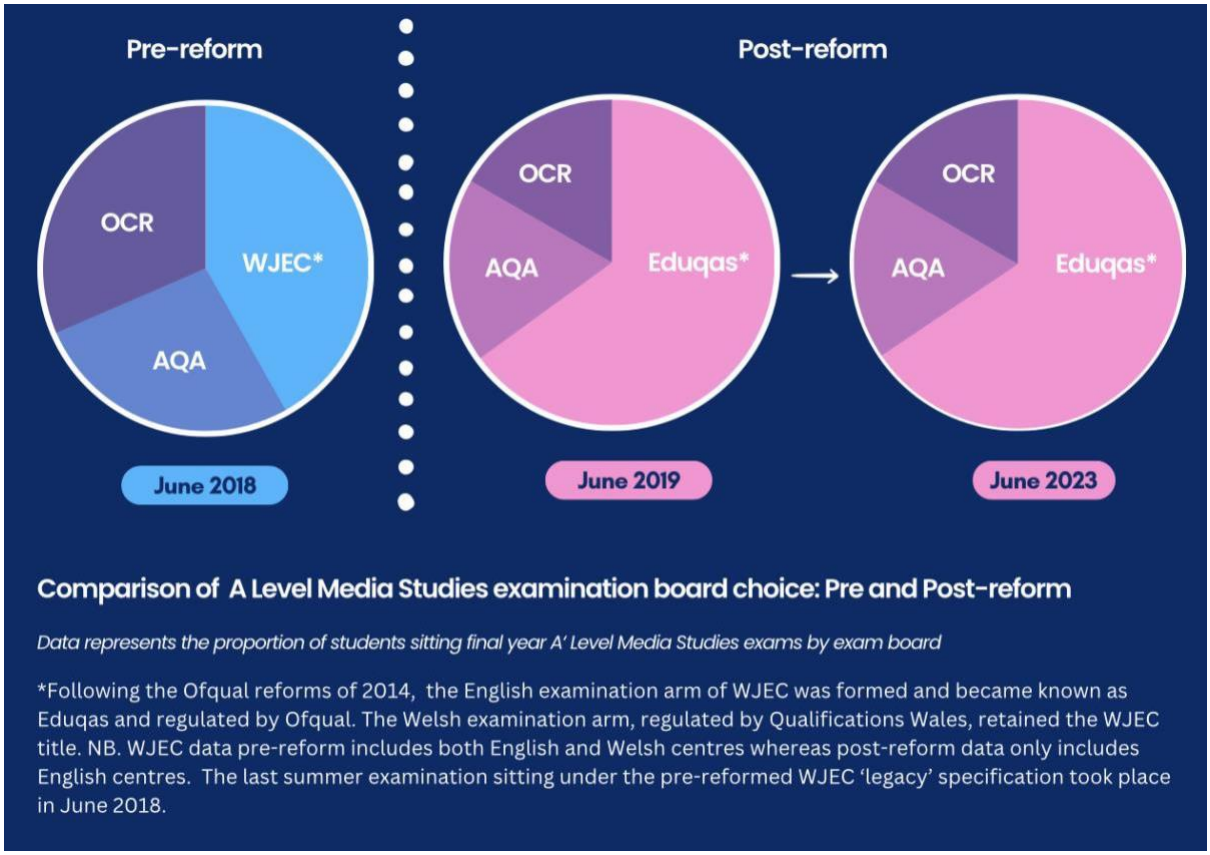

Figure 6: Comparison of A' Level Media Studies Examination Board Choice: Pre and Post-Reform (Data copyright owned by JCQCIC (2024))

The desire for security and adequate time to plan for a new curriculum appears to have been the greatest deciding factor in exam board choice, not the quality of the curriculum on offer, which would normally be the key consideration in the decision making process. Terry, a subject officer for one of the other exam boards, acknowledged the "huge advantage" an early accreditation offered to Eduqas and Matt, a former English-turned-media teacher in his eighth year of teaching at a secondary school teacher in South Yorkshire, and who decided to remain with OCR, said:

> "I feel that probably a lot of people jumped ship to Eduqas … for teachers it was the easier one to shift to because they got approved early – so they could plan".

Lily, a subject-specialist media teacher at an academy in Kent and an admin for the Eduqas Teachers' Sharing Facebook group, said she found Eduqas' early accreditation "reassuring" and Pritesh, a subject-specialist media teacher in his fifth year of teaching at a school in the East Midlands, reiterated this view about his own department's decision to move to Eduqas:

> "WJEC has always been the most 'generous' exam board. They were the ones who got accredited first so that's what attracted me to them and it

> was ready to go and the others were not accredited until much later on. They had the first textbook, they had the resources, they had everything sorted. Their textbooks are pretty decent."

The role of teacher support provided by the exam boards such as text books and other teaching resources, as mentioned by Pritesh, is an important aspect to consider as not only did Eduqas' early accreditation provide them with more time than the other exam boards to prepare substantive teacher support, they have also been noted by several of the participants in this research as the exam board that has provided the most ongoing resource support for teachers. This approach has drawn both praise from teachers who appreciate the support but also criticism from others who believe Eduqas' 'fact sheet'[15] style support model delimits the variety and depth of student understanding and responses in an already rigid assessment framework.

These conflicting views were also mirrored elsewhere in the participant interviews with several participants expressing the view that Eduqas compromised too much in the consultation process in order to get the subject content framework and then their specification through:

> "A lot of people felt that Eduqas board gave up a lot of, you know they sacrificed quite a lot to be approved early." (Matt)

> "Some people feel that Eduqas kind of sacrificed a little bit too much too early" (Ellen)

> "They caved in and they were determined they were going to get, be first off the mark and they were going to get their numbers in and therefore they closed down other options." (Marianne)

This raises all sorts of questions about the equitability of the curriculum reform process, in which the exam board that appears to be the most reform-compliant (as Seamus and Ellen both indicated from their experiences of the early consultation meetings) is 'first past the post' and thus rewarded with the largest market share of exam centres who have moved across because they want to maximise the time they have to develop a new curriculum. As

[15] Eduqas produces fact sheets for the majority of the set texts on their specification which teachers and students can download. They, however, state on the website that these are 'an introduction' and 'starting points' for further study.

the previous diagram above shows, this issue has long-reaching implications for exam boards, not least teacher choice and student experience. Bruce commented in his interview that this would be "financial peril for OCR".

Conversely, though, participants such as Christine expressed a much more positive view of Eduqas' role in the reforms and believed, like others, that media studies was under threat and that "They [Eduqas] were trying to save it". Other participants such as Lily also expressed appreciation for the good and open lines of communication Eduqas provided and she feels "like they work hard to support teachers as much as they can". Certainly, regardless of the reasons for choosing Eduqas in the initial phase, their continued majority share of the A' Level Media Studies exam board market indicates that centres are satisfied enough to remain with them over the longer term.

It was interesting to note, though, that the exam board that elicited the most positive comments from participants regarding the quality of their specification and what can be termed as the most explicit exam board 'loyalty' was OCR. Despite a vastly reduced share of the exam board market post-reform, a larger proportion of teachers who had remained with OCR following the reform offered to participate in the research interviews than what might be expected by the pie chart data. Several teachers noted that the delay for OCR to be accredited was a positive thing. Ellen said "it was OCR that held out the longest for things that was [sic] wanted on the specification" and, for Kate, she "took the fact that OCR took a while to get accredited as a good sign – a sign that they were pushing back". Alan also reiterated this view and commented that he believed that "OCR fought longer and harder on the specification that's why it took longer to get sorted". Semantically, the choice of words these teachers use ("held out", "pushing back", "fought longer and harder") imply a sense of resistance against the changes being pushed through. The same teachers all also variously expressed appreciation for the subject officer who was described by Ellen as "excellent" and trust in the exam board's efforts in the consultation period and, later, to devise a workable specification.

Terry, who was an exam board subject officer for OCR at the time of the interview but who had been a classroom media teacher during the first year of the new curriculum, said:

> "I felt that the OCR one was the one I would be happiest with and having taught OCR pretty much my entire teaching career I thought, you know I had a better understanding of; how they work, what they're expecting. So I kind of decided to stay with them for A' Level for that reason. I mean, I found some aspects of the specification more appealing generally than the Eduqas one even though that had been accredited first."

Both Terry and Alan expressed the same view about their preference for OCR's choice of texts over Eduqas'. Terry states he felt that Eduqas's texts "wouldn't work for [his] students" whereas Alan was more openly critical:

> "I just looked at the Eduqas one and thought I just cannot get interested in this. I mean, I looked at it and just kind of go: 'So ok, so the one video game you're going to do is 'Assassins Creed 3: Liberation' - which was on the PS Vita which barely anyone played - that's your game? Of all games that you want to put out there?' I looked down the list, as I said, I'm a complete nerd, and I just go; 'I don't even recognise half of these things."

Both felt OCR's specification and choice of set texts were more appealing, a view that was also shared by other teachers such as Terry, Alan, Will, Adam and Bethany. For example:

> "I just thought [OCR] offered more freedom than the constraints of the other exam boards" (Will)

> "I went with OCR because I thought it would suit our students better and my experiences of what I'd done previously." (Bethany)

David also said he "had more faith in [OCR] as an organisation" and expressed his preference for their specification as he felt it was "much better" than the others because "there was a real coherence about the theory and practice" and because "it allowed a lot of autonomy for teachers".

What can be deduced from the above is that teachers desire a coherent specification, authentic exam board support and a level of teacher autonomy within what the subject content framework allows – not a radical revelation as such but, nevertheless, as the reform process has shown, these are things that cannot necessarily be taken for granted.

The issues created by the delays in the exam board accreditation process also highlighted some interesting pedagogical approaches taken by several teachers. For the teachers who decided to 'hold out' for OCR, these generally tended to be experienced educators, loyal to the exam board, and who also demonstrated a more bold approach to their teaching and tended to work in institutions that allowed teacher autonomy. Kate, Alan and Matt all talked of how they decided to begin their teaching of the new curriculum in a more generic way, via concepts and terminology, and leaving the teaching of the set texts until these foundational skills and knowledge had been taught. For example, Alan says:

> "My mentality was I'm going to teach them terminology, I'm going to teach them analysis techniques, I'm going to teach them some theory and just the very basics, I'm not going to start touching the case studies until maybe November time anyway – by that point if OCR is not accredited then you know they're out."

Both Matt and Alan also explained that they were in the fortunate position of not having to specify the exam board they had chosen before first teaching of the specifications began. Matt said he "never really felt under any pressure from either [his] head of faculty or the school in general to make a quick decision" and Alan did not need to tell his school examinations officer the chosen exam board until the end of the first term so felt "what's really the harm in holding back for something that, in the long term you think you can teach better". Both teachers, however, also acknowledged that this kind of freedom may not be experienced in other institutions and that some teachers would be under pressure to make an earlier decision. Matt said he thought that "probably some people were told 'well, I need to know by this date'".

Matt and Alan's responses potentially point to a wider issue in education about how teachers respond to the constraints imposed on them by external forces and it can be deduced from the interviews that teachers tend to be positioned in two camps:

1. Those who take (or are allowed to take) a bolder, more confident approach to their teaching and more likely to push back and resist the imposed restrictions, as well as find alternative ways of holding on to some autonomy over their teaching. These

teachers are more likely to be more experienced subject specialists who have an historical understanding of teaching on the legacy specifications.

2. Those who have a stronger preference for security and support and may, in some cases, feel less confident in their navigation of a new curriculum. Whilst they may not necessarily like the restrictions imposed by the reformed curriculum, these teachers may mitigate this transitional dissonance by seeking earlier opportunities to plan and choose approaches that involve the security of standardised guidance and resource support.

Given the number of centres that opted for the earliest accredited exam board Eduqas, it can be concluded that the vast majority of teachers fall into the second category. Taking into account the protracted nature of the A' Level Media Studies curriculum reform process, it is not difficult to see why teachers, who have to find time to plan a whole new curriculum above and beyond their usual duties, would naturally choose the option that gave them the greatest chance of stability, resource support and planning time. The comparatively high membership of the Eduqas Media Teachers' Sharing Facebook group not only statistically reflects the number of centres choosing this exam board, but also, more implicitly, of the type of teacher more likely to engage in the collective sharing and support online networks available to them. These considerations raise significant questions about teaching practices: Would teachers' curriculum decisions change if they had adequate time and resources? Does the need to reduce workload outweigh their desire for professional autonomy? Furthermore, could an increased workload diminish teachers' motivation to resist, resulting in a more compliant workforce? Addressing these queries could provide insights into the dynamics of educator autonomy and the impact of workload on teaching effectiveness. It could be also argued that these are the sorts of consequence of the kinds of specification produced - the 'creep' of knowledge ossification that results from overly rigid frameworks and standards, which stifle innovation, the development subject-specialist expertise and contribute to a form of professional erosion.

Alan and Matt both speculate that teachers might choose the first board to be accredited because of 'a lack of confidence in the subject' and, echoing Goodwyn and Branson's observations in 2005, that media might indeed be "a bolted on bit of the timetable" to a non-subject specialist. Whilst the 'standardised' subject support available to teachers in the

form of exam board-approved resources (Eg. fact sheets and text books) were noted as being beneficial to these types of teachers, many of the participants perceived that a reliance on high levels of resourcing support has led to bromidic, rote teaching and perhaps, unconsciously, a longer term dereliction of subject specialist knowledge. Marianne, a long time media educator, commented on her experiences of observing lessons taught under the new curriculum:

> "What you do see is these incredibly, these incredibly detailed massive, massive, massive PowerPoints of seventy two slides that a head of department will produce for the department, hand over to the teachers and say 'ok, do this', and students will just come in and they'll believe that they've got to work their way through all of that."

Coming from a slightly different angle but one that addresses a similar point about teacher autonomy, Shruti expressed concerns about the impact of fact sheets and how her students might be hindered by their use:

> "My [A' Level students] were finding the fact sheets and then regurgitating – I said to the exam board 'is there any way you could just put that on a teacher-only access?', and they were like; 'well, no, because everyone should have access to it'. I'm like, 'but the teachers will if you just put it on their access page' - just because I've found it very difficult to teach set products once students got hold of these."

The issues here appear to be two-fold. On one hand, some teachers appear to have an appetite for ready-made, standardised and approved resources - perhaps, on a personal level through lack of confidence, subject-specialist knowledge, planning time or even teacher motivation, or, at a departmental/institutional level, through a need for standardised consistency driven by both internal and external scrutiny and accountability policy and measures – and this need is particularly highlighted at a time of radical curriculum change. On the other hand, some teachers actively resist shackling themselves to standardised resources and homogeneous teaching and find it difficult to operate in such restrictive educational confines that, as Marianne comments, close down opportunities for "spontaneity …and that craft and the beauty of [teaching]" – a sentiment allied to the *Bildung/Didaktik*, as outlined in chapter 5.

In the context of the study's findings, it can be tempting to view the former as 'bad' and the latter 'good', but to do so would be to not recognise the complexities and nuances of the contexts in which teachers operate in. It is not contentious to assert that teacher autonomy is a highly desirable component of a teacher's professional life but it is often viewed in the 'dichotomous pairing of constraint vs. freedom' (Wermke and Hostfalt 2014) without considering the various contextual individual, local and institutional factors that influence the exercise of that autonomy. Autonomy, thus, is not a static in nature and rather than viewing it in absolute terms, it should be understood as a dynamic and multi-faceted construct, and defined by the contexts in which it operates. In simpler terms, autonomy does not mean (or fulfil) the same thing for every teacher - another key aspect of *the dynamic episteme*.

Allied to the above, it is important to note that whilst the majority of participants felt the reformed curriculum reduced autonomy, some educators voiced more affirmative views of the reform – and of the 'constraints' it brought. Raph, as one of these educators, held discernibly more positive views and, whilst critical of some aspects of the reform, he self-describes as a pragmatist. He states his pragmatism derives from his concurrent roles as media studies teacher, assistant head teacher and teacher-trainer and says he:

> "…[looks] at policy and academic debate around media education through the lens of what happens in a classroom and the kind of practical issues and opportunities and challenges that teachers face, and heads of department face, and the accountability measures that all schools around that face."

As outlined earlier in this chapter, whilst he felt that media studies did not ideologically align with the educational 'worldview' of the government, he was also of the view that media studies had been allowed to "revel in [its] periphery status" and "those who wanted to marginalise [media studies] were able to do so with some impunity, really". Raph, in many regards, welcomed the reform and an "attempt to define" as it was an opportunity to "play by the [same] rules as all the other subjects" and "to legitimise ourselves within the curriculum". In many respects, Raph is making a counter-argument to Geraghty's idea that media studies is an "unruly discipline" (2002). Whilst Geraghty's statement may be more akin in tone to, as Raph says, 'revelling' in this status, Raph views this as damaging to the long term perceptions and integrity of the subject. In making these comments, Raph

demonstrates how overtly political the knowledge can be, and just how tied this is to teacher identity. As outlined in his comments on page 109, Raph also views the reforms as beneficial because they provide more guidance and support to teachers new to media. Whilst it could be argued that this might be better achieved in a different way other than through the diktats of a standardised subject framework that demands the study of texts in a uniform way, nevertheless, Raph does highlight the important point that the support that accompanies this uniformity can be beneficial for trainee and new teachers "on a very practical level, on a really busy course where everything is essentially new". Raph recognises that the ubiquity of uniform shared resources could also be "a horrible kind of approach" but ultimately, he asserts, "it does give consistency and a shared language for my trainees".

This view was also supported by Adam and Amina who both reflected on their experiences as a newly qualified and trainee teacher respectively. Of the set texts, Adam felt it was of benefit to him in his first year of teaching as his head of department "walked out after a couple of days…so it helped me to sort of structure my teaching towards a core of set texts". Amina also valued the provision of exam board endorsed text books to support her own subject knowledge development and planning, particularly when mentor support in placement was not as strong. Shruti also noted that the prescription of set texts can be a fairer approach as it reduces inconsistencies between teachers and between schools. Posing a scenario whereby teachers would be completely free to select their own texts, she asks:

> "What if one teacher is better at [choosing texts], what if one teacher is better at doing it than another? And then is that fair on students to have different teaching in that sense?"

Echoing the sentiment of the participants above, Alan also considers the level of prescription helpful for "weaker students, and, dare I say it, less confident teachers". Kate also acknowledged the possible benefits of the set texts but from a different perspective. She felt the requirement to teach a designated range of texts and media forms removed an element of bias that comes with freer teacher choice:

> "One trainee wanted to impart very white middle class texts to 'idiot teenagers' so set texts avoid this. At least the set texts are not the horrendous, canonical middle class set texts that some teachers were getting away with."

Whilst it can be argued that the reform of media studies is predicated on elitist educational values, Kate, in her role as the editor of a subject specialist magazine, also felt that the lack of choice helped to eradicate unhelpful practices in the subject:

> "I get pitched a lot of articles [by teachers] who I know would have been teaching the things they were taught at film school – the type of teacher who used to teach film in media more. I am trying to stamp that out [of the magazine]."

Similarly Raph, as a trainer of teachers, values the uniformity because it removes the element of personal bias that Kate also finds problematic:

> "I think it's [the set texts] really helping them when I do my placement visits – I'm no longer going to classrooms [where] they would be like a like a bedroom of the media teacher or a reflection of them. Now it's more uniform."

Although Alan considers the reduction in teacher autonomy problematic, he also, like Raph and Kate, values the reform for providing "consistency across the board", as does Shruti, who noted the prescribed content framework created "more parity between different schools". Additionally, the necessity for students to study all nine media forms across their two years of A' Level study was considered by both Adam and Amina as a positive because it gave "a wider perspective of media studies" (Adam) and was "a good option" (Amina). Amina's comment was borne out of her own experiences of the pre-reformed qualification that she herself studied. Having only studied the three forms of "print, e-media and broadcast" for her own A' Level in Media Studies, she felt that now as a teacher of the subject, it was now more engaging and democratic, giving the example of one of her students, an ardent gamer, who may have not had the chance to study videogames had it not been for the stipulation of the new framework.

Pedagogy of the Depressed: The Problems of a Prescriptive Curriculum

> "It went from being no set text to being everything set text" (Seamus)

For many media educators the seismic shift towards what was, to all intents and purposes, a 'canonification' of the curriculum was unwanted and problematic. Problematic because textual prescription is anathema to a subject which requires the flexibility and ability to respond to contemporary culture; problematic because of the erosion of teacher agency and professional trust; problematic because the selection of texts to fulfil the government's criteria of quality, significance and diversity, the process is arbitrary and incoherent; and problematic because teaching and learning moves towards the formulaic, shallow and tokenistic and, as Buckingham (2019) states, "to fulfil an absurdly elaborate, convoluted system of assessment". Buckingham also encapsulates the problematic process of set texts:

> "Some are surprising, even provocative, while others are profoundly boring, or just bizarre. Some work well in the classroom, while others are exceptionally hard for students to engage with." (ibid, n.p)

The addition of set texts to the subject content framework was unsurprisingly a dominant topic of discussions across the participant interviews and interactions on the Facebook groups, with the vast majority of these being discussed in negative terms. From qualitative analysis and coding of the interviews and Facebook posts, the key criticisms that can be deduced from the data are summarised as follows:

- Set texts become outdated quickly and anachronistic
- Adverse impact on teacher workload when texts change without sufficient notice
- Prescription leads to lack of personalization
- Lack of coherence in selection of texts
- Reduced teacher agency leads to homogeneous and reductive pedagogic practice
- Reduced student engagement and lack of appropriate challenge
- Incompatibility of set texts in the teaching of media and the need for an approach that goes beyond 'text'
- The degree of prescription regarding set texts in media studies does not have parity with the degree of prescription in other cognate subjects such as Film Studies.

One of the main frustrations that preoccupied research participants was that set texts quickly become out of date. These frustrations encompassed two mains issues: (1) dissatisfaction

with the selection of individual named texts; (2) that the actual choices of texts in general do not accurately reflect media in the present day. For example, AA raised a rhetorical question:

> "Could this course reflect what Is actually going on in the media that our students use everyday or is it stuck in an anachronistic idea of 'the media' that's out of date and irrelevant?"

Bethany echoes this with her comments about specific set texts, such as the Radio 1 Breakfast Show, which "was out of date within minutes" as well as her observation about the requirement to study print versions for the newspaper case studies "because the newspaper isn't read like that, it's read on iPads and I know we're looking at the websites now, and that's good, but I feel like it's behind". Similarly, George, Alan and Sarah also bemoan the inclusion of particular newspaper editions as set texts, 'irrelevant' vloggers such as Zoella, which, George recounts, provoked embarrassment amongst some of his female students who once would have been her target audience, and unrepresentative videogames such as Assassin's Creed III. George also feels that, like David, there is a lack of coherence in the curriculum and some texts appear to have been chosen to tick the 'feminism' box or the 'diversity' box, particularly so with the texts cited above, of which he says "seems sort of clunky, and a bit, 'oh we've got to do something'".

Two interesting exchanges which offer a slightly different perspective are those observed on two of the Facebook groups following the announcement by the exam board that several of the set texts were changing. Whilst many teachers elsewhere in the interviews and on the Facebook groups expressed negative sentiments about the prescription of the set texts, the exchange below highlights more practical concerns about set texts such as the impact on teacher workload and timely notification about impending curriculum changes:

CD: What? I just felt like my lessons for the other ones were finally up to par. Now we have to plan for these. [weary face emoji]
ND: It's sole [sic] destroying [sad face emoji]
CD: I just hate how last minute they are. They just don't understand what it is like having our workload. We need lots of notice so we can prioritise. It's the last half term for goodness sake.
KB: GB [Crying face emoji] Just when we thought we were sorted!
GB: KB [brain exploding emoji] Could you imagine [A' Level English] Literature doing this? Or any other A' Level for that matter? [angry expletives face emoji]

CJW: OMFG! 9! Just change the whole course why don't you?!?!?! That's literally my whole summer time on replanning [Crying face emoji]
SO: CJW, me too … Just bought a load of stuff from CPress too ffs [sad face emoji]
CKW: SO It's a joke. If they told English that the set texts would change every three years, there would be a riot. If they told Science that there would be whole chunks of the syllabus exchanged for new areas there would be outroar. If they told PE you had to assess every child on specific history of specific sports and those sports would change every year, there would be blood. But this is our new norm. At least they've picked decent texts for the most part.
JL: Ahhhh! ! love 'The Missing' too ! Damn it!! Hopefully the new two are good - unless anyone recommends another good pairing? That's our summer done then!!
KM: Unbelievable! I've made entire workbooks for the video games and those TV dramas [sad face emoji]

Highlighted by these short exchanges are some of the more problematic aspects of the set texts such as the lack of teacher choice and the time and workload pressures present in teaching, exacerbated by the exam board delays in their release – delays which are perhaps inevitable given the logistical issues exam boards face in the selection and resourcing of new set texts that need to be as relevant as possible. Pedagogically, too, the impact, according to MK, appears negative:

> "There's an awful lot of very repetitive analysis looking at the same things in a large number of rather uninspiring and outdated texts. It doesn't really grab the kids and they don't have that spark of recognition with it that you get with more contemporary texts"

Bruce also voices his concerns about set texts committing the subject to irrelevancy because, logistically, a set curriculum which has to operate with the inherent delays that come with logistic issues of updating and revising specifications before their public release mean that exam board specifications will never be able to keep up with contemporary media issues. Bruce notes that "this will hurt media a bit more than it will hurt film studies …[the set texts] just make everything old very quickly…You think that when specifications are being redeveloped, like with cutting edge stuff or new stuff, probably the 'new' stuff was 2015 - and now that's five years ago!". This presents a growing – and compelling – body of evidence to suggest that media studies is epistemologically resistant to a 'canon' and thus the prescription of set texts is an undesirable stringency in the teaching of this particular subject.

One of the consequences of curricular prescription is that teachers' enjoyment in teaching may also be reduced. DF's comment outlines this consideration:

> "I'll keep repeating this until I'm blue in the face but if the exam board set nineteen theories and then let us choose the texts the students would learn more, the responses would be of a higher quality and the whole course would be 100% more enjoyable for all parties." (DF)

Keller et al (2018) articulate that for a teacher's enthusiasm to be authentic, it needs to be experiential and behavioural, that is, the teacher needs to internally experience enthusiasm on a personal level and be able to externally convey this to their students.

Many teachers may 'fake' enthusiastic behaviours such as Sarah, who says "from the [students] point of view, as long as we're enthusiastic, they generally will take it as it comes", but whilst this "surface acting" (ibid) may not impact significantly on student enjoyment and outcomes, the dissonance between internalised feelings and externalised behaviours is connected to a reduction in occupational well-being (Taxer and Frenzel 2018). Therefore, the implications of negative teacher responses to the introduction of set texts is significant in terms of professional sustenance and longer term issues related to the retention of subject specialist teachers. As the comments that follow in this section exemplify, reporting on enjoyment (or lack of it) of teaching the new curriculum appears as a recurring theme in the participant data.

An important concern that teachers had about the introduction of set texts was that many felt that this made teaching and learning more reductive than generative, and raised issues about the lack of engagement and colourless pedagogy. Maxine has hopes that the curriculum will change to "give [her] more freedom to select things that we generally enjoy teaching". Similarly, some teachers felt that the teaching of set texts relocated the focus of the curriculum to the instrumental approaches of second-guessing' the examination boards and trying to interpret how texts should be taught from the materials (such as the Fact Sheets) that the boards produce, thus reducing the role of the teacher to 'deliverer' - and another form of professional disempowerment.

Comments of this nature span both the teachers' own lack of pleasure in teaching set texts but also the impact on student enjoyment of the course. Regarding the former, JDR, posting on one of the Facebook groups, notes:

> "Is anyone else feeling bored by the new spec? I'm certainly not blaming anyone at [exam board] but I'm really not enjoying teaching the new A' Level and attempting to question whether I'm just fed up with teaching or the new spec is just a bit bland. I'm aware of the trials and tribulations undertaken to [get] the course [approved] but find it so bland and sanitised compared to the last two specs. Sorry for using this as a forum to vent my frustration…"

Reiterating this sentiment, Polly, one of the interview participants and experienced subject specialist teacher, head of department and exam marker at a school in West Yorkshire, believes "there's so little room for [teachers to pursue] their own interest or find interest in texts for the pupils as well because it's so prescriptive". She feels it has become a "kind of exam machine" which has "thrashed a lot of the interest and excitement out of the subject".

Therefore, whilst it is clear that the rigidity of set texts reduces teacher enjoyment, this also has the knock-on effect on how teachers teach the course. For example, EC, on a different Facebook post, laments the lack of freedom to teach more creatively:

> "I feel like this whole a-level [sic] is lecturing with handouts!!! Very little scope to create unless you build it in depending on time - get them recording segments of radio using conventions. Apparently some very

> good podcast creators for free on App Store. I try to attach a creative task to 3 or 4 units but since Covid it's changed that emphasis on the fun I used to have… I'm more worried about their poor written responses [sad face emoji]"

Replying on the same post to EC, PH states they also find certain set texts [Jungle Book, Minecraft, Radio 1] "really dull to teach" whilst also noting that their "students do tend to do well at as they regurgitate all of the facts easily". Again, these observations counter the government's intention to create a more rigorous qualification. However, in response to PH's comment, NP concedes that the compulsion to regurgitate facts can be counterproductive because students are repeating everything "regardless of whether it's relevant to the actual question". In response, IS expresses solidarity and adds that it's "nice to see it's not a solo struggle".

Reflecting on how it has influenced the way they teach, Alex, Bethany and Adam all comment variously on the negative impact that the prescription of set texts has had on their pedagogical choices. Similarly, Bethany recounts her own struggles at the prospect of teaching the new course in a way that didn't align with her own teaching preferences. Of this dissonance, she "felt [it] took the joy out of learning the subject" because she believed she was ' going to have to teach [the subject] in a really formulaic way''. Adam also echoes this discomfort because he "found [he] was less creative in [his] teaching…and teaching very much to the exam, to the set texts to the contexts". Interestingly, Adam also makes the observation that he feels the new course makes it easier for non-specialists to deliver the subject but "the irony is people, the non-specialists I know who have taught media previously do not want to come, go anywhere near the new specs". Amina, a PGCE trainee teacher training in a school in the south east of England, notes from her experience that fellow trainees were looking forward to teaching practical production but because they were usually given year 12 classes (not year 13 when the practical production coursework takes place) they didn't get to experience this as part of their training year as it was "just [students] learning different set texts that they had to obviously learn for the exam".

For many of the research participants, however, the key concern about set texts was not actually the specific choices of the texts (although as highlighted above, these were also problematic), it was the principle of the prescription and the accompanying reduction of

agency that was the issue. As Maxine recounts, this lack of agency has had a detrimental impact on her own enjoyment of teaching:

> "I know I used to love choosing case studies and looking at theories that could potentially be applied to analysis of certain case studies as well and picking my own content – I used to love that. And I used to put a lot more heart and soul into it as well, like the planning so if I took a theorist like Bell Hooks for example, I would choose a text that would generally fit in with Representation or Audience or Positioning or whatever and I used to love being able to find those cases…I do try and remain enthusiastic about certain case studies that I'm told that I need to deliver, it's very hard to be passionate about something that you're basically being told to deliver... It's not necessarily all the time, like today I had a great lesson with my first years we taught…we looked at Marketing and Distribution for I, Daniel Blake and …there was some really interesting and innovative strategies that were launched really for that one. So I was into it because I was and, again, they were as well…but, yeah, there are certain things where it think 'Oh god, this is mundane'."

Additionally, Maxine goes on to express disappointment at the lack of space in the curriculum, created by the need to cover all the set texts, and being unable to teach more creatively. On wanting to get the students to play a "fake news' game 'to give them [something] a little bit more exciting to do with fake news stories", she notes she didn't have enough time to do it in a meaningful way.

It is clear, from these analyses of teachers' sentiments, that the lack of autonomy and rigidity of choice has led to a kind of 'professional ennui', and certainly not a desirable condition for those who teach the subject. In the current climate of teacher satisfaction, at its lowest for four years (Martin, 2023), this has additional and wider significance for the subject and the profession. Bruce and Alex talked explicitly about the current state of the subject being career limiting for them in the longer term. At the time of his interview, Bruce had made the decision to stop teaching A' Level because it "felt horribly deflating and demotivating" and Alex commented:

> "I think [if] there's no immediate prospect of A' level media going back to the way it was, I feel like I'm done now with teaching, if I'm perfectly honest… in five years' time I see myself not being a teacher anymore, to be honest."

These views clearly go much further than a superficial unhappiness about the prescription of set texts because they also point to the bigger and very worrying issue of teacher retention in the context of radical curriculum change.

As outlined above, one of the key issues with prescribing set texts is that there is very little room for personalising texts to the individual student demographics and the different education settings in which media studies is taught. When textual choice is taken away so is, to some extent, the teachers' and students' ownership of the teaching and learning. Helen, an experienced subject specialist working in a further education college in the north west of England, reflects that under the previous specification, she was able to tailor the texts she chose to the changing student demographics over the years:

> "We used to get quite a lot [of students] coming in from the centre of Manchester that we don't now. When we used to, then we would be able to tailor so we used to do – in terms of ethnicity - that's what we would use, so we would use kind of ad campaigns for 'Incredible India' and stuff like that, which obviously isn't the option now - it's like Dizzee[16] and Claudia[17] are slung in there as a nice token".

Bethany and Sarah, too, recount their frustrations with the homogeneity and lack of flexibility of the set text approach:

> "How can you create set text in media that is going to be suitable for every student, in every class, in every city?" (Bethany)

> "In the past, you would have had more choice to think about the nature of your students and choose something that would be interesting to them." (Sarah)

As Raph argues earlier in this chapter, teachers may have had too much freedom of choice in the past but, for many teachers interviewed, the pendulum has swung too much the other way and the selection of texts represents a tick box approach and a 'blunt' inclusivity. This

[16] The music video for 'Dream'(2004) by UK Grime artist, Dizzee Rascal was a set text on the Eduqas A' Level media studies 2017 - 2024
[17] This refers to the advertisement for the charity Wateraid, entitled 'Rain for Good'(2016), which features a Zambian student called Claudia. The advertisement was a set text on the Eduqas A' Level media studies 2017 – 2024.

has also eroded the democratic and accessible nature of a subject that has traditionally been better placed to offer academic pathways to a wider and more diverse demographic of young people.

Emma, a university media lecturer with a background in further education, rejects the idea of the study of media through texts altogether. She feels that media has moved beyond "the idea of 'text' as a singular entity" and is no longer a desired or compatible approach in the teaching of the subject. Bruce, too, on being asked what it would take for him to return to teaching the A' Level Media, said that "they'd have to loosen the straps…for the whole idea of set texts". He goes on to outline how the current specification demonstrates "a massive disconnect now between what the syllabuses absolutely, fundamentally require and what, kind of like the consumer practices as such".

The points made by Emma and Bruce, suggest that the reformed curriculum with its emphasis on set texts and theorists is incompatible with the academic integrity of the subject and highlights the key problem with locating the focus of a curriculum around specific texts. This view is also echoed by Buckingham (2019) as he claims "it restricts students' opportunities to engage in independent critical thinking", opportunities, he says that come more fruitfully from conceptual application of "a move back and forwards between theory and analysis". Emma's vision, however, is more radical than this and calls for a new approach that completely diverges from established and traditional teaching methods.

For those teachers who expressed more positive views of the reformed curriculum, they tended to be either teachers who were actively using the restrictions to innovate their practice or enjoying the challenge of change. On one Facebook group, KB says she appreciates the variety of "how often [she and the students] have to change topics" as she "gets bored easily" and finds the new course "fun". SCK, commenting on the same Facebook post, say she also likes the variety, and views the new specification more favourably than the specification pre-reform. Similarly, Bethany, in the participant interviews, stated that she "enjoyed teaching it…enjoyed planning it…enjoyed using my brain".

As outlined earlier in this chapter, Raph, Amina and Adam all acknowledged the particular benefits of set texts for those who are training or in their early teaching career. Adam noted

that his teacher training course emphasised the negative implications of the more restrictive framework but whilst he recognised this, his own realities as a new classroom teacher when the reforms were first implemented contradicted this. He felt having set texts helped him structure his time and teaching and "if you know what the set text is, you know what [you're] planning". Similarly, Rae, a PGCE trainee teacher at the time of her interview, also saw the benefits as someone new to teaching:

> "I found [teaching the specification] quite challenging; it was enjoyable because, even though it was very prescriptivist, I had that control over what exactly was being covered within that topic."

She also expresses gratitude for the availability of resources provided by the exam board but acknowledges she only uses them as a starting point and parameters of "what needs to be covered" to give her the confidence to "[build] up from there" to use her prior knowledge and expertise.

In addition to the introduction of set texts, the compulsory study of set theorists was also felt to be problematic for the same reasons. Whilst generally supportive of the need for the media studies curriculum to change in other ways, Raph is critical of the stipulation of set theorists and the implication of this for the study of the subject:

> "What's almost happened is we've turned the subject into a study of theory, rather than the study of media and that's usually problematic when all young people's experience [of media studies] will be 'Well, we learned 'Stuart Hall'" (Raph)

Of the theorist choices, like David, who describes them as a "motley collection", Raph also considers the prescribed list of nineteen theories "not of equal merit" and "a bizarre list". Emma also shared strong opinions about the inappropriate choices based on her former experiences of teaching A' Level Media alongside her current experiences of teaching the subject at degree level:

> "Students studying the new media A' Level specification who have progressed to undergraduate media studies have a tendency to constantly 'dump' in the names of theorists studied at A' Level like Stuart Hall's theory of audiences or bell hooks's theory on intersectionality as if that's all those theorists ever said. They tend to parry theorists to a specific thought, without any nuance and often inaccurately (as the A' Level simplifies things somewhat). They also tend to struggle to critically engage with theoretical readings and think across texts. I've had to make

> a thing near the beginning of the academic year of getting students to imagine everything they learned for A' Level media and imagine throwing it in the bin…a few still filter through though and it really, really, really hampers their grades. Those lecturers (which is most) who are not familiar with the A' Level spec are totally baffled by this work and tend to give really harsh comments. I'm fortunate in that I recognise where the peculiar insertions of theorists have come from".

What Emma describes is the problematic reality of what David feared after his own experiences of and involvement in the reform process. Like Emma, he supports the idea of theoretical study at A' Level and agrees that students need "to have some understanding of Structuralism, for example, or Semiotics or Political Economy of media". Comparing the subject to a cognate subject - A' Level Sociology - he makes the point that he is not critical of an attempt to define the study of theory more explicitly in the curriculum, but he is critical of it when its inclusion doesn't have a coherent rationale:

> "Look at [the] A' Level Sociology textbook, it says there is Functionalism and Talcott Parsons wrote this and that and the other about Functionalism. So you kind of think 'Ok, well that's fine'; so my argument is not an aversion to teaching theory – it's how you teach it, and why you teach it, and what it is you're doing."

'The Minister Doesn't Like Concepts': Meeting the DfE

David, representing The MEA, alongside Professor Natalie Fenton, representing MeCCSA[18], as outlined earlier, had first hand involvement with the Department for Education, through their efforts to steer the DfE advisors towards a more coherent subject content framework. Recounting his experiences, he recalls a round of draft documents being circulated in the consultation period which he believed to be initial versions of the proposed subject content framework that various parties including the examination boards had provided input on, and which The MEA had refused to endorse. David and Professor Fenton had been given a narrow window of time to draft and present their own version. David recalls:

> "We went to this meeting at the DfE - Ofqual were there and various people from the awarding bodies were there- …and we came out of the meeting (and this was from Natalie Fenton… she's a serious tough cookie and most impressive, I thought)... and we came out of that

[18] MeCCSA is the subject association for the field of media, communication and cultural studies in UK Higher Education.

> meeting basically saying; 'Look, we are going to do our own draft' and initially [the DfE] was; 'You can'. I mean, there's no question in my mind that if they put ours next to the exam boards they would at least have realised that ours was coherent…so I basically took stuff from my book 'Media Education'…it was that structure of key concepts and then… we knocked it about a bit, but we had a very short timescale and we basically submitted that. Initially the exam boards were saying; 'Well yes, we'll submit this alongside our version and we'll give this to the DfE'…we just thought that was just pathetic actually, and in the end they agreed that they would present our version as 'the' version".

On writing the new draft, David recalls "there was a whole series of further changes that went on" to ensure that the framework contained "theory and knowledge". These "further changes", it turns out, meant that, as David outlines below, that the final subject content framework published by the DfE ended up looking quite different to the one originally intended by David and Professor Fenton:

> "So we said; ok you know, 'Media Language' – well, media Language includes Semiotics, for example, Roland Barthes…but the 'for example' got changed to the word 'including' and from there we have a cannon of theorists, and we now have the exam boards [who have] published their spec and it says; 'Roland Barthes – here are three things to remember about Roland Barthes'. We have somebody writing a textbook about A' Level theory, you know, the key theorists and, I mean, I almost feel I wouldn't mind so much if it was Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall and whoever, but actually you know it's people who have just been put in, you know, what's George Gerbner doing there, or …the Bobo doll experiment?"

David also recalled the convoluted way in which the subject content framework came about and, from his own involvement in the reform process, he speculated about who the others were who had influence over the final document. His main criticism stems from his lack of confidence in those who represented the exam boards and whilst he recognised that he and Fenton put forward a selection of theorists' names as exemplar for certain conceptual ideas, such as Roland Barthes for Semiotics and James Curran for the political economy of media, he bemoans the insertion of other compulsory theorists stating these are "just crazy names put in there by people either for sort of fashionable reasons". David goes on to assert the same point that Emma, the lecturer, later recounted were also her own experiences teaching undergraduate media students:

> "These are not people that A' level students are going to read at first hand, they are often not central to the field at all and yet a lot of obvious names are not there. I mean if you're really into theory there's a lot more obvious stuff that should be there and I think if you'd said to most academics; 'Oh you know we're doing the major media studies theorist [name redacted] they would just laugh you out of the room so why has that happened? Why has that happened? Is it because [name of subject officer] once read a book about media studies? Or something? Or has [the subject officer] got an academic advisor?"

David stated he was aware of an additional subject consultant advisor being involved in the consultation who was "clearly was not a media specialist…not somebody who'd ever taught media studies". Questioning why someone who "had no expertise either in pedagogy or in academic study" is involved in advising Ofqual regarding the content, he states:

> "It's kind of ignorance, incompetence…it's a central dictate of an ill-informed kind…put all of that together and it's probably not a surprise that it comes out as something that is, well is fairly unteachable, really, isn't it?"

One of the key concerns expressed by both teachers of the A' Level and academics about the compulsory study of named theorists was that it encouraged reductive and tokenistic teaching, with several teachers relaying that the study of theory had essentially been reduced to 'bullet points'. Bethany sums this up:

> "It is so prescriptive, I mean, they've even told you which theory applies to which text and how"

Similarly, Christine, whilst generally supportive of the increased focus on theory in the new framework, also states that this superficiality of study has been noted by those who assess the qualification:

> "Some examiners I've spoken to have bemoaned the fact that students rattle off the same standard three line paragraphs in an exam but haven't been able to learn the more nuanced aspects of the theory due to lack of time as the content is so heavy."

David fears the prescription "reinforces that tendency to think of theory in terms of gobbets of facts – 'Judith Butler says this, David Gauntlett says that'". Alex, Bethany and Matt, as classroom teachers, also exemplify these fears and concerns as they all

describe their own problematic classroom experiences of teaching theory under the new framework:

> "I put my students through what we [originally] called 'Theory Week', but it became 'Theory Fortnight' and probably by the end of that fortnight we were all ready to just throw in the towel! It becomes such rote learning and…you end up … with a superficial understanding of nineteen theories." (Matt)

> "[The students are] going to be asked 'What does Liesbet Van Zoonen say about this?' and it's like, 'Here are three bullet points, you need to remember these and regurgitate them in the exam!'' (Alex)

> "I find myself saying 'well, no you can't do that because that's an audience theorist so you can't talk about it…You find yourself doing reductive revision things like; 'match the theorist up with the theoretical framework' and 'match the theory up to the theorist' and it's reductive …much of that meaning has been lost there'' (Bethany)

Interestingly, like Polly, who thinks the study of nineteen theories is "overkill", exam board subject officer Terry also acknowledges the problematic nature of the inclusion of the stipulated nineteen theories:

> "I think because there are so many set theorists to be studied, it can only be a few bullet points… we couldn't expect students to know nineteen different theories inside and out - it has to be fairly sort of superficial."

However, Terry also goes on to suggest that the depth of understanding required by the new specifications is similar to that of the pre-reform 'legacy' specification. Recalling his own previous approach to teaching theory he says he wasn't "going into huge amounts of depths on different theorists… it was always about … a basic understanding, you know, of 'what is this theorist's idea?', 'this is how it might apply to this media text'" so whilst he understands teachers' concerns about superficiality, he does believe the level of theory study is "appropriate".

However, Emma's experience, as a lecturer of undergraduate media students, and as outlined earlier, does not agree with Terry's perspective. She recounts that "some [of her students] have felt bemused about why they can't just add in the theorists and the theories as if they add up to a points system that equates marks…particularly an issue at foundation degree level". Emma's perspective is of particular significance here as her view clearly

challenges the 'success' of the Hirschian ideology that governs the reformed curriculum. It is also a good example of the generative discourses that characterise *the dynamic episteme* because, in addition to expressing these views in her interview, she also engaged in discussion with Christine on one of the Facebook posts regarding the above, changing Christine's perceptions about how university lecturers thought about the theoretical content of the reformed curriculum.

Another criticism levelled at the inclusion of set theorists by teachers was not just over the reductive teaching methods it but the actual selection of the theorists themselves. AE, on the Eduqas Facebook group, believed the prescribed theorists were "very strange choices" and created "a distilled canon". Bethany also worried they were "out of date" and had "some glaring omissions", a view also echoed by Terry who felt that not all the chosen theorists were "relevant", whereas Helen, Christine and Shruti all felt that there was a lack of authenticity about how the selection of theorists were integrated into the specification, using phrases such as "shoe-horned", "crammed" and "wellied in" in their interviews to describe this dissonance. Raph questioned how the theorists were selected for inclusion noting that "some of the them have written books and books and books and books and books, and some of them are written, you know, one tome."

As outlined in the previous section of this chapter, even the theorists themselves who were included in the set list, such as David Gauntlett, were quizzical about the decision to include them. For Emma's undergraduate students studying Gauntlett, for example, she points out that her students can only reference his theory of identity (as specified in the A' Level subject content framework) and not his updated work which is more 'relevant for the digital context'. Emma, Will and Ellen all questioned the inclusion, as Ellen called, 'leftfield' theorist choices such as Clay Shirky, whom some of the teacher participants considered more to be part of the popular media commentariat than a media scholar as such. Ellen also suggests that Buckingham himself should have been included as a named theorist but that "he would never write himself into it". However, although Ellen does not generally "mind the theory", the more she teaches the course "the more [she sees] it makes sense to have it [Buckingham as a theorist] there".

Some of the participants not only questioned the relevance of the theorists but also the suitability for study at A' Level as teachers, new to the profession, like Amina, found some of the theorists, such as Butler and Baudrillard, as well as some of the 'industry' theorists, unfamiliar, inappropriate and more 'difficult' to understand and apply in the context of the designated set texts. Helen, as an experienced teacher, observed that "if you're new, I think that [teaching the theorists] would be phenomenally overwhelming". Rae, a trainee teacher, mirrored this sentiment:

> "I found [starting to teach the theory] quite overwhelming…I thought 'Oh, I knew this was going to be difficult but I've really got myself in for a bit of a hole here'"

Interestingly, Emma also notes that "apart from bell hooks and Stuart Hall" many of the theorists on the A' Level are not even included in undergraduate level study which is why she encourages her students to "wipe the slate clean". She also feels that studying media at A' Level puts students at a disadvantage when they go on to study the subject at degree level and makes the observation that often the 'best' students she teaches are the ones who come from a background of history or philosophy, not media studies A' Level, because they 'have learnt those kind of high levels of critical thought'. Emma also expresses a particularly negative observation from her experiences of teaching undergraduates who have studied the new media studies A' Level.

> "[The students] tend to feel a little bit, I suppose dispossessed, you know? 'Why was I made to learn all that stuff? What am I doing? What was the point?' But they also struggle to let go of it in some cases".

However, a significant number of teachers who had criticisms of the prescription and the selection of theorists, did also agree that putting a more explicit emphasis on theory in the specification was a positive move and, as Alan says, "having a structure in place was very, very helpful". Several teachers, such as James, Ellen and Terry, also stated they had embedded the teaching of theory into their teaching prior to the reform and whilst they would have preferred more autonomy over the choice of theorists, they had no significant dispute about the framework specifying the study of theory more formally.

Practical Production Reduction

The reduction of the practical component of the course from 50% under the pre-reformed framework to 30% under the new reformed framework, and the removal of group work in favour of individual assessment, provoked a great deal of consternation amongst teachers of the subject. The feeling, as outlined earlier, that the exam boards had given up too much too quickly in terms of practical content was viewed by all the teachers in the research as a negative move. The key issues teachers noted revolved around concerns that the increased volume of exam content came at the expense of students developing their creative and technical skills, and that this not only reduced student engagement with the course, it also did not serve students who wished to go on to work or study in creative and technical media roles and practically-orientated courses well. Also apparent were views about the status of practical work within the curriculum, with some educators wishing to see the academic status of the subject raised but acknowledging the tensions about how perceptions about practical work may compromise this aim. This also interlinked with concerns that some teachers had about what the subject, at A' Level would actually offer students in terms of an academic pathway and skills. Some teachers, who had considered the subject, pre-reform, as a more democratic and accessible academic pathway for students, worried that not only its new increased weighting towards exams would be detrimental to this, but also that the legacy perception that media studies, as a 'practical' subject, would mean that some students would choose to take the subject on a false assumption.

One of these concerns expressed by teachers was not only about the reduction of the practical content but again the level of prescription that the practical briefs specified. For example, LM, on the Eduqas Facebook group states:

> "They even went and ruined the coursework by setting ridiculous briefs that aren't even appropriate and again feel very dated. The mark schemes that reward ticking off brief requirements rather than creativity and technical skills pains me every time I mark them."

As a result of this approach, Shruti felt that the production work her students make now compared to the pre-reformed specification is "not as good"' and Maxine bemoans the "checklist" approach her department has adopted to "make sure that the students are adhering to everything that the brief stipulates in terms of the media product". BF also

unfavourably compares the new to the pre-reformed specification, believing the old specification "gave a much more rounded experience and prepared students for the industry and uni". Amina, reflecting on her own experiences as a media student of pre-reformed course, and as a new teacher teaching the reformed curriculum, is well placed to comment on this comparison. She notes that her current students are far more limited in their practical opportunities and do not get the "leeway and space …to engage with creative aspects" that she did.

The majority of teachers participating in the research believed that practical work in media studies was, as Raph states, "really crucial…to develop what they already know and to foster their creativity" but that the new curriculum does not give students "practical readiness" (Amina). One key criticism was over the new stipulation of individual assessment. The removal of group work was commented on by some as a regressive move as it does not reflect the real world of media production. One example of this is from Ellen:

> "The individual nature of it now is just.. well, it's just a load of old what-you-call-it really, because you'd never go into the industry and work entirely on your own in something so it doesn't model industry practices – it's ridiculous."

James talks about the 'downgrading' of the media practical component as "very, very disappointing" and "ridiculous" as it "bridges the gap" between the "academic and practical", he feels more strongly about how the new curriculum "really privileges those who are academically gifted "but for those who have a real eye for doing things practically…it diminishes that side of things". This was a view echoed by a number of other teachers, similarly concerned about the purpose of media studies and what it provided students. Whilst Alan recognised that having '50/50 coursework really helped some of those students who maybe weren't "quite so academically able", he was also conflicted in his belief that the old specification "drastically needed updating" as it did not necessarily serve some of his more academic students that well, a view also held by Raph. However, counter to this, he also warned against the potential collective loss of professional knowledge if media teachers had to divert their expertise more towards the theoretical aspects of the course, which dominate.

The concerns regarding the limitations over how contemporary the course is able to be was also mirrored in concerns about the relevancy of the curriculum Of the old specification, Alex reflects on being better able to provide opportunities for students to "explore their own interests and be enthused" because doing "a coursework project is much easier if they enjoy or buy into what they're studying". Alex goes on to recall one of his current students coming to his class excited about the possibility of making a music video for a song they had chosen for their coursework. However because this did not fit the brief, Alex recounts his response to the student:

> ''I'm really sorry, you can't do this, it doesn't fit with the brief, this is the wrong target audience – it's not going to get you that demographic, so you can't do it'. That's terrible to be saying that."

The likelihood of reduced student engagement, too, was an issue. Amina and Shruti, like Alex, both observed that some of their students at the outset of the course were "really looking forward to" the practical component (Amina) but in reality, their students were disappointed to be able to do this until their second year and "not do as much practical as they thought they should be able to do" (Shruti). Polly also stated she felt that the reduction of the practical element "thrashed a lot of the interest and excitement out of the subject".

Budgets for resourcing practical work was also highlighted and revealed just how variable and unequal these were around the country. Perceptions about teacher expertise and level of training in the practical and technical side of the course also appeared to vary greatly. As later discussed in more detail (on page 190), some colleges reported state-or-the-art equipment (George) whilst others reported limited budget for equipment or CPD in technical skills (Helen). Adam, to some extent, welcomed a reduction in practical as he feels it is "a headache" but he is "quite sad because you don't just want to teach them the serious side…the practical side is a really good skill". He also felt quite limited in his own technical confidence and "only ever" offers print because of this. Like George's production facilities,

Miles also states his department is well equipped and appears to anecdotally provide some credence to the link between better funding and student achievement. He says:

> "We absolutely beasted the coursework but we're lucky because we've got the 'dough' – so we've got the photography studio and stuff so, you know… we'll make sure they've got decent shots and then once they've got decent shots, they're in control."

However, unlike Miles, who feels that the practical reduction has been a disadvantage for him because he hasn't had time "to develop [his] kids' own interest in the practical side in a way that we could before", George feels that it hasn't affected him at all because his college offers vocational media courses and markets the A' Level as more academic. Interestingly, since his interview, George got back in contact to say that his college has since cut all A' Level courses and now focuses solely on the vocational side. This in turn leads back to discussion of how media studies is valued and perceived in the education sector more generally, and, whilst it is outside the scope of this thesis, it also links to the curriculum policy schism and increasing bifurcation of academic and vocational qualifications since the introduction of the T Levels.

Historical vs Contemporary texts

Whilst the addition of the compulsory study of 'historical' texts and the prescriptive list of 'contemporary' texts provoked strong reactions from many of the teacher participants, historical texts generally appeared to be an uncontentious addition to the prescribed framework and some teachers such as KR and Christine explicitly stated how much they and their students have enjoyed this aspect of the course. Christine goes on to surmise the reason for this is that "in many ways they are 'easier' to analyse than contemporary texts as the passage of time inevitably creates critical distance between text / audience". Whilst Sarah concurred with this approval of compulsory historical study in the curriculum, she also found the inability to choose "more relevant and interesting" contemporary media to compare them to "all so frustrating".

Several participants reiterated this view and how inflexible the specifications were when teachers wished to respond to current media and events. Both CT and Emma noted that this was particularly problematic when there was very limited space in the curriculum to study

issues that had significant socio-cultural relevance to their students' lives such as Covid or Black Lives Matter. Of this issue, Emma states:

> "You can't use that as a case study which is important and develops all kind of critical learning in the curriculum …[and to understand] the flow of media and that this is a constantly changing, digital environment that we live in and live with"

Both Polly and Alex talk at length in their interviews about their disappointment at coming across a media text which they think would make 'a really great case study' (Alex) but not being able to use in their teaching. He cites the example of the film 'Rocks' as "a perfect case study…[it's] about young people it's got representation - themes in it about women, its's an independent production". Polly also bemoans the lack of flexibility in textual choice. Of these constraints she says:

> "I can't even pause and go 'Wow, look at this interesting thing that was in the news' … you just kind of like quickly go 'Hey everybody, here's a quick starter, think about this, right, bang, on to the next thing'. [I want to] go off piste a little bit, and relate it to other stuff and get them to make all those kind of links between the different subjects or between other things that they've seen, they've read or watched or whatever, it's just all <audibly sighs>"

Student Engagement

There are many examples of teacher participants citing the (negative) impact of the new curriculum on student engagement and enjoyment for many of the reasons already outlined in this chapter. One of the key reasons is exemplified by James' experience, who has found it "really difficult to get the kids to engage" with the new course largely because of the mismatch, he believes, between the realities of the media his students encounter and how they use it, and what he feels is an anachronistic array of set texts:

> "These kids, they've never played the Tomb Raider game, they don't recognise Lara Croft as being an iconic figure…why aren't we looking at Netflix and exploring that as a platform? And why aren't we doing stuff like Fortnite? Or… the current, big things that are happening? Why are we looking at stuff that is fifteen years old"

Shruti and Amina mirrored this experiences, wanting more autonomy over the selection of set texts because this "keeps it more alive for the students… it keeps it interesting and

engaging" (Shruti) and that "more relevant examples" would serve to "hook them in and get them engaged" (Amina). Miles rued the lack of opportunity to "bring in more of what [the students] know…more of them to the party which [is how it] used to be". He goes on to consider how there was more of an emphasis on critical thinking but under the new curriculum, they "learn more factual stuff but understand less of what they're consuming themselves".

The importance of discussion and knowledge exchange between the students and the teacher also recurs in the comments of Rae, Raph and Emma. Rae reflects on the importance of recognising how powerful the students' own knowledge and media experiences are in the process of teaching and learning because "they're living in it, they're surrounded by it", but whilst she accepts students should study things that may be unfamiliar to them, injudicious text choices have the opposite effect because "they don't want to engage… it doesn't connect them, there's no desire to find out more".

Raph and Emma, too, advocate for a more democratic and "dynamic and live" (Raph) freedom of choice, and one that incorporates students' own interests as a form of "collective intelligence". Emma goes on to note that:

> "It helps build a culture of trust and respect, it helps with behavioural management. If you get students doing something that they care passionately about and that allows them to express their identity and makes them feel that they have self-worth and self-confidence and that they're knowledgeable."

The ideas that Rae, Raph and Emma allude to resemble a more participatory model of learning, one that is a reciprocal curation between teacher and student and akin to what Andrews and McDougall advocate for in their 'pedagogy of the inexpert' as "a handing over of power, of mastery, towards a more negotiated pedagogy where students and teachers exchange and negotiate degrees of cultural capital" (2012, p.154). This approach requires a more democratic handling of teaching and learning where the traditional hierarchy of teacher/student is reimagined as an interplay between the 'expertises' of both to construct new kinds of knowledge. This is a far cry from the approach of the reformed curriculum which ossifies a hierarchical - and as Raph says, 'top down' - construction of knowledge via

the fetishizing of text and constructing the media as 'The Big Other'(ibid) rather than recognising and integrating media in its everyday, real life contemporary forms as sources of study.

What this section also alludes to is what students of the subject may not be getting as part of their media studies education such as critical thinking skills through the study of meaningful, contemporary and relevant examples that validate and extend their own academic, economic and cultural lives, and opportunities to develop their creativity and technical skills through practical application. The epistemological disconnection between curriculum policy and subject, therefore, has much wider and serious implications, not just for the teachers who teach it, but for the lives and experiences of the students who study it.

A Sense of Dissonance

Many of those who participated in the research recounted having to change their pedagogical approaches for the new specification. Much of this is also tied to how the teacher participants viewed their professional identity and, as such, will be returned to in the next part of this chapter, but this section seeks to elucidate the impact of the reform on how it is taught. A significant number of the teacher participants (twelve in total) talked explicitly and negatively about how the reformed curriculum had necessitated a change to more teacher-led, didactic style teaching and this was a prominent theme in the data.

Many teachers cited the volume of content as one of the dominant reasons for needing to take a different pedagogical tack. For example, Shruti and Maxine always felt "wary of time", George struggled not to teach by rote and Christine comments:

> "I definitely changed my teaching style to be more teacher led. I had to do it to get through everything but it goes against everything I've ever been taught." (Christine)

Dissonance between how these teachers wanted to teach and how they felt they needed to teach the new curriculum was a recurring theme. Virtually all the teachers in the research reported feeling discomfort at having to teach in a way they did not wish to. Teacher-centred teaching, rather than student-centred learning appeared to be the main source of this discomfort– many reported lessons that were far more 'teacher-led' (Matt, Maxine) and

'much more me, me, me' at the expense of "discussing, developing and exploring ideas" (Christine). Both Alex and Amina recounted wanting to be more engaging in their teaching. Miles and Bethany, too, bemoaned the didactic style they felt they had had to adopt. Similarly, Adam, Ellen, Polly and Rae reported they have had to change their pedagogic style to accommodate the increased emphasis on terminal exams and become less creative in their methods. James' comment below aptly sums this up:

> "I am teaching much more to the text, the test. Everything is predicated on how to answer that question, how to answer that question, what you need to write in what order, rather than actually it being teaching students to have a deep understanding of media concepts and media language and then being able to apply that to everything. It is a kind of; 'right, this is what you need to know about, you know this is what you need to know about … here's a bunch of facts, here's a bunch of ideas – write them in the right order, there you go, off you go' I don't feel it's really teaching students to be thoughtful consumers of media, it's just teaching them to remember a bunch of facts and churn it out in an exam."

The practical element of the course throws into sharp focus some of the more problematic pedagogical aspects of the course. On one hand, many of the teachers state this element has suffered as a result of the reduction and stipulation of practical production, and on the other hand, some teachers have been actively using practical production work to 'work outside the lines' and in new, creative ways to try and engage students more in the course as a whole. Several teachers described innovative approaches in this. For example, Matt said he 'front-loaded' the course with production work to 'embed those skills' and to mitigate against the more 'rote learning' that students might encounter later on. Other teachers, as outlined earlier in this part, ensure they incorporate practical opportunities into their teaching to instil the creative element back into the curriculum even when its structure makes it difficult to do so.

The dissonance between the reform and the 'spirit' of is media studies has been discussed extensively throughout this thesis, but perhaps where this is thrown into the sharpest focus is through the concept of cultural capital. Journalist Warwick Mansell (2019), in his scathing critique of the instrumental way cultural capital is 'measured' in schools, claims that the reforms effectively "write off the experience of working-class pupils." There is a deep irony

inherent in Gove's goal to improving social mobility through greater access to cultural capital because a high level of cultural capital is already required from students before they even encounter many of the set texts, particularly the historical ones.

Many participants views this as disadvantageous to students because it serves to repeat inequalities rather than reduce them, particularly amongst cohorts from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Bethany, Maxine and George all noted the sheer volume of context they had to teach for students to fully engage with the historical texts such as the adverts from the 1950s and Vogue from the 1960s, through to the socio-economic context of austerity for the study of I, Daniel Blake and The Big Issue. Whilst the majority view was that both students and teachers enjoyed the historical aspects, in an already over-loaded and prescriptive curriculum, for students who did not already possess this understanding, the teaching time needed to be spent on bridging these gaps detracted from the time spent on focused textual analysis.

However, to revisit Connolly and Bates' (2024) study, there are nevertheless examples of teachers working hard to mitigate for this. Their study provides a good example of how teachers continue to innovate beyond the rigid confines of the formal curriculum to meaningfully incorporate cultural capital. This innovation exemplifies yet another form of teacher resistance in response to restrictive policy frameworks.

Part Three: Teacher Agency and the Professional Identities of Media Studies Teachers

Ball (2003, p. 215) states that reform "does not simply change what people, as educators, scholars and researchers do, it changes who they are" and it is to the impact on the professional identities of teachers in the 2014 A' Level Media Studies reforms that this chapter now turns.

Teacher identity is "not a stable entity" (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop 2004, p. 107) and Day et al (2007) assert that "policy changes and reformist imperatives have left many teachers themselves feeling confused about their professional identity" (2005 p. 566). Whilst there has been a burgeoning amount of research in the education domain both in the UK and global context over the last two decades, (see, for example, Beijaard et al 2000; Day et al 2007; Rinke 2008; Czerniawski 2011; Fuller et al 2013), it remains a "largely undervalued" consideration in the context of education policy impact (Beijaard et al 2022; Rushton et al 2023). Ball (2002, p. 15) claims that in the process of top-down reform, teachers are cast as "teacher subjects" (rather than autonomous professionals) and that the struggles that teachers articulated about reform and change were often "highly personal" and "expressed in the lexicons of belief and commitment, service and even love, and of mental health and emotional well-being". Ball also suggests that education reform creates long term change by provoking internal contestations in teachers' subjective existences and what he terms "the struggle over the teacher's soul"(ibid). In the netnographic field observations and research interviews of this study, these kind of "highly personal" sentiments that Ball observed in his research were clearly apparent, and one of the key findings in the research was just how strongly professional identity came through, not just in terms of being a teacher but specifically a media teacher and what the subject meant in terms of their own self-concept as an educator.

Ball also suggests that government reform can lead to the "destruction of solidarities based upon a common professional identity" (2003, p. 219) but, conversely, he suggests it can also lead to the "construction of new forms of institutional affiliation and "community'" and as, Imants et al (2020) suggest this also presents opportunities for "reinvention", "reinterpretation" and "diverging enactments". In the case of this study, the very act of media studies curriculum reform itself loosely represents Ball's "destruction of solidarities" because, as has been outlined in the first two parts of this chapter, the participant data

revealed a majority view that the media studies curriculum had been, at best, undermined, and, at worst, completely eviscerated by the reform, thus throwing into flux (rather than destroying) the 'solidarities' that had been established by those who had taught it prior to the reform.

New Forms of Affiliation

Conversely, though, the creation and development of the Facebook communities of practice and this study's inquiry into the social practices and function of these online groups clearly demonstrate how the teachers of media studies, when faced with the sea change of curriculum reform, seek out and (re)construct new, informal professional networks, thus forging, as Ball (ibid) states, "new forms of affiliation". This, in turn, provides a collaborative ecosystem for iterative and dynamic professional reflection and inquiry into the epistemological make-up of the subject – something that embodies the notion and central thrust of this thesis: that knowledge in media studies "behaves differently' (Connolly, forthcoming), is not fixed and thus obliges continuous interrogation, calibration and, crucially, co-curation from those who teach and study it. This is central to notion of *the dynamic episteme* and it represents the kind of agency that Biesta, Robinson and Priestley set out in their research on teacher beliefs in which they postulate that agency is a quality that people "do", rather than possess or have bestowed like a "property, capacity or competence" (2015, p. 3). In this research, this 'doing' comprises of teachers engaging both online and offline in an ecology of CoPs as they navigate the everyday functional implementation of the reforms. This often also prompts metacognitive ideological reflections about their subject and professional identity which manifest (sometimes deliberately, sometimes spontaneously) in what I propose as a kind of reciprocal, iterative process of action-in-dialogue and dialogue-in-action in both the online (Facebook groups) and offline (the classroom) world generating new collectively generated understandings, conceptions and knowledges about and for the subject. This kind of dialogical process, as Emirbayer and Mische describe as "by and through which actors, immersed in temporal passage, engage with others within collectively organised contexts of action" (1998, p. 970) encapsulates the kind of generative and, in most regards, naturalistic, ebb-and-flow construction of the subject's epistemology - a *dynamic episteme* by accident, if you will.

Seven Considerations of Teacher Professional Identity

So far in this thesis, I have argued that the reforms are not compatible with the 'subject spirit' of media studies, and have attempted to describe this in academic terms through the discussion of a signature pedagogy and how other conceptions of knowledge such as those proposed by Luke, Deng and Connolly might offer a better epistemological framework for the subject. However, I now wish to emphasise, through the words of the research participants and the 'thick description' constructed from their contributions, that the seam of this epistemological incompatibility runs much more deeply - in the experiences and identities of the educators whose professional lives are defined by the teaching of the subject. As I go on to discuss in the next part of this chapter, the findings of this research reveal that how teachers perceive themselves, and the factors that contribute to these perceptions, are multifarious with overlapping considerations. From the analysis and iterative coding process of the participant data, I have grouped these considerations into a typology of seven different categories that represent the key influences on a teachers' professional teacher identity in the context of the curriculum reform. They are as follows:

Figure 7: Seven considerations of teacher professional identity in a subject context

Consideration 1: Personal Efficacy

One of the key themes that arose from across the participant interviews and netnographic observation of the Facebook groups was the extent to which the new curriculum provoked strong sentiment in teachers in terms of their reflections on their own personal efficacy. This manifested in discussions of how confident they felt about their own subject-specialist and pedagogical competency and the associated feelings of anxiety about reform, the changes and what this meant for the future of the subject. Sentiments like these have a significant impact on teacher identity because also bound up in this are important issues such as teacher well-being, retention and, ultimately, the success of the curriculum's implementation in the classroom as well as students' experiences and outcomes. Allied to this, Deng (2012) asserts that knowledge and understanding of a subject specialism and how it is formalised in the school curriculum "lies at the core of teachers' professionalism" so when this knowledge and understanding is disrupted by the introduction of an unfamiliar and prescriptive new curriculum, and brought in at relatively short notice, the potential for teachers to question their professional ability and for this to impact upon teacher identity is greatly increased. Beijaard et al's research into teacher identity formation also supports this idea and they propose that when there is a "need to learn and put into practice new knowledge and skills" this can also 'lead to new identity issues that may constrain or challenge one in the teacher (s)he wants to be and/or can be' (2023, p. 775).

There has been a wide range of research conducted into teacher efficacy and professional identity (Gu 2023) and combined with studies into teacher emotions (see, for example, Sutton and Wheatley 2003; Frenzel et al 2014; Ingersoll 2021), it can be plausibly surmised from that for teachers to foster a positive self-concept in their professional context, a crucial contributor to this is their perception of themselves (and by others) as capable subject-specialists. Therefore, for the enactment of a new curriculum to be considered 'successful' (if this is to be defined by the measure of student outcomes, that is), this strongly supports the idea that curriculum reform should provide the conditions that allow teachers to feel positively about their own abilities.

There were 125 references coded from the data as sentiments pertaining to how 'competent' or 'confident' teachers felt about their personal efficacy to enact the reform. The overriding majority of these, even from teachers who self-reported having experience

and good subject knowledge, demonstrated that the reform had been, at least in its incipient stages of implementation, a destabilising force and anxiety-inducing. Pritesh, a relatively new entrant to the profession, expressed concerns about his own ability:

> "I don't feel confident. I have no idea of what I'm doing. I'm becoming more confident but without becoming all sentimental, I just don't feel it, I just don't."

Alina also reiterated these feelings, calling teaching the new A' Level "a massive struggle". She goes on to qualify that she was "pleased" she was not currently teaching the A' Level as she "felt overwhelmed by it", "didn't have the confidence" and "felt very much like a guinea pig". Whilst she expressed a desire to go back to teaching A' Level, this was only something she said she wanted to do when it became "more concrete". As the holder of a media degree, Alina is also well placed to comment on the content and expectations of the course which she felt was at the same level as an undergraduate course and that "there are things on there that I hadn't even been taught at university". These were also views echoed by many others teachers, with 45 references coded to teachers specifically expressing views about their lack of confidence in delivering the new curriculum.

Just as Thompson (2023) suggests that curriculum reform may throw people back into a period of transition of novicehood, many of these teachers, such as Sarah, Lily and Terry (all very experienced teachers) reported that the new curriculum had made them initially question their confidence to deliver the course.

Perhaps more worryingly, several teacher participants, including LM, cited in part two of this chapter, expressed how the implementation of the new curriculum was affecting their well-being, to the extent that LM felt like "giving up". Similarly, Alex said he was "absolutely stressed out of [his] mind" and goes on to recount his struggles at "waking up at 3 o'clock in the morning worrying about what's going, how [he's] going to get this group through" and that "that year was probably about the most stressful [he] remembers in [his] career".

Student outcomes, performance and accountability were other key concerns for many teachers too, such as Adam who questioned his own ability and wondered if he was "over-panicking". Both Alina and Sarah disclosed their anxiety and nervousness at the outcomes in the summer (Alina) and for the weaker students in her cohort (Sarah). Whilst Ben said he felt somewhat confident in teaching the new curriculum, this was undermined by the pressure,

accountability and the transactional nature he felt as a teacher of the course.

Shruti, Alex, Bruce and George all also expressed fears over how it has or might impact their longer term careers as media teachers. It is interesting to note that since their original interviews, the latter three teachers no longer teach A' Level media, one through personal choice, and the other two through an institutional decision to move to vocational media courses which they reported was a response to the unsuitability of the new curriculum to their student cohorts. All three talked in their interviews with sadness about this possibility, which has since been actualised.

Poor teacher self-perception of personal efficacy may also be subconsciously influenced by a kind of 'ideological creep' driven by government policy and education agenda which positions teachers and the education system in a deficit model (Mockler 2023) – and thus constructing the notion that this is a 'problem' that needs to be fixed. Where it impacts teachers on a micro level may be through what Bourke and Alexander (2021) call the mythologising of "unsubstantiated claims about teachers, teaching or teacher education". If teachers are operating in an environment "animated by a discourse of blame and derision about teachers" by which policy makers construct the perception or belief that teachers are somehow "deficient and simultaneously shouldered with the responsibility of fixing societal and school problems" (Larsen 2010, p. 208), then this inevitably will leach into a teacher's attitude towards their own ability, professional efficacy and job satisfaction – all factors important to a teacher's identity. Where this is also coupled with a new curriculum that is considered rigid and abstruse, and thus more difficult to understand and implement, this may compound this impact further. Studies have shown that where a teacher holds a negative self-concept or low morale (see, for example, Mackenzie 2007; Mishra 2013; Kareem et al 2015; Sadeghi et al 2015), this has wider reaching implications for education and may lead to the reduction of teacher well-being, career enjoyment and longevity; subject longevity; student experience, enjoyment and outcomes – all 'wicked' problems for education as a whole.

A reaction to this perceived 'deficit' can be, according to Beijaard et al attempts to increase personal efficacy through formal or informal professional learning opportunities - a type of "sense-making" (2023, p. 776), that is an iterative and (re)interpretative way of navigating unstable professional terrain. It is also one way of seeing the rapid development of the media teaching communities of practice on Facebook as a deliberate response to curriculum

reform. Furthermore, when allied to Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice, (as an example of sites where "sense making" occurs), this also offers a theoretical lens through which to view the impact of reforms on teacher identity in other subject contexts and fields of education in a broader sense.

Likewise, the findings and discussion around personal efficacy in this section also point to bigger questions that extend beyond the subject context of media studies. Firstly, alongside making the connection between teacher identity formation and personal efficacy, indicated also is that curriculum reforms may actively present significant challenges for teachers around subject-specialist and pedagogical knowledge. This, in turn, may provoke anxiety and destabilise their professional self-concept and well-being. Subject expertise forms the core of teacher professionalism, and when reforms disrupt this, as seen in the case of the A' Level Media Studies curriculum, teachers may experience alienation and question their ability to deliver effectively. Moreover, deficit discourses in education policy, as framed by Mockler (2023), which position teachers as inadequate or to blame for systemic issues, may deepen or exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and negatively impact morale, retention, and subject longevity.

Looking beyond subject-specific considerations, important systemic questions can also be raised about how educational policies and reforms can either support or hinder teacher identity formation such as:

- How can reforms be designed to preserve or enhance teachers' confidence in their subject knowledge?
- How does the interplay between individual identity and collective professional spaces influence teachers' adaptability to change?
- How can theory (such as that included in this research) inform not only understanding but practical strategies for supporting teachers across diverse educational contexts in periods of transition?

Consideration 2: Subject Affiliation

McIntyre and Hobson argue that "an important aspect of a teacher's identity formation involves their identification with the subject they teach" (2016 p. 143) and that "teachers share a common pedagogical and moral imperative to teach children and young people

about the subject that they have invested a considerable amount of time to learn themselves" (Thompson 2023, p. 851). In light of the above, where every teacher's subject identity comprises part of their professional identity, I propose that subject affiliation is the dimension of this that describes the strength of connection, perhaps even a kind of loyalty, teachers have to their subject and the extent this is driven by (or drives) their beliefs, moral purpose and professional identity within education and beyond. Just as I explained the role of subject identity in my own positionality in chapter two, subject identity, and thus subject affiliation, can also be seen as the intersection of where the personal and the professional intertwine and its formation is influenced by teachers' very personal histories, education, experiences, background and beliefs.

Borrowing two geographical metaphors - Alsup's "discursive borderlands" (2005) and Brooks' 'professional compass' (2016) - I suggest that we can perceive the educational, moral and ethical imperatives a teacher has in order to want to teach their subject as a terrain that is constantly negotiated and traversed. Influenced by individual motives and dispositions, socio-cultural and demographic context, needs of individual school settings, the wider influences and demands of external bodies and government policy, this is a terrain, much like *the dynamic episteme*, that can be dynamic and shifting - sometimes robust, but quite often also fragile and porous to changing variables within the educational landscape.

When teachers are confronted with new or alternative versions of how they conceive of their subject (as in the time of curriculum reform, for example), they may "find themselves behaving in ways that may not match up with their image of the teacher they want to be" (Brooks 2016, p. 114) and thus impacts on their identity as a professional. From this may stem feelings of disempowerment and deprofessionalisation that in turn provoke "contradictory dispositions and opinions" (Sayer 2005, p. 160) in the struggle against subordination. Sayer goes on to explain:

> "They may try to make a virtue out of their position and their toughness and fortitude in bearing burdens, at the same time as they feel shame about having to bear those burdens. These are simultaneously responses of resistance and compliance" (ibid)

Through interviewing the teachers in the study, I recognised that many felt a sense of powerlessness about their ability to challenge or resist changes which they felt altered their relationship with the subject for the worst. The paralanguage – the resigned tone in which

many participants spoke, or the sighs uttered – intimated this was not an isolated feeling. However, far from being a body of teachers who had 'given up', their subject affiliation still appeared visceral, but their 'professional ennui' was always couched in terms of external factors (Creagh et al 2023) For example, the chaotic consultation process mired with conflict, the interference of ministers, a wider move to a top-down centralised curriculum, Ofsted accountability, internal institutional constraints and teacher workload increase – all contributory factors to feelings of deprofessionalisation and limited conditions of possibility.

The curriculum reform, particularly when teachers were faced with the prospect of 'losing' the subject, provoked reflections about the purpose and importance of the subject. For example, Bethany and Matt both expressed their strong affiliation to the subject in terms of its importance in the curriculum:

> "It's a very, very important subject to teach. I think it's incredibly relevant. It's jam packed with transferable skills and it affects everybody whatever career they go into. I think it's essential that it's taught" (Bethany)

> "Without being too dramatic about it, I was devastated at the idea of [media studies] disappearing. Not just because I enjoy teaching it but just because I thought if we're not covering what's evolving in the media age and what's happening then we might as well give up in schools 'cause it's such a fundamental part of our students lives" (Matt)

Other teachers, such as Raph, talked about its importance as a "subversive" subject which he sees as 'something that is critical of the established order'. He also feels that it is uniquely positioned "to engage young people in the world as it exists now for all of us". Additionally, Raph, whilst not as critical about the reformed curriculum as others, talked at length about why he feels so affiliated to the subject and that his 'call to media' was based on the fact that it "is not like any other subject" because it has the ability to address important issues such as equity, race, ethnicity and social class and be "a critical lens on the culture of the world that we're in". Raph's sentiments capture what many other participants in study indicated – that they feel more affiliated to a subject that is underscored by critical thinking and questions or challenges existing social structures.

References participants made about the subject's ability to develop critical thinking through the engagement of contemporary issues were coded 50 times and there were 114 posts

observed within the netnographic data in which teachers shared articles or media texts related indirectly or directly to the curriculum. Cumulatively, these comments and posts by participants suggest that teachers not only have a strong investment in the subject and their own subject knowledge, as well as a professional willingness to share their expertise, but it also may suggest that the subject inspires a stronger affiliation because it resonates with teachers on a more ideological level, and thus perhaps a stronger foundation on which to weather the vagaries of reform.

A common acknowledgement across the data was the external perception of media studies as a 'Mickey Mouse' subject and this recognition and the need to defend the status of the subject seemed to inspire, in many cases, a sharpened affiliation. Teachers talked about their subject being seen as "a little bit of an underdog…a little bit misunderstood" (Alan), "an easy option" (MG), "a soft subject" (Matt), the "brunt of jokes" (Polly) and having a "bad rep" (SW) whereas Bruce talked about it being a victim of "cultural elitism". Some of the teacher participants also recounted experiences of having to defend the subject. For example, James says:

> "I've had arguments with careers advisors who I've heard actively telling students not to do media studies because it's not worth anything and it's a pretend subject and all of those, kind of, you know, the old nonsense."

Both Maxine and George assert their defence of the subject: Maxine, in recognition of media studies being viewed as a marginal subject in her school; and George, in his view of the subject's purpose in the curriculum:

> "We have as a department collectively got together and said; right we are going to stand, we are going to make sure we're counted this year" (Maxine)

> "We are quite sort of territorial when it comes to this subject by nature, I think. We've always had a bit of a bad press, ironically, from the media itself, and I think it does harden us to say 'No, we are going to present this as a serious subject'…I can't think of an area of life at the moment which is more needed than media studies in schools. But the way that the specification runs at the moment, you know we, it's such an opportunity that's being missed, Michelle, it really is." (George)

However, echoing Raph's perception of media studies "revelling in its periphery status" in the past, both Bethany and JL welcome the opportunity for new curriculum to raise the subject's status. JL felt that the reform provided "a brand of A' level worthy of respect

rather than derision" whereas Bethany said that she is "enjoying the credibility" that comes when "everybody says media's really hard".

This raises broader questions, beyond media studies, about the relationship between subject and knowledge in teacher identity, particularly in how teachers' understanding of their subject evolves dynamically through personal experiences, educational background, and professional contexts, but which is also influenced by or in tension with externally driven factors. Alsup's "discursive borderlands" and Brooks' "professional compass", in particular, lend a theoretical way of understanding and framing how professional identity is constantly negotiated amid external pressures, and how this can also lead to deeply personal beliefs about subject affiliation.

What this also prompts is a consideration of the interplay between subject knowledge and teachers' ideological investment in their subject. As suggested by the findings outlined in this chapter, teachers often view their subject not merely as a body of knowledge but as something that serves a greater purpose within society, and this speaks to wider concerns about the role of subjects in fostering critical thinking and broader educational aims. For example, this is particularly relevant when subjects, such as the creative arts and sport, are at risk of being misrepresented or undervalued, prompting a reconsideration or 'defence' of their significance, role and, sometimes, legitimacy within the curriculum. However, it is also relevant to all subjects, particularly during times like the current curriculum review, when there is an opportunity to reassess what is deemed important within each subject thus providing teachers both individually and collectively the chance to engage in the process of redefining and rearticulating the knowledge and values their subject represents.

Consideration 3: Values Alignment

The data also revealed much about the kind of values media teachers held about their subject, teaching and education more widely. Much of the strong feeling expressed derives from the radical departure of the reformed curriculum from the old which has given rise to, what Foucault termed, "disqualified knowledges" (1980, p. 81). This dualism between the new and the old curriculum appears to have invoked teachers to enter into a new relationship with their subject and its knowledges, creating a tension of what Ball (2010, p.223) terms "schizophrenia of values and purposes" – evident in this research as the negative reactions to

the reform. Concerns about the reformed curriculum, such as those already outlined throughout this chapter, also reveal the kind of values teachers hold about the subject itself, particularly when they reflected about the reformed curriculum in the context of the former 'legacy' specification. For example, many teachers felt that the new curriculum did not support authentic, real-world practical production skills or a more holistic "rounded experience" (SW) and insufficient preparation "for university critical essays AND the world of work" (LF).

Teachers also valued the subject's ability to be responsive to and address important social, cultural and political events and issues such Black Lives Matter. There were 56 references coded relating to this area and it was clear that teachers valued the subject's ability to contribute to socially-just and inclusive education through a critical lens, something many teachers, like Will, articulated as easier to achieve in the pre-reform specifications. He comments:

> "I found that there was always a way into media studies for every student, every student could find something that they enjoyed in that course and thrive."

One recurring concern about the new curriculum was that teachers felt they often had to subsume their own values about the subject and how it should be taught. Much of the dissatisfaction with the curriculum that was discussed in part two of this chapter can also be viewed through the lens of values dissonance. Sarah, for example, talks about the "unnaturalness" of her teaching of the new curriculum and she felt she was "doing a disservice to students by forcing connections that [she] wouldn't ordinarily propose".

These comments echo Ball's proposition that education reform calls up "a new kind of teacher and new kinds of knowledges" when there are the added demands on teachers to "maximize performance", "set aside irrelevant principles" and "ensure excellence and improvement" (2010, p. 223). Bernstein also argues that official policy discourses (such as education reform) "construct in teachers and students a particular moral disposition, motivation and aspiration, embedded in particular performances and practices"(2000 p.65). This is apparent in SW's comment where she aptly sums up the pressures:

> "A LOT of content, little autonomy, teachers and students wanting 'teaching to the exam' a bit too much, time constraints, worries from teachers that they want the kids to get good results etc... etc…"

Discomfort about 'inauthenticity', when teachers felt compelled to teach in a way that does not align with their values, also arose from the data. This discomfort was particularly pronounced when teachers reported hiding their true feelings from their students, a common phenomenon which Osborn et al (1997) called "protective mediation". This protective impulse is also understandable because authenticity has been widely held as a virtue in education (see, for example, Chickering et al 2006; Kreber and Klampfeitner 2001, Bialystock, 2016). It is therefore not surprising that when 'external contingencies' (Ball, 2003) such as policy reform conflict with the value systems of educators, their professional identities may be negatively impacted. As observed throughout this research, this has manifested largely as frustration, anxiety, sadness and, in some cases, anger - all of which are not sustainable emotions for the future health of the subject, or for the well-being of its teachers. This is further exemplified by Emma who observes, at the end of her interview, that talking about the impacts of the reform for the first time felt therapeutic and that "13 years of frustration have been released".

Again, this raises important considerations about the impact of curriculum reform and policy shifts, particularly the tensions between top-down education agendas and the lived experiences of classroom teachers. The findings suggest that excluding educators from authentic participation in reform processes can result in feelings of inauthenticity and performativity, as described by Ball and Foucault. This provokes a broader question for policy makers: how can curriculum reform and education policy processes be designed to genuinely include and reflect the voices and expertise of teachers?

Consideration 4: Agentic Action

Biesta and Tedder (2007) contend that agency "is not something that people can have – as a property, capacity or competence – but is something that people do" whilst Emirbayer and Mische (1998) conceptualise agentic action as a 'chordal triad', a delicate three-dimensional interplay of influences from the past ('iterational'), orientations towards the future ('projective') and engagement with the present ('practical-evaluative'). These are helpful lenses to interpret the ways media teachers responded to and navigated curriculum change

as all three dimensions are clearly observable in the interviews and across the netnographic Facebook observations. However, it is the practical-evaluative actions teachers have taken in response to the reform that are the most pertinent to focus on in this context. These actions may not always be undertaken as conscious acts of agency, but perhaps are more representative of a kind of teacherly imperative rooted in a strong sense of professional and subject identity in and of itself.

As outlined earlier in part two, a strong sense of deprofessionalisation, founded in the lack of freedom and choice in the new curriculum, came out from the research findings through the 54 references coded for 'Feelings of lack of agency/autonomy', with many teachers directly using these words to describe their experiences of the reform. In response to restrictions or curtailments imposed by the new edicts of curriculum reform (Ball 2003; Imants et al 2013), teachers often seek new ways or "alternative possible trajectories" (Emirbayer & Mische ibid) for agentic action in their professional lives - most visibly, in the case of this research, the creation and development of the media teachers' online communities of practice on Facebook, an example of what Emirbayer & Mische (ibid) term "temporally constructed engagement with different structural environments".

Whilst there is not the space to detail every type of agentic action that emerged from the data, particular evidential examples of this can be found in such interviews as that with Alina. As one of the original Facebook group creators, she does not explicitly acknowledge that the group was driven by a sense of needing to regain autonomy or agency, but it can be inferred from the functional reasons to start the group ("I just wanted to collaborate with some of the teachers to see if we could share the workload in planning for when the spec changed") that the reform precipitated a desire for practical-evaluative peer collaboration in place of the "really expensive" top-down exam-board endorsed resources and online subscription sites. Terry, a subject officer for one of the exam boards, takes a perspective which perhaps more objectively sums up the agentic action represented by the creation of the Facebook groups in the context of the pre-reform specifications. He says:

> "I think it's quite interesting because [online communities of practice] wasn't something that happened with the legacy specification, I think the legacy specification was so kind of blog-focussed – everyone was just kind of sharing blogs and things like that, so it is quite interesting that it's kind of gone to Facebook as a platform. I think it is really good that teachers have got that network and they can connect with each other and share

> ideas in this way. I think obviously particularly for this new specification which is so different, is so demanding, compared to kind of what we were used to. I think having that additional support is a really big positive for teachers."

Resource creation and sharing – both considered here as agentic actions – also figured heavily as a reason why and how teachers primarily used the Facebook groups, which may seem like a very obvious and functional reason to do so, but what was also evident in how teachers talked about this was how much this appeared to be an important part of their professional identity. For example, whilst many teachers sought the reassurance of having access to other teacher-created resources, most expressed feelings of pride or ownership when talking about the creation and usage of shared resources. For example, Matt commented that "98/99%' of his resources were 'self-created" and Christine and Bethany describe the effort they put into resource creation for the new specification, rather than use ready-made resources:

> "I create my own. I spend hours and hours and hours, working to one or two in the morning. A bit excessive really, but it's about getting the layout isn't it? I would never just take something straight from the website…I am a bit precious about my resources because I've spent so long!" (Christine)

> "I'm a bit of a control freak... it's been phenomenal what I've spent, in terms of hours at work I have spent" (Bethany)

Ellen also holds a similar perspective and expresses it in the context of how she perceives her own identity as a teacher:

> "I'm not the kind of teacher who can just pick up someone else's work and teach from it. I can't do it *laughs* I spend hours; someone will say 'here's a spread', like I was teaching Jungle Book this morning and somebody said 'Look I've done this Powerpoint for it' and then I looked last night and thought 'I understand everything that's in there is useful but… I can't teach it in this order'. So I spent about four hours last night redoing it – so I'm that kind of teacher".

Like the view Ellen expressed, Shruti, George, Bruce, Polly, Bethany, Rae, Maxine, James and Alan all explicitly talked about how they use the shared resources on the Facebook group's Google Drive as a starting point, but take pride in tailor-making their own resources to suit their own pedagogic style, context and student demographic. Similarly, Maxine views resource creation as an important part of her role as her identity as a subject specialist:

> "It's all about your professional judgement isn't it? But I personally think I prefer to be challenged in the way, you know in kind of researching into my own content, I like to do it myself rather than have someone say 'Right ok you're going to deliver this'. I know some teachers love it and they prefer it … maybe their subject specialism isn't media, it's English and they've incorporated a bit of media, but for me, personally its zapped the fun out of it a bit for me."

Several participants cited their concerns over the use of fact sheets and online resources provided free by the exam boards and this is one possible reason why many teachers, despite it being so time consuming, spent so much time and effort creating their own resources - as a reaction against the prescription, as well as all the other paid-for resources such as qualification-specific subscription-only sites, media education consultancy, the TES[19] resource site and the exam-endorsed text books, which Seamus claimed were "a complete utter waste of money" and with "300 quid [he] could have bought a camera!".

Shruti was particularly concerned about how the use of text books limit her teaching to the point she chose to "never use them with her class now". These concerns perhaps exemplify what Ball (2003) calls "exteriorization" whereby knowledge becomes delimited by set texts and standardised resources thus reducing teachers' ability to operate as professionally autonomously as they would wish, hence Shruti's opposition to them.

These concerns expressed by teachers also extended to their pedagogic agency, and whilst there is not the space to detail this further, it should be noted that whilst seventeen teachers out of those interviewed individually stated they had had to change the way they taught to be "more teacher-led", several teachers such as Ellen, Miles and Amina, make explicit reference to pedagogic agency and how they deliberately tried to teach in a manner which is more pedagogically aligned to how they conceive the subject should be taught. What they described was pedagogic agency in terms of including more practically-oriented tasks, group-based, discussion work and the use of teacher selected contemporary examples, all elements that have been reduced or excluded from the reformed curriculum.

This section only captures a vignette of how teachers engage actively in the development and direction of their subject but it does exemplify the kinds of practical-evaluative agentic

[19] The Times Education Supplement Teaching Resources is a 'made-by-teachers-for-teachers' online resource website where teachers can upload their individually created resources and other teachers pay to use them.

actions which also characterise *the dynamic episteme*, in which the collaboration and discursive interchanges between committed teachers calibrate, shape and sharpen the subject specialist space through a collective agency.

The irony within the context of this research lies in the fact that the constraints imposed by curriculum reform have, in turn, prompted the emergence of practical-evaluative, agentic actions. However, beyond the bounds of the media studies subject context, this raises more general considerations of what opportunities and fora, both online and offline, are available to teachers for cultivating and sustaining a sense of agency in their professional lives, as well as the conditions that best facilitate this process.

Consideration 5: Intrinsic Contextual

One of the significant observations that arose from the research findings was of the subtle differences in tone and perspectives between teachers of different lengths of experience as a media teacher. Whilst some teachers also taught another subject (Eg. A' Level English, Sociology, Graphic Communications were all subjects mentioned) all considered themselves subject-specialists and they linked this to feelings of professional autonomy, and an important part of their teacher identity. Some teachers, like Adam, felt strongly that "Media Studies should be taught by a specialist". It could also be interpreted that those who felt the most strongly about the reduction of teacher autonomy in the new curriculum were those who were both subject-specialists and experienced teachers. As touched on in earlier sections, many teachers described feelings of inauthenticity when faced with teaching a new curriculum of what could, in the words of Foucault (1980), be classed as the "disqualified" or "subjugated knowledges" of the former curriculum and that the teachers had been teaching for a longer period of time displayed signs of a "cynical compliance" and "ethical retooling" as they reorientate themselves from the former established curriculum to that of the new. Rather than the explicit "insurrections" of resistance that Foucault (ibid) talks about in his discussion of how teachers may respond to curricular reform, what may be observed in this research are assertive acts initiated by individuals such as media teacher, Chris Mummery's 38 Degrees campaign entitled 'To: Nick Gibb MP - Schools Minister: Save A' Level Media Studies and Film Studies' in 2015 which received over three thousand signatures; and the campaign Helen brought to her local MP in Bury, and to which all her students submitted written statements advocating for the continuation of A' Level Media Studies when it was at risk of not being reformed.

Emirbayer & Mische's (1998) concept of the *iterational* dimension of agency helps explain how experienced teachers in the study selectively draw on "past patterns of thought and action" for new practices. This reflects an intrinsic desire to create "stability and order", sustaining identities and institutions over time. Change occurs through subtle actions that blend the old curriculum with the new, a key part of *the dynamic episteme*. In a policy landscape limiting "autonomous or collective ethical self" (Sennett 1998), these quiet acts help teachers engage with the curriculum without being mere instruments of reform.

All teachers in the study identified as media specialists, some having transitioned from English teaching, while others had media-specific degrees or PGCEs. Their participation alone shows commitment to the subject, but the strong and often passionate views they expressed about the reform also reveals a group of subject-specialists intrinsically and deeply invested in media studies and its future. There was discernible desire to 'pass on' expertise to newer or non-specialist teachers, seen as functional support but also a drive to 'level up' skills. As Shruti noted, "as experienced teachers, it's always in our best interests to ensure others deliver [the course] well because it reflects on media as a whole".

This aspect of *the dynamic episteme* – the 'micro-generational passing-on' of expertise that Shruti speaks of - resonates more broadly, even beyond the realms of curriculum reform to wider education professional development contexts, with the idea that there is a grassroots imperative in the teaching community to share knowledge and skills within small professional informal networks or communities. As exemplified in this research by the field observations of the Facebook groups, similar activity, where experienced teachers mentor, guide, or collaborate with less experienced colleagues, or where peers exchange ideas, strategies, and resources, can be seen in other subject disciplines through, for example, Facebook groups for the music teaching community (Pušić, 2024), other small informal offline and online communities such as TeachMeets and 'Unconferences' (Amond et al 2020) and, even at sector level, communities such as JoyFE, a collective dedicated to educators in Further Education.

These examples indicate that groups like these do not exist simply as functional resource sharing networks, but are communities predicated on more altruistic aspirations of collective professional development, raising the status of the subject/sector and the expertise of those who teach it, and as Emirbayer and Mische (1998) describe, ensuring continuity and

innovation of practice. This also highlights not only the importance of informal, grassroots knowledge-sharing within professional communities, but also the broader implications for teacher identity, the evolving nature of subject expertise, and the ongoing negotiation of knowledge within the educational landscape, created as a result and, in some cases, in spite of curriculum reform.

Consideration 6: Relational Contextual

Many of the participants in this research reported being either the only media teacher or subject-specialist where they work, or part of small department, therefore a collective and accessible forum such as Facebook becomes a significant means for individual teachers to commune in a professional space and share expertise. Ben, Sarah and Alina all talked about this benefit explicitly. For example, having moved from a large department to being a 'one man band', Ben says:

> "I didn't really have [a large department] so I kind of wanted a hub where I could both talk to people kind of alleviate any of my fears but also sharing good practice, to share my resources and use other people's content as well - and it's been an absolute life line like this past two years."

For teachers to face shared challenges together appears particularly important during a time of curriculum change. The impact stage of Hall et al's (1973) adaptation of Fuller's (1969) Stages of Concern model, where educators take collective action to seek shared understanding, create new meanings, and reconcile old ones, is a useful frame to understand the growth of Facebook groups after the first specifications were approved.

The research identified recurring themes regarding what the Facebook group offered teachers in terms of relational context. Reassurance and support were key reasons for using the groups, which served not only functional purposes but also as a space for catharsis and connection. Participants valued the groups for their support, especially newer teachers or those working alone. For instance, Matt, Ellen, Polly, Maxine, George, Helen, Amina, and Adam expressed appreciation for the group's ability to provide reassurance. Matt, as the only media teacher in his department, used it to check if others were taking similar approaches and Ellen, although an experienced teacher and not in the same position as Matt, does reflect on the benefits of the group for newer teachers:

> "Teachers who are on their own in a department, of which I understand there are lots, I think it's really helpful because they have no one to talk to, no one to share ideas with and then these sort of desperate late night pleas

> from people: 'Oh my god, has anybody got anything that I can do with my class in the morning?' And then five or six people will say; 'Look, try this, try this'. So I think from that perspective, [the Facebook groups are] really useful for new teachers and teachers who are the only teacher of that subject in their department."

Maxine, another sole media teacher in her department, reiterates that, for her, belonging to the Facebook group was "definitely [about] the community" and the "reassurance" and goes on to qualify how it helped assuage her anxiety about being in this position:

> "I just felt like 'Oh god, I'm on my own here'. So that really helped…so I didn't feel like I was on my own because that support network helped a lot."

Adam, an early career teacher who was without a head of department at the start of the academic year, concurs that the group had "been a big saviour of [his] teaching career so far for definite" and noted it had really helped him gain confidence in his own teaching. Both George and Matt called the group a "godsend", and Matt "a lifeline". George also conceded that he didn't think he would be "anywhere near as good a teacher as what [he was] teaching at the moment without having had that Facebook group to fall back on".

As mentioned in Part 2 of this chapter, the group also displayed, somewhat unusually, consistently positive interactions, cultivating a warm, supportive online environment, something noted particularly by George who commented:

> "Everything's positive… I've never seen one negative aspect to that group at all - I'm sure there are but I haven't seen [it]"

Amina also commented favourably on the generosity of members sharing their resources and noted that "everyone's always welcoming" with Helen reiterating the "nice kind of support system" the group offered.

Another theme that came out of the data was the notion of the novice versus the experienced teacher within the group and both Shruti and Ellen had observed this quite keenly themselves. Ellen noted "there is a definite split between the advisor and the advisee" and Shruti commented:

> "What I've kind of seen is there's been a sort of a split between more experienced teachers offering advice and new teachers wanting support

> and I think that's it's kind of like the apprentice idea that you've got two groups teachers who are communicating in that way which I think is really interesting"

From a newer teacher's perspective, Adam concurs with this observation:

> "I tend not to comment as much on people asking for advice because sometimes I feel like I am still relatively new"

Lave and Wenger's concept of situated learning (1991) is particularly relevant here, notably the idea of legitimate peripheral participation where novices (new members) may take on legitimate, though limited, roles within the community, which allows them to learn and participate without being overwhelmed. As observed through the netnographic observations, this may include posting about media texts, asking questions or uploading resources to the shared drive. The knowledge sharing, engagement and support offered by 'full' members encourage this activity and over time peripheral members may take on 'fuller' roles. The length of this study is not sufficient to observe this in a longitudinal capacity but the interactions observed during the data collection period supports this, as exemplified by Ellen's, Shruti's and Alan's comments above.

The social and collaborative aspect of the group was commented on by all the teacher participants and the benefits of this appeared to be two-fold. On one hand, the sharing of resources was an important support function of the group, but even when these were noted to be of variable quality, the collaborative ethos generated simply by doing so had a second, and important, corollary by creating an environment in which teachers naturally discussed – and created discourses around – their subject. This informal and naturally evolving collaborative and positive dynamic in turn represents how *the dynamic episteme* functions – fluid, open to change and, most significantly, driven by those who teach the subject. A particularly good example of this was shared by Seamus, who appeared to be quite cynical about the use of social media in general, despite being a regular user of the Facebook group, but had significant praise for its social capacity. He depicts a vibrant and dynamic group that actively supports and extends subject-specific expertise, and perhaps, even more importantly, interest:

> "Yesterday [on the Facebook group] was really good…people putting up the Channel 4 News, and putting up the debate about David Lammy, and Comic Relief. Someone sent me this book about cricket of all things! In

> there's a woman called Joanne Littler who is a cultural theorist - she wrote a nice piece about the idea of quasi-sainthood in celebrities, and I put that quote on [the group] as well. She's very interesting and talks about culture and sainthood as an idea".

Even for those who are not actively posting or sharing, the group appears to be an important support to their teaching. For example, Amina, Polly. Alan and Helen all talk about observing conversations without necessarily commenting "to see what people were talking about" (Polly) and "to get a few ideas from people and how you can approach different topics" (Helen), particularly when there is "[external] pressure on teachers to fix and change the curriculum" (Amina) and "even to just [see the opinions of others] from a slightly more tertiary position" (Alan). Polly also notes that this has been even more evident since the impact of Covid and "the sort of communities of practice on Facebook are really interesting just to look how teaching is moving to that sort of way of supporting each other in the time where we don't have that much physical contact". Ben also describes how this type of interaction observation has influenced his own practice and "changed his mind" about how to teach postmodernism.

Similarly, some participants noted the benefits of the group in updating members' subject knowledge regarding contemporary texts. Across the whole study there were 207 references coded for posts related to members sharing information about and/or links to contemporary media texts. Miles, for example, comments directly about his appreciation of this element of the Facebook groups and feels that it keeps him "on top of bleeding edge stuff" which he think "is really important" because it makes his teaching "much more interesting" and "ties into [his students'] own experience". It can also be interpreted that the ability to express and share specialised subject knowledge is an important facet of a teacher's identity as it helps solidify a sense of professional competency as well as contributing to the co-curation and expansion of a wider body of specialised subject knowledge (Brooks 2016).

Participants did, however, acknowledge that there were some disadvantages to the Facebook group, particularly around the uncritical acceptance of some shared resources. This concerned some teachers, such as Shruti and Bethany, who felt that some teachers could use the shared drive as a 'grab and go' service thus entrenching poor practice. Helen also felt there was the potential for resource making "one up-man-ship" and Alan observed the potential for teachers to engage in unhelpful practices of complaining about the specification

without taking action. These, however, were noted as minor points, with all participants noting that the benefits of the Facebook groups outweighed any negatives. This does also point to the fact that the participants in the study have high standards for the status of the subject and represents a level of collective critical engagement. This idea also matches what Hall et al (1973) describe in the penultimate stage ('Collaboration') of their six stage Stages of Concern model in which they propose, in the context of curriculum reform, that "teachers seek to share experiences with colleagues and look at how collaboration can help the implementation". Indeed, the value that collaboration brings to individual teachers in their professional context, both in the implementation of reform as well as more widely, appears to be allied to their identities as an educators. It also points to the collaborative, collective way in which *the dynamic episteme* works in practice, both in this particular subject context as well as in other disciplines and areas of education.

Consideration 7: Extrinsic Contextual

Many teachers who participated in the research mentioned a myriad external factors that influenced their own professional practice as media teachers, how they implemented the reform and their identity as educators. Whilst there is not scope in this thesis to explore these external factors at a more detailed level, it is important to recognise that curriculum reform has a wider reaching impact beyond the confines of the subject curriculum itself, which in turn, has implications for teachers' professional identities.

Several teachers, such as Shruti, Alex, Helen, Matt, Polly, Maxine and Adam, voiced fears over the precarity of the subject in the curriculum, declining numbers and resulting anxiety over how this impact their career. Matt notes that the numbers on his course have dropped "quite considerably in the last few years" and Helen notes her school has seen "a massive drop". Shruti also worries that students "sort of catch on and speak to each other in different year groups… 'actually it's quite content heavy, you don't get to do much practical'". Shruti was concerned that she saw "numbers dropping again" and questioned whether there were "going to be enough jobs left". James raised concerns about media in his school being very much a minority subject and that getting "any kind of recognition" was "difficult". He also recounts he has had "arguments with careers advisors" who have "actively [told] students not to do media studies because 'it's not worth anything and it's a pretend subject'".

Institutional decisions to increase vocational provision in place of A' Level Media Studies also figured in the interviews. Whilst Ellen's A' Level student numbers remained relatively healthy (as one of the largest centres in the country for this), she recognised that this may be because local competition had reduced because other colleges offered mainly vocational media courses. This observation was reinforced by Alex who spoke of how his previous college had cut A' Level Media Studies to offer only vocational courses after the first teaching of the new curriculum and at his present college, he still felt worried about how the introduction of T Levels would impact the subject. Coupled with the prescriptive content of the A' Level, he felt despondent about his own prospects in teaching:

> "[If] there's no immediate prospect of A' level Media going back to the way it was feel like I'm done now with teaching, if I'm perfectly honest."

Bethany noted that her subject required some repositioning in the school curriculum when the new curriculum was introduced so it was seen as a more 'academic' subject than the perceptions held about it before. Maxine also noted that in the past that students with a less strong academic profile tended to get pushed towards media studies but this was no longer the case in her school. She also observed that a decline in student numbers was not unique to her subject, but representative of a wider decline in creative subjects, a view also supported by Bruce and Helen, who see it as part of a broader national agenda in education. Helen considers that the national picture of 'the push for STEM in schools has impacted on media phenomenally' and, allied to this, Bruce asserts the decline originates "a few years ago to Michael Gove being in charge" He goes on to note that this produced "a kind of reorientation, as such, of what A' levels were for in terms of the Russell Group…creating a hierarchy of saying 'These A' levels are good and these are not so good'".

All of the above relates back to the issue of perceptions of the subject's low status and this appears in various ways through the teacher participants' responses. Whilst Raph held the view that the curriculum reform would be beneficial to "legitimise" the subject, some of the teacher participants acknowledged, as described elsewhere in this chapter, they had found it challenging to assert the subject's worth alongside other subjects in the curriculum. Helen commented:

> "I think there's been a move back towards traditional subjects, as they're viewed, so we're still having to deal with the age old stereotyping of media studies as being a soft subject or anything else like that."

Whilst there were mixed views about the extent to which the new curriculum had raised or was able to raise the status of the subject, what was clear was that positive perceptions of the subject's worth was an important factor to how teachers perceived their own professional identity.

Ben also noted the external factor of accountability and the pressure of both successful student outcomes and student numbers affecting how he viewed his professional role and recounted that was "definitely one reason why [he was] leaving [his] current place". Bethany and Maxine discussed conflicting feelings about the importance of accessibility of the subject but recognised that the new curriculum did not benefit students who had lower GCSE scores. Ten teacher participants also discussed issues related to being pressurised by the leadership in their school or college to take students who did not meet the required entry requirements. Whilst entry requirements varied according to school/college, the general entry criteria included at least A' Level 4 or above in GCSE English (with some requiring A' Level 6) but James notes the 'bums on seats' approach his management encourages which often results in weaker ability students taking the A' Level. This was reiterated by Miles, Maxine and Ellen who all recounted taking students who did not meet their school or college's entry criteria. Miles notes "the barrier for entry is higher now with the new [curriculum] - and that's a problem". He goes on to remark that this "makes it also kind of somewhat inaccessible to [students with lower GCSE scores]" and, like James, he said that those who are allowed on the course do "struggle". He also ruefully acknowledges his school policy and says "the kids that don't get a D, we get rid of".

In addition to the seemingly contradictory demands of accountability and maintaining student numbers, the pressure is further is heightened when faced with the limitations placed on teachers by a curriculum that reduces teacher agency. Whilst the emergence of communities of practice as Facebook groups are not unique to media teachers, they do take on additional significance for the professional identity of media teachers as they represent the collective initiation of professional dialogue and investment in the development of the subject at a grassroots level, separate from the external directives of the exam boards.

A recurrent theme in the participant interviews was the mention of the budget available to teachers and their schools, colleges and departments. This appeared significant as it not only

pointed to the wider national school and college funding issues that have increasingly impacted schools (Sutton Trust 2024) and colleges (IFS 2023) over the last decade, but it also highlighted some of the anxieties about the fragility of the subject's place in the curriculum in a broader sense. The sharper consequences of this can be observed in Bruce's comments in which he says media has been one of the subjects "hacked and slashed away at" and with Miles, similarly, that, in this school, "media is one of the first [subjects] to go".

Following on from this, one of the issues that came out of the interviews was the distinct variability of how well resourced schools and colleges were. Only George, who worked at a large further education college on the south coast, talked about being well-resourced in terms of equipment, but most participants referenced operating on the bare minimum of specialist equipment. Helen, for example, who worked at a Further Education college in the north west of English, says she has "no equipment…I don't have – I don't even own one camera, I have zip" and in terms of her students, she said:

> "They use phones. A couple of them do have cameras and I have been incredibly lucky at the risk of sounding like I'm very #soblessed, the fact that there was only a small group of them, they all got on so well, so they were very good at; you can borrow my camera, I'll come and do some pictures with you for a bit. So we had a lot of that going on".

Rae's experience as a classroom teacher is similar as she "[doesn't] even have computers in the classroom bar the one for the teacher" which impacts the value of doing the practical coursework (NEA) which, she claims, feels like it's on the curriculum as "an afterthought". Reflecting on her own experiences of being an A' Level Media Studies student and doing practical work, she recalls:

> "When I did it, it was one of the things I loved most about the course and that opportunity to be creative and contribute in your own way to the industry – even though it's not that, that you're not really - but you feel that kind of connection to the possible professions that you could go into."

This recalls the debates about social mobility discussed earlier in this thesis and it is useful to return to the notion of the 'discourse of derision' because media studies has struggled to find its place on the continuum between the autonomous, at one end, where education is valuable 'for its own sake'; and the vocational at the other, where education fills a less academic 'skills gap'. The new curriculum presents even more of an issue in this regard because it offers, as according to the teachers' critique of it in this study, something nor

nothing. Scratch beneath the patina of prescription that purports to 'rigour' and it neither achieves the type of truly academic critical rigour that autonomous education requires, nor, with its watered-down practical production component, satisfies vocational aims for social mobility either. By that logic, social mobility in either its academic and vocational definitions, via media studies, is rendered pure policy-making lip service in its failure to achieve either.

Alina's democratic drive to start the Eduqas Facebook group was 'to be a resource for teachers by teachers'. This is interesting in itself but also for what it represents more broadly about the motivations of those who create, use and value these collaborative communities, sharing resources for free against the backdrop of an increasingly rigid educational context. Alina summarises her thoughts about the commitment to free access:

> "Schools don't have a lot of money and teachers are time strapped. We don't want to be spending all of our budget on buying lessons. There are a lot of paid for resources on TES and I just thought I'm not sure why I'm doing this, I can do this and maybe better and I would be willing to share them. I don't want any money for them as long as people are willing to do the same - and that's the other thing, we have to make sure they're not ending up on TES… that's another thing that is massive and we can't always make sure that doesn't happen"

Pritesh echoed similar sentiments through his observation that he "was horrified" about the sale of teacher resources on the TES and he didn't "agree with having to pay for full resources". Ellen also took a similar stance to buying resources:

> "We will not - I won't pay for anything – we haven't got the money to… I actually have a moral thing about paying for resources – I just don't think it's right that teachers should have to pay for resources and I think we should be in a collaborative world where we all share with each other for free"

In terms of the exam board-endorsed text books, many teachers in the study, such as Seamus, Lily, Ben, Christine, George, Helen, Sarah, Ellen and Pritesh, all directly reported buying them but the predominant uses of these were more as a reference point for teachers and as a supplementary resource for students. Not one teacher in the study reported using text books as the mainstay of their teaching and several questioned the quality and long term relevance of the text books. For example:

> "I find [the text books] repetitive…they're all over the place, the information isn't in order, and you've got a student book that reads like a

> teacher book and a teacher book that reads like a student book" (Bethany)
>
> "The case studies have changed again… So I'm like 'Oh my god… I'll have to buy the new one with the new case studies in it" (Maxine)

Limited budgets, as outlined in the previous section, were also an issue for teachers like Pritesh who said he would not be able to buy more text books because "[his school doesn't] have any money any money at all for resources… literally [they] ran out of money to buy even toilet rolls last year".

Participants also discussed their awareness of other resources and subscriptions such as Edusites, Zig Zag and Curriculum Press. Other resources mentioned and appreciated for their quality were Media Magazine (paid for subscription), 'Essential Theory' (text book with associated online resources) and free online 'made-by-teachers-for-teachers' resources such as the You Tube channels of Mrs Fisher and Media Insider. What this demonstrates is a mix of free and paid-for subject-specialist resources that increased largely as a result of the reforms of, but all were discussed in terms of their 'value' in terms of quality and budget, but also how participants used or adapted these resources into their everyday teaching, and there was no evidence of 'uncritical' usage.

Whilst it is clear that curriculum reform offers new opportunities for marketisation, as outlined above, but to return to ideas of Ball (2003) and Imants et al (2013), it also creates new reasons, opportunities and platforms for teachers to establish new patterns and repertoires in their lives as subject teachers which break down older, established hierarchies. Citing McAdam, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) posited that change can prompt "cognitive liberation" and the discovery that collective action can help overcome challenges presented by change, as seen through the CoP on Facebook. Whilst it is likely these groups would still have formed even if there had not been curriculum change, the reform catalysed their growth and dynamicity. It might be too much of a stretch to claim that the curriculum reform provoked "cognitive liberation" but, in terms of professional agency, it has certainly galvanised teachers to purposeful collective and collaborative action and offered up new opportunities for professional dialogue that, in turn, serve to describe and determine the direction of the subject – once again, a key aspect of *the dynamic episteme*.

Who Do Media Teachers Say They Are?

The findings of this study highlight the complexity of media teachers' professional identities, and reveal the intimate connection these identities have to their values and the role they see themselves playing in the classroom. For example, the research suggests a significant number of teachers appears to view media studies as a platform for critical thinking, cultural awareness, and social justice, with the aim of helping students navigate societal issues such as political events and movements like Black Lives Matter. For these educators, teaching media studies is more than just about teaching subject content; it's also a vehicle for equipping students to engage critically with the world around them.

The teachers in this study convey a strong sense of professional pride in creating their own lessons and producing resources that preserve their pedagogical autonomy over classroom practice, enabling them to meet the diverse contextual needs of their students. Autonomy emerges as a vital aspect of their professional identity, with efforts to curtail it, particularly through curriculum reforms, often leading to frustration and dissatisfaction. The findings also reveal that media teachers acknowledge and embrace the rapidly changing nature of their subject, demonstrating a sustained commitment to staying informed about developments in the field but, more crucially, playing an active part in shaping and co-constructing its knowledge.

Central to this, collaboration and community-building - particularly the Facebook online communities of practice examined in this research - are of integral importance here, too. The findings suggest that this sense of collective action is significant in counteracting the isolation that can come with the pressures of external reforms. In this regard, media teachers create and seek out networks of support that mitigate for the effects and impact of policy mandates.

When there appears to be a strong sense of values, subject, and professional identity, there also appears to be a strong sense of resistance to forces that place these elements in jeopardy. This is evidenced in this research by the grassroots creation and popularity of online communities of practice, which act as vectors for reasserting autonomy, as well as the ways in which media teachers explicitly discussed adapting and innovating their teaching and resources in response to a reductive and prescriptive curriculum.

Overall, media teachers in the study present themselves as passionate, engaged professionals who value autonomy, creativity, and collaboration. They view their subject not merely as a body of knowledge but as a means to challenge societal norms and empower students. However, this commitment to their professional values is often at odds with external demands, creating a tension between their ideals and the constraints of the educational system.

The curriculum reforms have thrown into sharp focus their impact on the professional identities of media teachers. On one hand, through the resistance to a standardised curriculum, this has revealed a positive, values-led affiliation to their subject, innovative and collaborative practice and a reaffirmation of its importance in the curriculum. As a result, teachers may become more galvanised in their focus and committed to equipping students with critical thinking skills, empowering them to become active, informed participants in society. Peer collaboration, too, through the online communities of practice, also presents as a key strategy for building resilience among media teachers. Through these research findings, the mutual support that these networks offer, and their function in allowing teachers to share ideas and resources, appears to be instrumental in helping educators maintain a sense of agency and purpose in the face of curriculum reforms and other external pressures.

However, despite these 'silver linings', the efforts to regain or maintain autonomy in the face of curriculum reform, and the toll this takes on teacher satisfaction and well-being, cannot be negated. Operating over an extended period of time, in a state of dissonance - or, as many teachers in the study described as performativity and inauthenticity - can lead to frustration, burnout, and attrition, which cannot be good for the longer term health of the subject, its teachers, nor the educational experiences and outcomes of the students who study it.

However, also in the longer term, the values that media teachers continue to promote—critical thinking, inclusivity, and creativity, for example, —can have a ripple effect across the broader educational landscape. In the right conditions and contexts, their pedagogical approaches can inspire reform in other subjects, while their collaborative efforts contribute to the collective knowledge of the teaching profession.

Professional Identity: Beyond Media Studies

As outlined above, the complexity of a teacher's professional identity reveals itself through discussion of the variables which determine it - perceptions of subject identity, the role of the teacher, individual and institutional contextual factors – and for teachers, their subject is not merely a collection of content, it represents a dynamic and evolving framework through which they navigate their roles as educators. Broadening out the findings from media studies to a wider teaching context, it can be surmised that teachers' professional identity involves their subject as a reflection – and extension - of their personal and professional values. Whilst for media teachers, the findings suggests that their subject might reflect their commitment to inclusivity, critical thinking and social justice, similarly, teachers of other disciplines will embody and express their ideological values through the subjects they teach. This ideological investment strengthens a teacher's connection to their subject and reinforces its centrality to their professional identity.

Allied to this, a teacher's relationship with subject knowledge can also be viewed as a site of agency and creativity. In this study, many teachers expressed pride and ownership over their subject knowledge, often resisting standardised resources in favour of creating their own materials and tailoring teaching to their pedagogical styles, contexts, and student needs. Thus, if we view this in a more generalisable capacity, the relationship a teacher has with their subject knowledge can be viewed as one of the fundamental expressions of professional autonomy and agency. There are clearly many more nuanced considerations as part of this discussion, depending on teacher background, experience and context, but it should be acknowledged, particularly by policy-makers, as an important aspect (and impact) of the reform process.

This is particularly important for policy makers to recognise and take into account because any curtailment of teacher agency may force teachers into a negotiation between external expectations and internal beliefs. As has been evidenced in this research, this may result in decreased job satisfaction and well-being, a particularly significant consideration given the current poor recruitment and retention statistics for the profession.

Yet, what this research also points to is that even in the challenging contexts of reform, these challenges also highlight the resilience and adaptability of teachers as they navigate

shifting educational landscapes. Many turn to their professional communities—both online and offline—to share resources, strategies, and support. These communities of practice serve as vital 'community anchors' - spaces where teachers collaboratively co-create knowledge, reaffirm their values, and reassert their agency. In doing so, they strengthen the role of their subject and its future as part of the curriculum. Overall, for these teachers, the relationship between subject and knowledge is dynamic and multifaceted, intertwined with their sense of purpose, agency, and belonging in their profession.

Part Four: The Future of Media Studies

The final question asked of all interview participants in this research related to what they thought the future of media studies was. Some participants chose to interpret this on an individual or local level and how their practice, longevity of course and/or students would be impacted for the longer term, and others chose to conceptualise what the reforms meant for the subject in a more epistemological sense. This represents what a healthy ecology of *the dynamic episteme* looks like because it encompasses both practical and theoretical concerns related to the evolution of the subject on micro, meso and macro levels. It also suggests that teachers can simultaneously occupy two roles in their professional context and what I characterise as the subject doer and the subject thinker, as illustrated below:

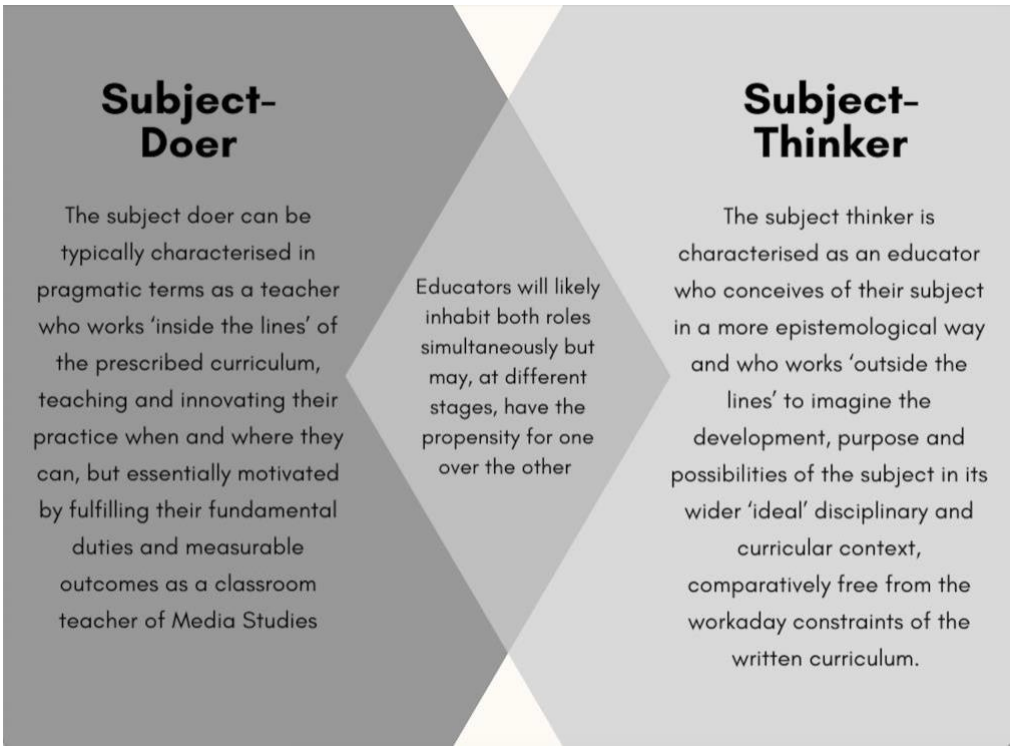

Figure 8:The Subject-Doer and the Subject-Thinker

All of the teachers who participated in the research study individual interviews exhibited elements of both in their individual interviews and it could be argued that being able to inhabit and freely oscillate between these two roles is important to sustain a sense of subject specialist professional identity, particularly in the face of change. I propose that this is key to *the dynamic episteme* because it enables the teacher to simultaneously attend to their everyday professional subject teaching whilst engaging in the wider theoretical debates that are crucial to the subject's development over time. To return to Hall et al's Stages of Concern

model (1973), it could also be argued that this is an important aspect of what they call refocusing, the last stage of the model, where teachers become more future-orientated to "consider and suggest modifications to improve the reform or even propose alternatives".

A Future Imperfect?

Several teachers, such as Shruti, Polly and Alan, talked in practical and pragmatic terms about their acceptance of the new curriculum and that they didn't feel anything significant was going to change. None of the teachers in the study felt that they would "ever go back to how it was" and that "this moment has changed it" (Terry). Alan's, alongside Terry's, comment are representative of the sentiments expressed by many of the other teacher participants:

> "It's going to be tweaks now or probably over the next decade rather than anything too substantial, just some little updates here and there, but that will probably be it I suspect" (Alan)

This pragmatism appeared to manifest mainly from discussions of the everyday practicalities of teaching the reformed curriculum but it did not, however, prevent these same teachers expressing their desire for change, even though there were mindful about what further change might mean for their individual workloads. Other teachers such as Amina, Rae, Polly and George talked specifically about what they would like to see change in the curriculum and these thoughts tended to coalesce predominantly around the reinstitution of increased practical production, autonomy and textual choice responsive to contemporary context that has more "fluidity…more options for the subject teacher" (Rae). Both Bethany and Terry outlined more specific wishes for "a wider range of set texts … and more choice" (Bethany) and "more flexibility… more consideration over what theorists are relevant and what theorists aren't relevant" (Terry). Terry, Christine and Shruti also expressed that they wanted to see the historical and socio-cultural contextual component of the curriculum remain.

Other teacher participants took a more conceptual view of the subject to consider its future. Both Helen and Rae reflected on their own experiences of studying media (and in Helen's case, her industry experience too) to discuss what they considered to be the future of the subject. Taking a similar view, both teachers acknowledged that critical thinking and the academic, theoretical sides of the subject were very important to be valued as a subject and "to be up there with Maths, English and Science" (Helen) but they also need to be balanced more evenly with the creative practical production components. Similarly, Terry, James, Christine, Helen and Emma all individually raised the issue of the subject's current status in

the curriculum, advocating for both its inclusion as a subject in the core curriculum and the importance of media literacy as a future curricular entitlement "because it's a fundamental part of our students' lives" (Helen). Terry discusses how the awareness of the need for media literacy has grown and feels that this is a key opportunity for the subject to develop in terms of its status in the curriculum. He goes on to say:

> "I think there's huge scope for media studies to expand in the future… it does feel like kind of media studies has been beaten back and that I think with things like the EBacc it has undermined the position of the subject… it is about finding ways to emphasise why media studies is important, what students can get out of it and thinking about how, with potential future reforms, how we can make sure that future specifications equip students with the skills they need".

Nieveen and Kuiper (2012) introduce the concept of 'pendulum swinging' in curriculum policy, highlighting the shift between centralized and decentralized control of the curriculum. This idea is mirrored by several participants in their discussions about the future of the subject. Maxine describes this swing in almost identical terms:

> "The autonomy, the freedom has been taken away hasn't it? This idea that before it was too loosely applied and now it's very, very stringent and you've got no halfway in between. Maybe the pendulum will start swinging back a little bit… but you can only hope that it will go in the right direction"

Alex, a teacher with a longitudinal perspective of media teaching, couched it in hopeful terms, recognising the cyclical nature of curriculum and the political motivations that drive it:

> "The hope is that it will swing back again and I think these things will come in cycles – like when I first started teaching it was still the two year linear A' Level, that got done away with - 'Oh, we're going Curriculum 2000! We're going to go AS! We're going to de-couple it from the A2! It's going to be modular!.. and now it's gone right back the other way to where I was when I started. So I think, it will come round again, I think it's not going to be like this forever, there will be a look at it and people will wrestle control and put it back the way it is, and the government will say; 'Oh yeah, we're going to give freedom to teachers and it's going to be more autonomous' - and it will be touted as a great new idea!"

Miles, too, expresses a very similar thought, remarking also on the wider impact on the media industry:

> "I just think you need to hang out for like another five to seven years, wait for a Labour government, get a load of curriculum reforms to

> swing the pendulum back the other way and then see what you get…because at the moment it's restrictive to the creative industries in this country, literally someone turned the tap off to film-making in this country"

The impact of how well the reformed curriculum prepared media studies students for the future was also addressed by some of the teacher participants in their interview. Both Sarah and Pritesh did not believe the reformed curriculum allowed students to be prepared for the future "unless they are doing something that is very academic at university, in terms of media studies, with less elements of production" (Pritesh). Alina reports that her school has taken the decision to move to media vocational courses and away from A' Level because her students were "more inclined to take a more practical course".

The Beautiful Risk of Media Education

Collectively, the research participants who occupy education positions or academic roles related to media education provided an interesting counterpoint to the classroom practitioner participants because they all, to some degree, advocate for a complete reimagining of the subject. Whilst their conceptions of (and optimisms for) this may differ, they are all aligned in ways that are more overtly radical than that of the teacher participants, which is interesting in itself because it suggests that the ontological conditions of classroom practitioners suppress their ability to conceptualise the subject in ways that are not rooted in the practicalities (and accountabilities) of classroom teaching.

Oliver, a senior education figure in a film and television charitable organisation, has a longitudinal perspective of the subject in both its curricular and extra-curricular formats. He accepts "the halcyon days are long gone" and that media education "needs to be fit for a different media environment" because "the liberatory, emancipatory and democratic nature of the subject has been moulded to fit in with the teaching of what is 'right versus wrong' and it hasn't changed to match the pace of the subject". He identifies several moments from recent social history that could have prompted "look[ing] at the subject differently" such as the Black Lives Matter and the Decolonise the Curriculum movements, the rise of fake news and media portrayal of Shamima Begum, as opportunities to rethink media education. He also notes issues of representation within the media teaching community and that "there are students being taught by people who don't represent them".

A significant majority of the research participants expressed a firm belief about the value and purpose of the subject's role in the greater project of education, often framed within the context of teacher autonomy and governmental restrictions. Oliver aptly sums these sentiments up:

> "Media is a unique - it deals with the stuff that was made yesterday, today… to make us change and challenge our practice. When you close the classroom door, you are the most powerful person - the government can't touch you in there and you take back what is yours in that space"

Citing work of academics who take a provocative and emancipatory position, such as Biesta and Ranciere, Oliver advocates for a radical rethink of "framing and conceiving the subject" and "rather than just stop[ping] with the key concepts", he believes "it needs to be reframed for a new generation". The answer to this, he suggests, is if, through collaborative effort, "the exam boards, The Media Education Association teachers, smart teachers and the Scottish subject association got together". He believes that ultimately "the most enduring work in media…should be done by educators, collaboration between educators …and its future lies with teachers".

As a prime example of *the dynamic episteme*, Oliver interrogates the curricular reach of the subject in its current format and proposes that "we look around the edges…the margins of the subject" and away from it as simply a "textual subject". He puts forward the example of social media as something that calls for reconsideration of the subject's epistemological underpinnings" and suggests that the changing skillsets of teachers coming into the profession will, in turn, shape the direction of the subject. More radically even, he advocates that the name of media studies could be changed entirely to recognise this new subject landscape.

Emma also held quite distinct views over how media studies should or needed to develop in the future, and, like Oliver, felt these were not compatible with the current reformed curriculum. Her experiences teaching the first sets of undergraduates arriving on their degree with the new A' Levels and her consequent criticism of this has been detailed in Part 2 of this chapter, but as a follow on from this, she goes on to discuss what she sees as the longer term impact of this on the future of the subject. Her initial fear is that the subject will with "merge into English" because of the canonified way it is structured "or it will disappear altogether".

She also commented that because of the greater choice of texts and more discrete structure of the film studies course, she felt that, anecdotally, schools were choosing this course over media studies – a view that was partially supported by other teacher participants elsewhere in the data.

Whilst Emma admits to being a film studies 'purist' in the past, she considers this a "silly and dead-end" position to take now and, like Oliver's proposal for a subject name change, she advocates for a complete reimagining of the subject as 'Screen Studies' because if you separate film and media out "you're actually lying about what digital cultures and media cultures are". Just as Emma argues, as outlined in Part 3 of this chapter, about how media has gone beyond the study of texts "as a singular entity" she goes on to advocate for a more expansive approach that incorporates a more deliberate focus on digital media:

> "I think media studies will need to be there. It needs to be and I think it needs to be essential from the beginning - from coding, and digital literacy, from a very young age"

Recognising media as "a long game", she, nevertheless, remains hopeful for the subject to develop and thrive in the future. This recalls earlier debate in the subject's history regarding its identity (Berger 2013, p.152) but here what both Emma are Oliver are essentially calling for is a complete reimagining of what the subject is in terms of how knowledge is constructed, understood and taught.

Terry is the media subject officer for one of the main exam boards and at the time of his interview, had recent classroom teaching experience of the new curriculum. Echoing Emma, he conceives the future of media as more encompassing of digital literacies to equip and empower young people for their future lives and careers, which, he says, should :

> " …give young people the opportunity to have a better understanding of all the different media forms and how they interact with them, how they're influenced by them… and all the skills you use and develop in media studies are ideal for a range of future careers, particularly given the increasing digital culture we live in."

He believes, though, that the real challenge is about finding the ways "to emphasise why media studies is important, what students can get out of it… and how we can make sure that future specifications equip students with the skills that they need".

Marianne is a long time media educator, with a career spanning forty years in media education from when media studies was first introduced as part of the school curriculum and, thus, in a unique position to reflect on the future of the subject. She admits she sometimes feels "very gloomy" about its future when she compares it to the initial days of the subject's development when "you could go to the LAs (local authorities) and work with them on thinking about media" but, she reflects, "none of that has lasted".

Marianne is hopeful, however, that it will "re-emerge" but feels that this will take a long time "and a change of society and government" before things are more positive. Whilst she recognises that there is "some very good practice" going on in the subject, even with a change of government she feels "it's going to take twenty years to undo some of the bad practice" and a "very long time to undo this culture of accountability, outcome driven stuff… all this led-by-testing". Expressing similar views to Terry and Emma, she hopes the future holds "a much more holistic, cross curricular approach" but doesn't believe this will happen in her lifetime because it will require a "whole change of ethos".

David is an Emeritus Professor of Education and, like Marianne, his career in media education begins at the early formation of the subject. His academic writing and advocacy for the subject has shaped its development over forty years and, as described earlier, his involvement in and subsequent writing about the consultation and reform process has been recognized in this research. Perhaps unexpectedly, David was reticent to speculate about the subject's future because, in reference to the government reforms, he considered that education and schools more broadly had been "so terminally damaged" that "really fundamental things have absolutely shifted in their meaning over a longer period of time". He thus questioned "how do we ever get back from here?" because "it's hard to see how that would happen".

He was, however, very clear in his views that "the need for media studies is not going to go away" and felt, like Emma and Oliver, that it may "resurface in a different form - whatever that is – but it's not going to go away because this is the modern world".

Raph, a media studies PGCE and former media teacher, considers himself as "a pragmatist" and describes his views of the new curriculum as "conservative with a small 'c'", and was not as critical of the reforms as many others who participated in this research. His views are

underpinned by his experience of training new media teachers and whilst he feels that "retain[ing] some teachable autonomy" within the curriculum is important, what he feels is crucial for the subject is to gain some legitimacy and, with that, he feels there should be an accepted "shared body of knowledge" within the subject. On one hand, he believes this provides his trainees better preparation for the everyday realities of the classroom because "they were able to share resources; we could look at a particular text that nearly all of them are going to be teaching and run through it together" which he feels was "very different from before where you'd say "Well, right, hey, today we're doing genre studies - science fiction, action, whatever - and then you have to adapt it to whatever text you're going to teach".

Raph explains one of the key concerns he has for the future of the subject is to gain more legitimacy and status in the curriculum and he believes that high quality subject specialist teachers is one of the keys to achieving this. He says:

> "I say this to my trainees. The worst thing you can be is a badly prepared media teacher - if you are, you just confirm everything to those students, those parents and your colleagues who think all those things about media studies"

Training teachers to teach a curriculum that has an accepted body of knowledge, for Raph, is preferable because "it's much more tangible and practical, on a really busy course, where everything is essentially new". Interestingly, even though Raph holds more positive views of the current curriculum which he describes as "top down", he still wishes there were more spaces for it to be "dynamic and live" and "to be actually challenged as a teacher".

One aspect of the subject that Raph is unequivocal about is the importance of practical production work and that this should be more authentic in future iterations of the curriculum or in reform:

> "The practical work is really crucial. This is the reason a lot of young people choose the course - to develop their practical skills, but practical skills have got to, at their heart, develop and foster their creativity… and I think it needs to be group".

Raph also reflects on the "education policies pendulum swings" and notes how much the curriculum has changed since his early career as a teacher "where everything was 100% coursework…and now it's all pretty much exams". Whilst he appreciates the more concrete nature of the current curriculum, he does recognise this may change in the future

and that he is "trying to prepare [his trainees] for an entire career where the things will change, you know, move".

The majority of the subject's 'future-talk' by the participants was lined with a sense of cautious positivity and whilst it was acknowledged that change was strongly desired, the subject in its curriculum form, was going to endure. However, it needs to be recognised that a minority of voices, such as Bruce and Helen, felt far more pessimistic about the future of the subject.

> "I'll be amazed if media studies exists in ten years" (Bruce)
>
> "[They've] made the spec so complicated and so ridiculous at points for people…that it will be got rid of from a government perspective" (Helen)

As an interpretation of what these participants express elsewhere in their interviews, I suggest these feelings appear to have been the product of cumulative issues but cemented by the period of uncertainty when teacher were fearful that the subject would not be approved for reform. For these teachers, perhaps the prescriptive subject content framework that came out of the reforms was just the tangible representation of years of the subject being denigrated and undermined.

However, regardless of the negative sentiments expressed about the reform, running as a common thread through this research is a media teaching community characterised by a clear commitment to the subject which they see as holding vital educational, social and academic value in the curriculum. George states media is "the most exciting subject to teach" whilst Helen claims it "is one of the great loves of my life" and "the only subject I can think of where I'll hear something or I'll read something and think 'Oh! I must get that into my lesson tomorrow!'".

The ways in which this commitment is expressed may differ between individuals but this variety, underpinned by values-driven beliefs about the subject, I posit, is key to the healthy functioning of *the dynamic episteme* – and, ultimately, to the future development of the subject.

The Functioning of *The Dynamic Episteme*

The online communities of practice in this research provide clear evidence of the function of

the dynamic episteme, operating as a constantly evolving system of knowledge shaped by the activities and interactions of its members. Examples such as Christine and Emma's exchange on Facebook (p. 154) demonstrates how these communities make visible – in one place – the ways teachers articulate their ideas, how they teach, and how they feel about their subject. This process throws a spotlight on practices that might otherwise remain implicit, offering a space where thoughts and actions are made explicit and shared.

Pedagogic sharing within these communities illustrates the *episteme's* dynamic nature, with teachers co-curating resources, informally self-regulating their quality, and building a shared body of knowledge – a knowledge that spans texts, pedagogy and the core values of the subject – of which is cumulatively and iteratively built through a process of democratic, exploratory and open continuous recalibration of the subject. Examples such as those where teachers like Emma, Miles and Amina discuss their pedagogic approaches illustrate how reflectively and deftly these become interwoven as part of their everyday practice.

The communities also highlight the ideological dimension of *the episteme*, where teachers like Adam and Seamus share their political perspectives, and Shruti reflects on the future of the subject. These ideological exchanges blend with the practical and procedural, creating an evolving dialogue that interrogates and reimagines the subject, its knowledge, and its spirit – often in ways that are implicit or accidental.

Through these activities, the communities strengthen the professional identity of media teachers, acting as a mechanism for professionalisation and coherence. New and experienced teachers engage in reciprocal knowledge exchange, contributing to the creation of an informal, open, and democratic body of resources rooted in the shared principle of collective expertise.

This *dynamic episteme* is further evidenced by teachers like Polly, Helen, Alan, and Amina, who describe how the groups allow them to reflect on their practices while observing and learning from others. The collective community of reflective practitioners they form demonstrates how subject knowledge is continually built and refreshed, incorporating contemporary texts and examples while helping teachers situate their work within a broader educational landscape.

For many teachers, particularly those in small departments, these online communities provide a way to critically examine their often-isolated experiences through a collective lens. The interactions within the communities reveal how teachers test their ideas and practices against shared insights, allowing them to better understand the relational 'bigger picture' – the position of their subject in the curriculum, its place across institutions, and its role in the broader educational context

Conclusion

This thesis began by framing the curriculum reform of A' Level Media Studies as another chapter of conflict and resistance in the subject's evolution – but it has been much more than that. This period represented the shift away from internal discussions within the subject over its development to it being shaped by external, top down forces - specifically, the curriculum reforms introduced by the Conservative party's 2014 education policy. As a teacher of the subject in this time period, the drive to find out 'what is going on here' provided the impetus for the research but particularly important and constituent to this was what the online professional communities of practice on Facebook were revealing, not just about the reform, but also about the subject, its teachers and education more broadly.

Another research imperative derived from the recognition that not only have teachers not been meaningfully involved in the development of the reformed curriculum but there has also been limited research conducted by and involving practising teachers from the subject discipline in the wider sphere of media education. It was important that this research captured this latest stage of the subject's evolution but, equally, that it reinstituted the voices, experiences and perspectives of teachers to research and discussion about the subject and its long term health and identity.

This research has also proposed that the conflict precipitated by the reforms, and which generated strong, palpable and predominantly negative sentiment from teachers, stemmed from the subject's epistemological incompatibility with 'knowledge-rich' education ideologies underpinning the reformed curriculum. It has been particularly pronounced in media studies because the rigid and prescriptive subject content framework that privileged the standardised 'knowledge' of set texts and theorists sits counter to, as has been argued extensively in this thesis, the 'spirit' of the subject and its value of contemporary media study and creative practical production.

I have proposed in this thesis that whilst there has been evidence of some specific explicit acts of what could be termed 'resistance' to the reformed curriculum - such as an online petition, subject association advocacy, relevant conferences, and so forth (and which are

clearly significant to the future of the subject) - my conception of resistance lies primarily in and as the online communities of practice. These communities represent an active body of teachers who, through their engagement in these forums, iteratively express and negotiate their professional identities, share resources, and collectively navigate and shape the development and teaching of the subject. This form of resistance is subtle yet powerful because it fosters solidarity and empowers teachers to influence the ongoing discourse around the curriculum despite the top-down nature of the reforms. I have argued that these online communities of practice are representative of what I have termed *the dynamic episteme*, because they provide flexible and autonomous "affinity spaces" (Gee 2004, p. 84) where media teachers can interact, collaborate, exchange expertise and support each other in ways that encourage a meaningful, shared understanding of their subject matter both within and outside the constraints of the formal curriculum, allowing for a more authentic capture of the subject's 'spirit'. This environment also reflects the evolving nature of the subject and facilitates the exploration of alternative conceptions of knowledge and practice.

In this manner, I propose that this research captures a *dynamic epistemic event*. As a theoretical concept, *the dynamic episteme* can be conceived of as the continuous and naturalistically evolving interplay of knowledge, inquiry, and experience within a specific subject domain or field of education. As such, *dynamic epistemic events* occur at various points over time as new understandings, perspectives, experiences or data emerge, reshaping and evolving what is known or believed and thus contributing to the understanding that knowledge is not static, but rather a fluid construct that reflects these ongoing interactions, transformations and the shifting contexts of subject and education discourse.

In this research context, the *dynamic epistemic event* is, of course, an opportunity to capture a particular moment in the subject's evolution. However, as outlined above, it is also an opportunity to go beyond this, to identify and understand the conditions under which knowledge is formed—considering multi-dimensional phenomena such as policy, identity, teacher experiences, agency, communities of practice, and so forth. The nuanced conceptual principles of *the dynamic episteme* have generalisable applicability in education, extending beyond the realms of media studies, to offer an alternative theoretical lens to consider how knowledge is constructed, transmitted, and transformed within different subject domains

and educational fields. This perspective invites a deeper exploration of how students, teachers, and educational systems interact with evolving information, experiences, and contexts to shape - and be shaped - by the development of the subject or field. It is also a framework flexible enough to allow for a wide range of contextual and subject specific factors — in the case of this research, the focus is on the impact of policy on subject identity, teacher agency and professional identity within the context-specific phenomenon of the rise of the online communities of practice – but, in other domains, it could just as easily extend to factors such as technological, scientific, cultural, pedagogical, economic, or global developments within a subject.

In the present research context, the principles of *the dynamic episteme* are highlighted by how my four research questions have been identified and addressed. The concluding sections of this thesis focus on these questions and how they contribute to understanding the *dynamic epistemic event* in the specific context of media studies. However, while this research context provides a particular illustration, it should be borne in mind that the theoretical framework of *the dynamic episteme* could have broad application to a range of other areas.

In keeping with the spirit of *the dynamic episteme*, and throughout the following sections that address my research questions, I variously propose recommendations for the future development of the subject, derived from the key inferences and insights gained from a critical analysis of the collective perspectives of the research participants. Whilst the recommendations appear throughout these final sections, the full list of recommendations can be found together in Appendix 6.

Research Question 1

How have the knowledge and curriculum discourses and theory that underpin the 2014 education reform impacted the media studies A' Level curriculum and perceptions of its subject identity?

Contingent to *the dynamic episteme* is understanding the knowledge discourses that shape the development of the area under study. Analysis of key policy speeches and documentation related to the reform revealed a politically motivated reform that positioned education in a deficit model of insufficient ambition and rigour and which framed the Conservative's education policy as the answer. The discourse around 'rigour', with Gove's repeated use of this term, inculcated Gove and Gibb's ideological stance into educational discourse, and constructed in a way that was hard to contest.

A Square Peg in a Round Hole

The analysis of the Subject Content Framework for A' Level Media Studies introduced the hypothesis that the newly prescriptive framework was not epistemologically compatible with media studies. The strict parameters around set texts and theorists, the increased volume of content, and the reduction of the practical component conflict with the nature of media studies, essentially hammering the metaphorical square peg of media studies into the round hole of the Govian curriculum reforms. This dissonance has been further reflected in perceptions of the subject's status, both implicitly in rhetoric like Gove's 'Angry Birds OR Coding' remark and explicitly confirmed by many teachers on the Facebook groups and participant interviews, many of whom felt that these negative perceptions had led to media studies being unfairly singled out for particularly stringent reforms, in comparison to other cognate subjects such as film studies and sociology.

Whilst it must be noted that some teachers appreciated the opportunity for the new curriculum to increase the status of the subject and, in some instances, viewed the insertion of set academic theory as contingent to achieving this status, the overall impact of the new curriculum was perceived (and experienced) as detrimental to the subject's identity. Compounded by the absence of teacher voice in the consultation and curriculum reform process, the subject's epistemological foundations and pedagogic practices appear out of step with the government's ideological vision driving the reforms. Teachers have been in a place of flux and cognitive dissonance whereby they are not only dealing with a changing curriculum that they have had no say in developing, but one that many do not believe fits the 'spirit' of the subject.

An interpretation of the teachers' experiences regarding the above, suggests the following recommendations:

- Teachers should be involved in consultations relating to curriculum reform and review, and which should be robust, well-organised, meaningful and genuinely reflective of their insights and experiences;
- Consultations should include a representative spread of teachers, academics and other key figures vested in the development of the subject to gain a range of balanced and equitable perspectives, as part of a transparent process;
- The status and perception of the subject are tied up in long-held beliefs about it but attempts to address the recommendations suggested throughout this concluding sections would incrementally help to raise the subject's status both educationally and in wider public perceptions – and something that is absolutely key to the longevity and 'health' of the subject.

More Rigour or Rigor Mortis?

Gove's 'rigorous' ambition for the curriculum translated to the inclusion of set texts deemed to be of "cultural, social, and historical significance" and "perceived quality" as criteria for the new subject content framework but this view was not supported by the teachers in the netnographic research. Significant negative sentiment about the impact of the reforms included teachers' criticisms about the new curriculum's inability to adequately handle the contemporary and dynamic nature of the subject. As a consequence the set texts outdate quickly and the content-heavy curriculum renders the study of media unengaging and irrelevant for young people. Additionally, many of the views expressed by the teachers in the research disclosed a strong dissatisfaction for a curriculum that emphasizes superficial, rote learning over genuine critical thinking and creative development.

As exemplified above, teachers expressed a strong desire for more freedom and flexibility within the curriculum, thus, recommendations relating to increasing curriculum flexibility and reducing prescriptive content can be drawn out from their comments as follows:

- Give teachers more autonomy in the selection and optionality of texts for study;

- Reduce or remove the need for set texts so they don't outdate quickly and can be more responsive to contemporary media contexts;
- Adapt the curriculum so it is focused around the teaching of the key concepts in media, rather than on a textual approach. This could also include, as suggested by some teachers in the study, increasing the unseen element of the exam;
- Reduce the level of prescription in practical production NEA briefs to encourage creativity and the development of technical skills;
- Maintain the requirement for theoretical study but remove prescription of set theories/theories to encourage a more critical, appropriate and relevant engagement with theories. As originally suggested by Buckingham (2017), the wording of the subject content framework, regarding the study of theorists, should be changed from 'to include [names of set theorists]' and replaced with 'for example, [list of suggested theorists]' or similar.

Mind The Gap

Discourse around inequality is a fundamental consideration of *the dynamic episteme* because this serves to highlight issues of knowledge hierarchies and expose hidden ideologies and beliefs that underpin (and often undermine) subject access. Gove claimed that the reforms would improve educational standards and social mobility through an increased emphasis on traditional academic values that would significantly reduce educational inequalities but this has not borne out, indeed there is evidence to support that the gaps between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students have persisted and, in some locations, widened - a view supported by the experience of many of the teachers who participated in the study who found that the new media studies curriculum was far less accessible to students than it had been in the past. Moreover, some teachers reported how abstractly hard and unengaging their students had found it. Linked to this observation, the following recommendation can also be made:

- Improve the accessibility of the subject to diverse student populations through a more inclusive, socially reflective and engaging curriculum

Impact on Subject Identity

The perceptions of subject identity have been profoundly affected by the curriculum reforms, particularly impacted, as I have argued throughout this thesis, by the misalignment between the underpinning ideology of the reforms that prioritises hierarchical, fixed knowledge and media studies' dynamic, contextual knowledge. Here, *the dynamic episteme* becomes particularly prominent as, from those who participated in the study, this misalignment appears to have changed media teachers' relationships to the subject they teach. Firstly, because the way media studies teachers indicate they prefer to teach (as outlined by the 'signature pedagogy' I proposed in chapter five) conflicts with the didacticism and rigid instructional pedagogic required by the reforms, creating a sense of disconnection with the collaborative, dialogic and creative pedagogy that has evolved to be characteristic of the subject.

Additionally, the sheer breadth of content that the course requires students to cover (as well as concern over set texts, as outlined above) compounds this dissonance further. These concerns also extended to the reduction of practical work and the removal of collaborative elements, both of which were valued elements in the previous curriculum, because many teacher participants deemed that what students were learning neglected real-world applications and did not prepare them with the appropriate skills for their future. Here, the teachers' reflections on their dissatisfaction with the present compared to more positive perceptions of the past illustrate the iterative and reflexive nature of *the dynamic episteme* - various points at which cumulative, often subconscious, experiences from the past are brought to mind and calibrated to inform the present and future.

Participants in the research who had been engaged with reform consultation and subsequent exam board approval process also revealed a notable dissatisfaction with the lack of involvement of media educators in this, with many of those believing that this was the main reason behind the inadequacies of the new curriculum, as outlined above. These teachers also felt that the lack of genuine consultation was politically motivated and, as some expressed, an indication of the government's pejorative view of the subject and a perceived desire to 'kill it off'. The schism that appeared between policy makers and teachers as a result of the reforms has and will continue to have potentially long reaching effects for any future

attempts at reconciliation, curriculum review and reform, regardless of which political stripe they are.

As such, the following recommendations linked to reducing emphasis on terminal assessment and increasing practical production content have been drawn out of the findings outlined above:

- Develop a more balanced media studies curriculum that reflects real world practical application of understanding;
- Increase the practical production component above the current 30%
- Allow for the return to, and incorporate, group work assessment as part of the practical production stages to reflect real world media industry working practices.
- Create briefs that reflect changing and contemporary real-world media industry practices and skills.

Research question 2:

What impacts have the curriculum reform had on the 'pedagogic lived-experiences' of media studies teachers?

Perhaps the most significant aspect of *the dynamic episteme* is the communities of practice and key actors who contribute to and comprise it because it is they who simultaneously experience, shape, drive and reflect the processes of knowledge creation and transformation. These actors engage in ongoing dialogues and collaborative efforts that not only influence their own individual practices but also contribute to the collective understanding of their field and facilitate the future directions of it.

In the context of this research, as outlined earlier, to focus on the experiences of teachers was of particular importance and pertinence because the reform process did not centre the voices of media educators and, as a teacher-researcher, I also felt a professional and personal moral imperative to ensure this was an integral component of my research. In addition, there has been limited research involving teachers in media education therefore this study offers new insights into real practices in the media studies classroom.

Facebook Groups as a Site Of Support, Collaboration And Subject-Shaping

The online communities of practice on Facebook that are a significant focus of this research provide an prime example of a *dynamic epistemic site*. *Dynamic epistemic sites* are specific temporal and spatial loci where actors converge in ways that consciously or unconsciously shape the processes of knowledge construction and transformation within the specific subject domain or education field they operate in, in this case, media studies. The study (in this case, netnography) of these sites offers an opportunity to understand *the dynamic episteme* in action.

The findings from both phases of the research reveal a number of key themes, as illustrated in Table 2. What this also illustrates is the key characteristics of this particular *dynamic epistemic site* offering insights at this particular *dynamic epistemic event*, and comprising part of the continuous, iterative and reflexive process of *the dynamic episteme*. As seen in the table, these insights capture such things as sentiment, knowledge-creation, collaborative action, support, professional and subject identity, as well as the functions of online professional communities of practice.

Prevalent negative sentiment	Both the interactions on the Facebook groups and in the individual interviews, teachers expressed an over-riding sense of frustration, anxiety, and dissatisfaction with the reforms.
Positive community dynamics	Despite, and perhaps because of, the negative sentiments, the group remained supportive and contributed to teachers' well-being
Pedagogical adaptation and innovation	Teachers demonstrated evidence of 'resistance' by adopting innovative practices to navigate the constraints of the new curriculum and reclaim some professional autonomy
Peer learning	The group provided an informal educational space for subject-specific peer learning and professional inquiry
Resource and community value	The shared drive teacher-created resources and the sense of community were valued within the group.
Contentious reform process	The reform process was marked by conflicts and delays, impacting educators' ability to transition smoothly.
Subject and professional identity	The reform has impacted teachers' professional identities and this also has a relationship to the perceived status of Media Studies

Table 2: Key themes in the research

These key themes reveal a healthy and cohesive community of practice, collaborative in nature and buoyant through the active use of its shared resource drive created by members. However, as evidenced by the many posts coded for sentiment, it also acted as a therapeutic 'third space' where advice and ideas are exchanged, frustrations and worries expressed, and collaborative solidarities and shared emotional connection forged – free from the kinds of online disinhibition that might more typically be expected on active social media groups. The shared emotional connection the groups offered took on additional significance, revealing how marginalized some teachers felt—not only in the implementation of the reform but also within their broader institutional contexts and, for some, the education system as a whole. These insights also, therefore, provide valuable, generalisable understandings of the far-reaching impacts of curriculum reform and education policy, shedding light on the challenges facing teachers and the state of education more broadly.

Facebook Groups as a Site of Resistance

I suggest that the positive collaborative ethos apparent on the Facebook groups represents, whilst not always consciously intended, a form of 'resistance' to the reform, and evidence of a community of practice engaging and shaping the subject's direction. This is central to the notion of *the dynamic episteme* which emphasizes that knowledge and understanding are continuously shaped by these intellectual interactions and collective efforts. These groups exemplify how online communities offer spaces that influence and redefine their fields through ongoing dialogue and shared experiences, that learning and knowledge creation are active, participatory processes, and that can transcend the normative constraints of formal curricular edicts, something that has resonance with and translation to other subject areas and fields in education.

In the study, the response to (new) adversity in a context of curriculum change is significant. The individual interviews with participants revealed detailed and nuanced insights that supported the ideas outlined above, reinforcing the perspective this adversity has only served to further galvanise the media teaching community by reinstilling, in the face of its diminishment by political reform efforts, a sense of the subject's importance and purpose in the wider project of education. I assert that, conversely, these challenges have presented a

positive opportunity for media teachers to reestablish the subject's purpose and place in the curriculum and, despite the imposed restrictions, continue to forge and determine the direction of the subject in an innovative, creative and resilient manner, in keeping with the 'spirit' of the subject.

Research Question 3:

How have the policy reforms impacted teacher agency and the professional identities of media studies teachers?

As Ball (2003) describes, reforms alter what teachers do and who they are, and this research has shown that teacher identity is a dynamic construct, significantly influenced by policy changes that often provoke internal conflict and challenges. Media studies has been no stranger to conflict and challenges throughout its evolution but the 2014 A' Level Media Studies reform has had a direct and profound impact on the agency afforded to teachers and this has, in turn, influenced the way they have perceived themselves as educators and altered their relationship with their subject.

A Sense of the Subject-Self

The feelings of confusion, inadequacy, and stress that the reformed curriculum has engendered amongst many of the participants in this research sits in ironic counterpoint to the aims of the reform to improve educational 'rigour'. Ball's concept of "the struggle over the teacher's soul" is particularly relevant here as the reform has had significant negative impact on many teachers' professional self-concept and emotional well-being. This impact has been compounded by personal and professional uncertainty, rooted in negative feelings about self-efficacy and competency. This sentiment is supported in the broader literature, which links teachers' self-perceptions with their professional effectiveness and overall job satisfaction – and something that should be of concern to the government, given the current teacher recruitment and retention crisis.

However, whilst many educators have perceived these reforms as undermining established curricula and creating professional dislocation, the changes have also spurred the development of new forms of support and affiliation. The rise of the Facebook online

communities exemplifies how teachers have sought informal networks, crucial for support and professional reflection, and which represent Biesta's concept of agency (2015) which posits that educators actively negotiate their professional identities and pedagogical practices in the midst of evolving expectations. This concept is also very closely allied to reflexive nature of *the dynamic episteme*. This is particularly exemplified by the seven key considerations regarding teacher professional identity, put forward in chapter six, which are drawn from the findings and represent the ways media teachers have responded to the curriculum reform. These considerations, like *the dynamic episteme*, can be translated to other subject discipline contexts.

Teacher Agency: Lost And Found

One of the common themes within the research is that where there is dissonance or conflict created by the reform, there is also a renewed energy to 'resist' or at least, a commitment to reclaim some level of autonomy. The comments of the teachers in the research demonstrate that a highly prescriptive curriculum does have a significantly negative impact, creating a sense of deprofessionalisation. However, as highlighted previously, this frustration also spurred agentic action in other ways, most notably through the online communities on Facebook. Other examples include teachers like Christine and Bethany, who spoke of their dedication to resource creation, demonstrating a convincing commitment to maintaining pedagogical quality and personal teaching styles. This is representative of how Biesta and Tedder (2007) and Emirbayer and Mische (1998) conceive of teacher agency, whereby teachers engage with their changing environment to navigate reform and preserve the integrity of their subject. Also evident in the research was (usually older, more experienced) teachers engaging in 'cynical compliance' and other subtle forms of resistance by leveraging past experiences and practices to adapt their current practice and innovate within the parameters of curriculum constraint.

This notion of teacher experience also links to how the Facebook groups act as informal, relational spaces for bridging expertise gaps, providing reassurance and support and facilitating collective problem solving, working in and outside the lines of the formal curriculum. This also highlights the powerful role that online communities of practice can play in education for other disciplines, and groups of teachers with shared roles, as

professional spaces for peer-learning, support and well-being – and for potentially shaping subject discourse and policy - again, a particular characteristic of *the dynamic episteme*.

Raising The Status

While the overall sentiment toward the reformed curriculum was negative, not all participants were uniformly critical. Some teachers valued the curriculum's role in raising the status of media studies, even if the approach wasn't ideal and some noted that the benefits of standardized content for newer teachers and non-specialists depended on its ability to help them become more effective practitioners, which in turn would elevate the status of the subject.

Though issues like uncritical resource sharing and potential hierarchies were raised in the Facebook groups, their benefits—enhanced professional identity, shared resources, and emotional support—far outweighed these concerns. The collaborative nature of these communities highlighted the importance of collective effort in adapting to reforms and shaping the future of the subject. This is another key aspect of *the dynamic episteme*, which values dissenting opinions as a vital means of sharpening understanding and collective knowledge through critical thinking and constructive debate.

Highlighting Broader Concerns

Whilst this research focus is trained specifically on media studies, there are a number of wider extrinsic factors highlighted in the research that impact media teachers' professional identity such as national and institutional pressures of accountability, the impact of the EBacc policy and the resulting marginalisation of creative subjects, declining student numbers, and funding constraints which can reveal much about the wider context of education. This also points to the wider relevance of this study and what it, and the theoretical concept of *the dynamic episteme* can offer to other areas of education research and discourse around knowledge.

Strengths, Weaknesses… and an Opportunity to Refocus

The research findings strongly suggest that media teachers should be involved in shaping the subject's future trajectory. The final stage of Hall et al.'s (1973) model—'Refocusing'—places teacher expertise at its centre, with the strong implication that the success of reform is reliant on those who are invested and involved in it. It is clear from this study that the vast majority of issues arising from the reform derive from the absence of meaningful teacher consultation and involvement. This failure has had significant ramifications for not only the identity of the subject but also for the professional identities of those who teach it.

The research findings indicate the extent to which curriculum reform impacts teachers' perceptions of themselves as professional and subject experts, and thus I suggest the following recommendation:

- Attention should be paid to the link between teacher autonomy, trust, professional identity and well-being, particularly when significant curriculum change is being proposed.

Research Question 4:

What ramifications will the policy reforms have for the 'futuring' of media studies?

The dynamic episteme provides a 'rolling' conceptual framework to capture and study the impact of the evolving dynamics of curriculum policies via different *dynamic epistemic* sites and events over time, and these offer critical 'moments' to consider the past, present and future and their inter-relatedness.

In this research, the notion of the political pendulum swing between centralization versus autonomy (Nieveen and Kuiper 2012), is of particular pertinence in this context as it considers the current political shift in its historical and future-focused contexts, particularly around the recent discourse around the marginalization of creative subjects (Durham Commission on Creativity and Education 2019; Williams et al. 2022; Lucas 2023). Indeed, at the time of writing, the Labour party's recent election win over the Conservatives (4th July,

2024) has prompted a curriculum and assessment review chaired by Professor Becky Francis, Chief Executive of the Education Endowment Foundation with recommendations to be published in 2025 (as well as an immediate pause of the BTEC qualifications defunding that was due to happen at the end of July 2024). This once again reinforces the fluid nature of *the dynamic episteme*, as factors influencing educational contexts—such as the political landscape highlighted here—can change rapidly, opening up opportunities for new conceptions of knowledge.

Balancing Practicality and Advocating for Change

Considering the future direction of the subject is another key aspect of *the dynamic episteme* as it involves the evolution of knowledge in response to emerging educational policy and practices, pedagogical innovations, and societal shifts. It is clear from the comments of educators in this study that when education reform takes a top-down approach and does not authentically involve teacher-educators then the outcome can be damaging on many levels, evinced primarily through the pervasive negative sentiment expressed about the reforms by the vast majority of participants.

The teacher participants in this study expressed varied views on the future of A' Level Media Studies, balancing pragmatic acceptance with a desire for significant changes. Their dual roles as 'subject-doers' and 'subject-thinkers', balancing everyday teaching demands with broader imaginings for the subject, is contingent to sustaining a robust professional identity and represents a fundamental aspect of *the dynamic episteme*, as exemplified below.

While some, like Shruti and Alan, envisioned minor modifications due to a 'weariness' from constant change, others, like Amina and George, advocated for more flexibility, creative production, and teacher autonomy. The educational professionals and academics in the study, particularly Oliver and Emma, were, broadly speaking, more direct and assertive in their advocacy for a radical reimagining of the subject, emphasising embedding media literacy and digital competencies throughout the curriculum, and proposing even a reimagining of the subject's name and scope. These more expansive perspectives offer ideas that extend beyond the parameters of the current curriculum offer in schools, suggesting that alternative opportunities for the study of media, whatever guise that might take - media

education, media literacy, creative and digital skills, for example – should exist throughout the full school curriculum, not just as a standalone qualification at post-16. This was echoed by more modest imaginings by teacher participants, such as Helen and Rae, who also advocated for media studies to be regarded with the same academic rigour as core subjects like Maths, English, and Science, and others who viewed the primary purpose of the subject in the development of critical thinking skills and media literacy. Some participants also referenced a desire for more provision of subject-specialist focused work such as professional development, teacher training and policy-maker engagement with the subject association, which cumulatively, they perceived, would also seek to raise the status of the subject. As such, the following recommendations arising from these findings can be made:

- Media studies teachers should have access to a greater range of high quality subject-specialist professional development;
- Develop clearer subject-specialist teacher training routes;
- Develop engagement between policy-makers, the subject associations and key organisations and bodies related to media education, to influence educational reforms and ensure that the needs of media studies are considered in future curriculum developments;
- Advocate for the study of media to be a compulsory component in the primary and secondary curriculums, to include not just education leading to media literacy but also creative and critical thinking skills, the worth of which would extend far beyond the confines of the individual subject discipline.

A Cautious Optimism and Subject Future-Proofing

While many participants anticipated challenges with the new curriculum and its long-term impacts, there was a sense of cautious optimism for the future of the subject. This optimism was evident both in individual interviews and the productive interactions observed in online communities, especially within the Eduqas Facebook group. However, the dominance of Eduqas raised concerns about the disproportionate influence of certain exam boards, as changing boards is often too cumbersome for teachers. Some also feared that this would result in more reductive approaches as teaching becomes motivated towards meeting specific assessment objectives rather than a deeper engagement with the subject.

In terms of the subject's future, it is almost a certainty that the A' Level Media Studies will continue to be subject to the vagaries and capriciousness of policy reform regardless of which political party is in power. Ideologies and educational approaches may change and be more or less favourable to the subject's epistemological foundations but it is a subject that is well versed in conflict and therefore, I suggest that those who teach it already have a sense of resilience and well-rehearsed arguments for its importance, purpose and place in the curriculum. As suggested in chapter one, it may actually be the subject's subversive quality and attacks on its status that perpetuates this need, and that this also comprises for some teachers – perhaps those who have taught the subject for a long time and in its different curricular guises – part of their professional identity. Whether or not this imperative for dissent continues in the same way remains to be seen, or whether this might be better framed as 'inquiry' because the network of online communities of practice, which have the inherent capacity to grow, also have the potential to shape the future direction of the subject through collaborative interaction and shared commitment to the educational, social, and academic value of media studies.

The 'thick description' in this thesis has, in essence, captured a *dynamic epistemic event* in the subject's history of change and conflict. It has captured significant challenge related to the implementation of the curriculum reforms but in this challenge, it has also highlighted and reasserted the capacities and potentials of the subject and its educators. It is clear from the research that any media studies curriculum must have the capacity to be responsive to the ever-changing landscape of media. However, given the sentiment expressed and experiences recounted by the participants in this study, future reform must be considerate of the significant transformations that teachers have already endured, and mindful of the impact on teacher autonomy, workload and well-being. It is therefore essential that teachers are active participants in the reform process, having a voice in shaping both the current curriculum and its future trajectory. Granting media teachers professional autonomy and agency is vital not only for their sense of identity and professional well-being but also for the long-term health of the subject itself.

The Dynamic Episteme – To Media Studies and Beyond

As has been extensively outlined throughout this thesis, the central thrust of this thesis is that the hierarchical, static conceptions of knowledge driving the 2014 curriculum reforms are incompatible with the epistemological foundations of media studies. This has been supported by the research through the critical discourse analysis of policy documentation and speeches relating to the reform, the netnographic observations of the Facebook groups and individual interviews with teachers and other key figures related to media education. Deng's and Lambert's theories, proposed here as alternative conceptions of knowledge to the Hirschian ideology that underpins Gove's reforms, have been selected because they valorise and incorporate the dynamic and contemporary nature of media studies and align more closely with the subject's epistemic spirit - but these are just two of many other theories which could equally offer alternative and new ways of imagining the subject. This is the key to *the dynamic episteme* – both for this study, and more broadly in its applicability to other areas – because by its very nature, there will always be the need to remain open to new ways of theorising subject and educational landscapes as they change and evolve over time, and in ways we may not currently be able to conceive.

The dynamic episteme provides a powerful and adaptable framework for understanding how knowledge is constructed, negotiated, and transformed in media studies, both now and in the future. More importantly, its principles extend beyond media studies, offering a valuable lens through which to examine and reimagine other subjects and areas within education. By embracing this dynamic approach, educators, and those vested in education, can enter into a different relationship with knowledge enabling them to reach new understandings about their subject or field and to consider those who have access to it. The approach inherently encourages greater adaptability and responsiveness to evolving challenges in education, such as education reform, but, ultimately, *the dynamic episteme* enables a more innovative, flexible and forward-thinking relationship with knowledge, essential for navigating the complexities of contemporary education.

Addendum

The majority of this thesis was researched and written during the tenure of the previous Conservative government. However, as outlined earlier in this chapter, there was a change in government from Conservative to Labour on 4th July 2024. This transition has already initiated a curriculum review, with Professor Zongyi Deng (as referenced in this research), amongst others appointed to the review panel, with findings set to be published in 2025. Additionally, on 22nd July 2024, the new Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson, held an open webinar for school workers (www.bridgetphillipson.com 2024); on 24th July 2024, the pausing of the defunding of BTEC qualifications was announced, pending further review (FE Week, 2024); and on 29th July 2024, the approval of a payrise of 5.5% for school teacher and leaders was announced (Department of Education, 2024) as well as the scrapping of former Conservative Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak's, flagship plans to introduce the 'Advanced British Standard' which was to replace A' Levels and T' Levels - which I tentatively suggest are all early indicators that education is entering a new phase where there are potential opportunities for more positive relations with policy-makers and curriculum change.

There are signs too, within the subject and its educators, of continued commitment to and discussion about its development. On 6th July 2024 , the annual general meeting of The Media Education Association, the subject association for media education in the UK, took place on the theme of 'Change/No Change?', focused on, particularly in light of the very recent change of government, discussions about the future direction of the subject and the opportunities available to engage with curriculum change.

Whether (or what) change happens remains to be seen, and the education sector, more generally, continues to face significant challenges such as high workload issues, underfunding, and the lasting impact of a government that has both undermined and ideologically divided teachers. These factors collectively create a legacy of challenge for educators - and the new government - which cannot be easily remedied, at least in the short term.

This addendum presents the changing context within which this thesis was developed, marking a pivotal transition in the development of media studies. As the political landscape

shifts from a Conservative to a Labour government, and curriculum review takes place, this transition offers an opportunity educators to work with policy-makers to address the longstanding challenges outlined above, elevate the status of media studies, and reassert the subject's 'spirit'. With the current government's renewed focus on education, perhaps we can, as described earlier, hold a cautious optimism for the next stage in the evolution of media studies.

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Appendices

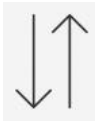
Methods Mapping Journal

Appendix 1: Hyatt's Critical Policy Discourse Analysis Frame (2013)

Key elements of Hyatt's CPDA Frame		Description	Outline of how Hyatt's Frame can be mapped onto and/or provide entry points for analysing policy text in this research study
CONTEXTUALISIN	Policy drivers, levers, steering & trajectories	The expressions of the intended goals, aims or outcomes of a policy.	Curriculum reform documents, political statements and speeches (drivers), the subject content framework (levers), Ofqual's approval of the exam board specifications (steering) and the implementation and resulting impact of the qualification in schools (trajectories)
	Warrant	The justification or rationale that establishes grounds for some act, course of action, statement or belief. Warrants serve to present policy goals or intended outcomes as 'common sense' or a natural part of the dominant norms and values.	Analyses of the 2014 curriculum reform policy documents, speeches need to interpret how these warrants appear with the texts and whether they are evidentiary (based on evidence), linked to accountability (results or outcome driven) or political (justified through arguments that a policy is for 'the public good' and in the interests of achieving, for example, better education, social justice and 'raised standards').
DECONSTRUCTION	Modes of legitimisation	The 'naturalisation' process by which policy is legitimised and justified. Fairclough proposed 4 main types: 1. Authorisation 2. Rationalisation 3. Moral Evaluation 4. Mythopoesis/legitimation through narratives.	Closely tied to 'warrants' above, the legitimisation of education policy can be constructed through reference to 'unchallengeable' experts or institutional authorities (authorization), convincing cognitive evidence of the efficacy and validity of the policy (rationalization), appealing to what is good or desirable, and often linked to ideological discourses (moral evaluation) and/or moral or cautionary tales of what has happened in the past or what could happen in the future mythopoesis).
	Interdiscursivity and intertextuality	The ways in which policy texts seek to establish legitimacy through how they refer to other texts, discourses or individuals, and the 'borrowings' of other language or discourses from other texts or individuals.	Language choice and use of terminology belonging to an established lexical field linked to certain concepts or discourses within education (Eg. the increasing popularity of using the language of consumerism in an education context, with references to 'stakeholders', 'learners', 'measurable outcomes, 'credits' and 'cashing in') and how they are used as part of the discourse can reveal a lot about the ideological standpoints of the policy makers (interdiscursivity). Policy makers may often refer to other academic texts or individuals to 'borrow' their credibility to construct a sense of respectability and authenticity in

			their policy documents and speeches (intertextuality).
	Evaluation	Policy text can use inscribed or evoked language construct or reveal the author's viewpoint or stance behind the policy for the audience of the text.	Inscribed language expresses the attitude, judgement or ideological position in an overt, unequivocal and straightforward manner. Evoked language is more subtle, often employing superficially neutral language and inviting the audience to make their own judgements but in a way that covertly leads them to share the same position as the author. Clearly policy makers wish to construct a positive image of change and language used will be chosen carefully to appeal to those who already share their ideological viewpoint and persuade those that do not through the notion that the change is 'natural' and 'common sense'.
	Presupposition / implication	To construct convincing realities via a number of lexico-grammatical features	Rhetorical persuasion is a key feature of policy makers wishing to assimilate those tasked with enacting the policy (eg. media teachers) into the view that the change is a positive. Negative questions that presuppose a certain answer, factive verbs, adjectives and adverbs that position the content as 'true', and the use of 'state of change' verbs to present the new against the old in a positive light are also all key devices used to achieve this.
	Lexico-grammatical construction	Pronouns, voice and tense can be all be used in specific ways to construct the appearance of credible and authentic realities.	The choice of pronouns such as 'we' or 'they' can create a sense of inclusion, exclusion or division, a powerful device in the constructing a case for change. Similarly, using the passive voice (Eg. Greater freedom and independence <u>will be given</u> to schools in the future) removes agency, and the ambiguity that this creates can be useful in limiting the potentially awkward questions about who specifically would be responsible for this action. Tenses can also construct understandings. For example, use of the present simple tense creates the sense that something is fact or reality or the present perfect can create the idea that something in the past continues to be relevant in present time.

Appendix 2: Adaptation of the Six Movements and Twelve Phases of Netnography

Six Movements of Netnography	Twelve Phases of Netnography (Kozinets, 2015, pp. 98-99)	Application of Phases to Research
M1: Initiation This gives the project its investigatory direction.	P1:Introspection Considering the role of the research	Initial proposal stage and formulation of research questions highlighted the need for an online ethnographic methodology
M2: Investigation This stage maps the the investigative space of the project and narrows down the field under research	P2: Investigation Focus on honing the netnographic question – is netnography appropriate?	During the research and writing of 'What is Knowledge?' (Assignment 2 of the taught phase of the Ed D), netnography emerged as the most comprehensive and suitable methodology from those considered (Eg. Virtual Ethnography (Hine, 2000) and Digital Ethnography (Murthy, 2008). This was confirmed through feedback from supervisors and further engagement with the AOIR (Association of Internet Researchers) and communications with another netnographic researcher in education at Leeds Beckett University (Dr Diana Tremayne)
	P3: Information Considering ethical issues	Prior to the first phase of research, I had contacted all the 'admins' of each group and received permission to use the groups as part of my research. This was later repeated for the second phase I also completed the university ethics module and gained full ethics approval following my university ethics application (which was also informed by Kozinets' protocols for conducting research on social media)
	P4: Interview Considering the people/sites to investigate	Phases 4 and 5 are interlinked as I was already a member of one of the media teachers' Facebook groups. The interactions on this group were the original instigation for undertaking this research so I was already familiar and an 'insider' of this online community. However, it was at this phase that I decided to extend the scope to the two other Facebook groups unofficially linked to the two other exam boards. I was already a member of these groups, too, but because they did not relate to the exam board I was following in my own teaching, my membership had been solely as a 'lurker', as Kozinets terms.
	P5: Inspection Choosing the site	
M3: Immersion  M4: Interaction These two movements are used flexibly and interchangeably here. Immersion involves the initial and then ongoing	P6: Interaction Considering how and to what extent the researcher will participate online with others	This was perhaps a more organic process than can be limited to a particular phase. As an insider teacher/outsider researcher, my online participation had dual purpose. My more 'active' interactions were mainly linked to my own A' Level teaching so I needed to consider whether I needed to reduce or increase interactions and to what ends – research or for my teaching. Returning to ethical considerations, it was important that my dual role within the group was made transparent in order to not mislead members as to the purpose of my post, if it wasn't related to my own teaching. As a consequence, I deliberately reduced my interactions online in my capacity solely as a teacher once I posted on the groups about my work as a researcher as members became aware and interested in my research, and I did not want any 'personal' posts to muddy the interactions I had in a research capacity. Interactions were a mixture of posts on the group about my

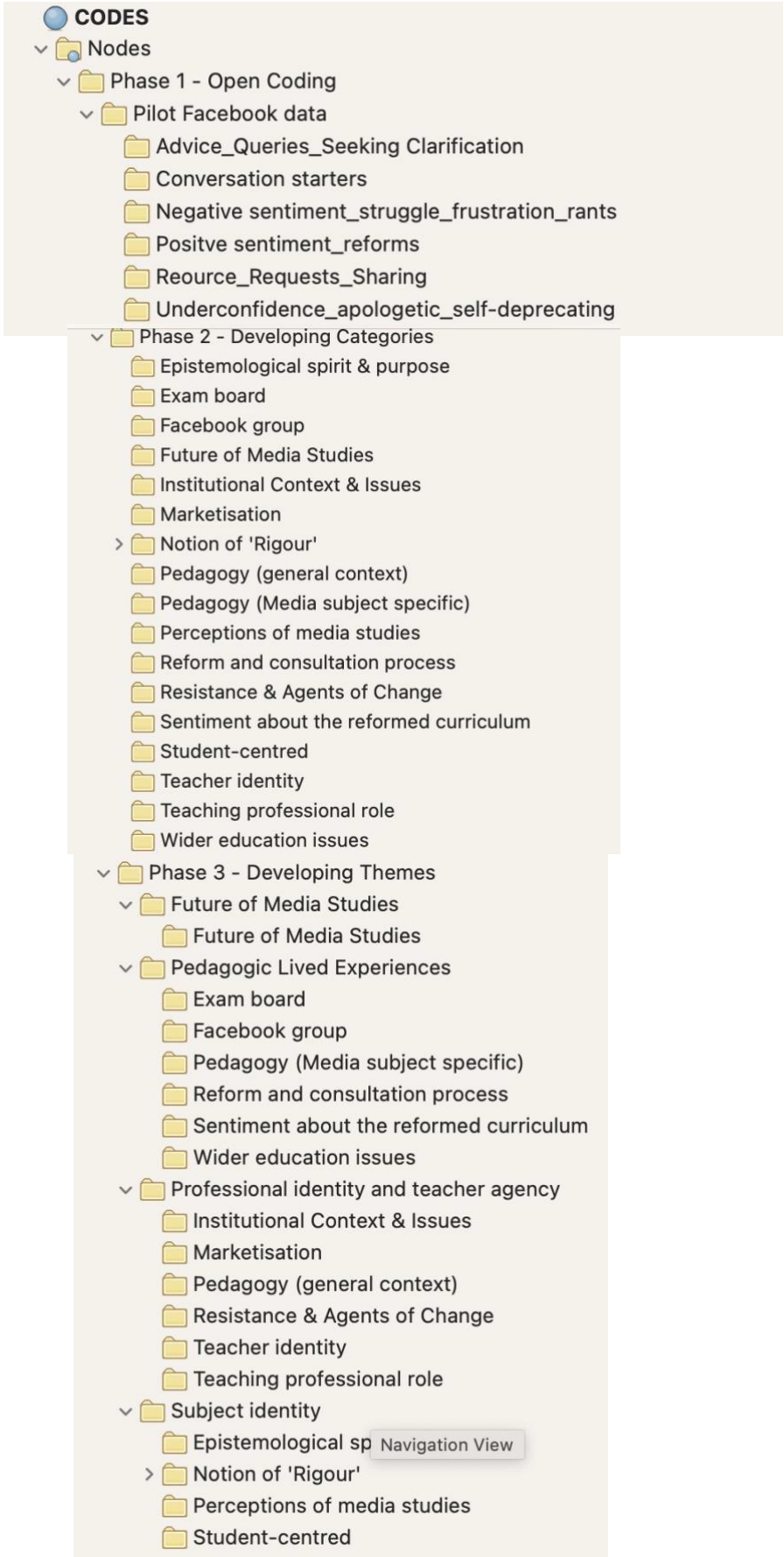
'inhabitation' of the research site to understand the language, the nuances, the practices and traditions of the space at a deeper level. This is facilitated by researcher interactions – again initial and ongoing – that could be passive and unobtrusive ('lurking') or more active and participatory.		research, inviting participation from members, and also some 'PMs' (personal messages) to admins and members who agreed to participate in my research interviews.
	P7: Immersion Immersion in the site, data, topic	This occurred in two iterations: 1. In the pilot stage where I conducted a week long 'intensive' observation of the most active of the three Facebook groups and collected data (all 88 posts in a 7 day period) as well as conducting 6 individual interviews with members in a similar timeframe 2. In the full study where I selected a range of key posts on the group over a three month period and 25 interviews with media teachers who were members of the group. The pandemic interrupted the naturalistic research of the group and as such, the interactions on the group changed in their focus as schools closed and exams cancelled. This had both its disadvantages and its benefits in terms of data collection. For the offline interviews with teachers sourced via the Facebook group, this was beneficial as more teachers were willing and able to be interviewed as they were able to fit these in to their working day more easily. However, whilst I continued to observe the online groups' interactions, I decided to take a more active approach on the groups by the summer after my interview data had been collected to triangulate my findings thus far and to elicit more data to mitigate for the opportunities lost to the pandemic. This is more fully explained in the Methods section.
M5: Integration Kozinets states that the lines between data collection, interpretation, and analysis are amorphous. The process is reflexive and iterative. He says 'Integration in netnography is an ongoing process of decoding, translating cross-translating and code-switching	P8: Indexing A data collection strategy to select sufficient but not overwhelming amounts of data	The first phase was a strong determinant in how second phase was designed and this was essentially, a scaled-up version of the first phase with some minor adjustments to account for the longer time period it covered. I accorded to the idea of data saturation, whereby, if the data is not generating any new findings, then data collection is complete. Part-way through the second phase, the individual interviews were not generating new data but it appeared that the kinds of teachers who put themselves forward for interviews also tended to share similar (strong) views. To test this, I decided to actively seek teachers who may not voluntarily put themselves forward for interviews and were of a different demographic to those who had already been interviewed. This included trainee and early career teachers as well as directly approaching some who had been commenting online but who had not put themselves forward to be interviewed.

between parts and wholes'	P9: Interpretation in depth interpretive analysis (interpenetration)	This is not a discrete process left solely to the 'Findings' section. Interpretation of the data, at many different levels, occurred implicitly from the very beginning and continued throughout the whole research process. As a researcher, I felt it important to be reflexive, responsive and adaptable, especially in the data collection phase particularly when it became disrupted by the pandemic. Again, more fully discussed in the Methods section.
	P10: Iteration Continuous interpretation, consideration of literature, data, site	This took place as a continuous thread interwoven throughout. As the concept of iteration suggests, this phase was not linear and as new literature came to light over the course of the research, this, too, was considered and integrated, as was my interaction and engagement with the Facebook groups and participants in the study.
M6: Incarnation This is what Kozinets conceives as the research 'coming to life. What began as an idea or question about the world now has form and shape, and exists as something concrete to be communicated to others. In essence, this is the incarnation of 'new knowledge' in the world.	P11: Instantiation How the project is represented. Kozinets suggests four types: symbolic, digital, auto and humanist	Kozinets' conception of symbolic netnography involves the study of a specific group and its architecture of shared meanings, collaboration and community. Inevitably, as an 'insider' embedded in this community, some autoethnographic elements also make up this instantiation.
	P12: Integration What happens as a result of the study? This goes beyond the study/thesis itself	The comparative time length of a part-time Ed D compared to a full time one, has both its benefits in this capacity and its drawbacks. The first phase generated a surprising amount of rich and valuable data early on in the research and I was able to share this at a number of education and media related conferences and events. The interest people have shown in the research has also extended to being asked to share research findings at such events as an annual exam board meeting and with national organisations such as the BFI for a variety of projects based around curriculum change and teacher voice.

Appendix 3: Anonymised Participant List

Pseudonym	Participant Biographical Information
Helen	> 15 years FE Teacher, NW England
Polly	> 25 years HOD, Exam Marker, Subject Specialist Secondary teacher, W Yorkshire
Bruce	> 18 years FE & Secondary Subject Specialist teacher, Midlands
Amina	PGCE trainee, SE England
Miles	> 13 years high performing Secondary School subject specialist teacher, London
George	> 25 years subject specialist FE teacher, Dorset
Adam	> 3 years course leader, subject specialist secondary teacher, Outer London
Maxine	> 10 years subject specialist 6th Form College teacher, NW England
Bethany	> 15 years high performing Secondary school subject specialist teacher, Midlands
Alex	> 20 years 6th Form College and FE subject specialist teacher, Hampshire and Surrey
Will	> 12 years Media Teacher at Independent Specialist Arts and Media Sixth Form, Surrey
Alan	> 5 years Catholic Secondary School, HOD, subject specialist teacher with FE/6th Form Background, South East England
Shruti	> 7 years large Converter Academy, subject specialist teacher, London area
Ellen	> 20 years 6th Form College, HOD, subject specialist teacher, inner London
James	> 20 years Boys Grammar School, A' Level only, small intake, English teacher
Matt	> 8 years Secondary school and former English teacher turned media teacher, South Yorkshire
Christine	> 20 years 6th Form College, Lancashire
Terry	Exam Board Subject Officer with recent experience of subject specialist media teaching
Emma	Media Studies university lecturer, South East England, background in Further Education as a Subject specialist.
Marianne	> 40 years in media education as a teacher and teacher trainer, executive board member of The MEA
David	Professor Emeritus in Media Education - background in teaching, teacher training and published academic author, executive board member of The MEA
Oliver	Senior education role in a Film and Media Charitable Organisation
Raph	Media Studies PGCE Lecturer
Kate	Media Studies PGCE Lecturer
Pritesh	> 5 years School Media Studies specialist, Midlands
Ben	> 10 years subject specialist school HOD teacher, Outer London
Sarah	> 15 years Curriculum Senior Leader, subject specialist, Girls' Grammar, Kent
Seamus	> 25 years former HOD large 6th Form College, principal examiner, subject specialist, Surrey
Alina	Facebook group admin & experienced media teacher, education setting and location not Disclosed
Lily	> 10 years Media teacher with subject specialist industry background, Academy in Kent
Megan	> 15 years College Lecturer, FE college, Bristol area.

Appendix 4: Screenshots of Nvivo architecture



Appendix 5: Codebook

- Phase 1 (Open Coding)
- Phase 2 Developing Categories
- Phase 3 Developing Themes

Nodes\\Phase 1 - Open Coding\\Pilot Facebook data\\Advice_Queries_Seeking Clarification

Name	Description	Files	References
Asking for advice		30	30
Asking for technical advice		2	2
Members responding with information and advice		20	21

Nodes\\Phase 1 - Open Coding\\Pilot Facebook data\\Conversation starters

Name	Description	Files	References
Conversation starters		27	28

Nodes\\Phase 1 - Open Coding\\Pilot Facebook data\\Negative sentiment_struggle_frustration_rants

Name	Description	Files	References
Venting frustration or struggle		19	19

Nodes\\Phase 1 - Open Coding\\Pilot Facebook data\\Positve sentiment_reforms

Name	Description	Files	References
Positive posts		1	1

Nodes\\Phase 1 - Open Coding\\Pilot Facebook data\\Reource_Requests_Sharing

Name	Description	Files	References
Resource request		16	16
Resource upload		12	12

Nodes\\Phase 1 - Open Coding\\Pilot Facebook data\\Underconfidence_apologetic_self-deprecating

Name	Description	Files	References
Apologetic, lack of confidence or self deprecating posts		21	21

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories

Name	Description	Files	References

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Epistemological spirit & purpose

Name	Description	Files	References
Canon, knowledge hierarchy & assessment		10	42
Commodification		2	3
Critical Thinking & Fake news		3	6
Curriculum purpose of Media Studies		21	61

Name	Description	Files	References
Decline in numbers taking MS		2	2
Decolonising the curriculum & reference to minorities		1	5
Employment		9	23
exam board		2	2
Film studies - relationship to		1	1
Higher Education		14	33
Inequality of opportunity		8	13
Legitimacy		1	2
Indulgence		1	1
London-centric		1	1
Media history		2	7
Media in English		2	3
Media Studies specialist teachers		2	7
Practical work		1	2
Primary and pre-GCSE study		1	3
Relationship with other subjects		8	13
Vocational courses		5	10

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Exam board

Name	Description	Files	References
Eduqas - reasons for choosing spec		3	3
Exam board choice		13	31
Examining		4	4
Negative - about Eduqas		4	5
OCR		1	1
Positive comments - Eduqas		3	6

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Facebook group

Name	Description	Files	References
Admin comments		1	1
Collaborating and sharing		6	13
Facebook Group use		73	151
FB group - community of teachers for support		5	9
FB group - helped with teaching the course		6	10
FB Group - how it is used		6	8
FB group - teachers' comments about it		3	7
Future - of the FB group		1	2
Gratitude and appreciation		8	9
Keeping subject resources free		2	5

Name	Description	Files	References
Keeping the facebook group free for members		1	3
Main uses of the group		4	7
Negative - running the FB group		1	2
Negative isssues with Facebook Group use		1	1
Positive - about other teachers		3	6
Reasons for joining the group		4	5
Reasons for starting the group		2	3
Resource sharing and collaboration		6	11
Sentiment from subject officer		1	2
Social media use - professional		3	3

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Future of Media Studies

Name	Description	Files	References
Exam Board changes		1	4
Future - Media studies - employment & skills		5	6
Future of Media Studies		22	58
High Low culture		1	1
Hopes and wishes - course related		8	19
Ofqual		1	2
Progression concerns (HE_Employment)		2	3
Student progression and well being		1	2

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Institutional Context & Issues

Name	Description	Files	References
Accountability and pressure from SLT		2	4
Equipment and technical resourcing issues		2	2
Institutional context		13	51
Issues - cohort recruitment and entry grades		4	9
Issues - staff and recruitment		1	1
Links to school funding		4	5
Student Entry Requirements		12	18
Student recruitment and retention		15	54
Vocational course - references to and comments		3	5

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Marketisation

Name	Description	Files	References
Advertising and monetising resources		6	11

Name	Description	Files	References
Marketisation		17	49
Keeping the facebook group free for members		1	1

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Notion of 'Rigour'

Name	Description	Files	References
Rigour		17	64

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Notion of 'Rigour'\\Political sentiment

Name	Description	Files	References
Political reference		16	37

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Pedagogy (general context)

Name	Description	Files	References
Pedagogy (general education)		3	4

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Pedagogy (Media subject specific)

Name	Description	Files	References
Engagement		9	30
Fact sheets		1	2
Likes		1	1
Negative about resources created or pedagogy		2	4
Pedagogy (subject specific)		17	67
Pedagogy - subject specific		4	6
Teacher confidence levels		30	45

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Perceptions of media studies

Name	Description	Files	References
Perceptions of Media Studies		17	58

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Reform and consultation process

Name	Description	Files	References
Consultation process		3	20
Ofqual		3	4

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Resistance & Agents of Change

Name	Description	Files	References
Agents of change		1	1
Resistance		9	15

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Sentiment about the reformed curriculum

Name	Description	Files	References
Assessment		1	1
Canon		1	2
Challenges - course content		6	12
Comments about practical work		4	6
Comparison to legacy Media and other cognate specs		19	60
Consultation & accreditation process		7	11
Contemporary texts and study of popular culture		20	56
Decolonise the curriculum and minorities		1	5
Course structure		4	8
CPD & subject knowledge		5	6
Curriculum choice and change		7	14
Curriculum reform process		15	59
DAvid Buckingham		2	2
Film studies - relationship to		5	6
Lack of confidence or inexperience in subject knowledge		4	6
Planning of lessons		2	5
Practical NEA issues		4	7
Sentiment - Contextual framework		2	2
Sentiment Content volume		17	53
Sentiment Course (Negative)		26	102
Sentiment course (Positive)		17	33
Positive comments - course content		4	11
Sentiment Exam board		3	9
Sentiment Exam board (Positive)		1	1
Sentiment Inappropriateness of course to students		2	2
Sentiment leaving teaching		2	3
Sentiment of worry, fear, anxiety		13	23
Sentiment Practical Coursework		19	51
Sentiment Set Text		22	82
Sentiment Theoretical content		20	66
Student expectations		2	2
Student experience of MS course		4	7

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Student-centred

Name	Description	Files	References
Student ability		8	14
Student Cultural Capital		4	11
Student demographic		3	4
Student engagement or enjoyment		16	54

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Teacher identity

Name	Description	Files	References
Background and history		4	6
Length of teaching and subject specific qual		2	2
Negative comments about other teachers		1	1
Professional identity - subject CPD related		41	73
Professional identity - resource creation		14	40
Professional identity - self		15	34
Teacher agency and autonomy		17	54
Teacher collaboration		5	7
Teacher experience and background		20	43
Teaching experience		7	7

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Teaching professional role

Name	Description	Files	References
Teacher training		10	20

Nodes\\Phase 2 - Developing Categories\\Wider education issues

Name	Description	Files	References
Budget cuts to education		9	14
Education in general		3	9
Ofsted		2	4
Sentiment about teaching		1	1
Teacher wellbeing		5	13

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes

Name	Description	Files	References

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Future of Media Studies

Name	Description	Files	References

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Future of Media Studies\\Future of Media Studies

Name	Description	Files	References
Exam Board changes		1	4
Future - Media studies - employment & skills		5	6
Future of Media Studies		22	58
High Low culture		1	1
Hopes and wishes - course related		8	19
Ofqual		1	2

Name	Description	Files	References
Progression concerns (HE_Employment)		2	3
Student progression and well being		1	2

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Pedagogic Lived Experiences

Name	Description	Files	References

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Pedagogic Lived Experiences\\Exam board

Name	Description	Files	References
Eduqas - reasons for choosing spec		3	3
Exam board choice		13	31
Examining		4	4
Negative - about Eduqas		4	5
OCR		1	1
Positive comments - Eduqas		3	6

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Pedagogic Lived Experiences\\Facebook group

Name	Description	Files	References
Admin comments		1	1
Collaborating and sharing		6	13
Facebook Group use		73	151
FB group - community of teachers for support		5	9
FB group - helped with teaching the course		6	10
FB Group - how it is used		6	8
FB group - teachers' comments about it		3	7
Future - of the FB group		1	2
Gratitude and appreciation		8	9
Keeping subject resources free		2	5
Keeping the facebook group free for members		1	3
Main uses of the group		4	7
Negative - running the FB group		1	2
Negative isssues with Facebook Group use		1	1
Positive - about other teachers		3	6
Reasons for joining the group		4	5
Reasons for starting the group		2	3
Resource sharing and collaboration		6	11
Sentiment from subject officer		1	2
Social media use - professional		3	3

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Pedagogic Lived Experiences\\Pedagogy (Media subject specific)

Name	Description	Files	References
Engagement		9	30
Fact sheets		1	2
Likes		1	1
Negative about resources created or pedagogy		2	4
Pedagogy (subject specific)		17	67
Pedagogy - subject specific		4	6
Teacher confidence levels		30	45

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Pedagogic Lived Experiences\\Reform and consultation process

Name	Description	Files	References
Consultation process		3	20
Ofqual		3	4

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Pedagogic Lived Experiences\\Sentiment about the reformed curriculum

Name	Description	Files	References
Assessment		1	1
Canon		1	2
Challenges - course content		6	12
Comments about practical work		4	6
Comparison to legacy Media and other cognate specs		19	60
Consultation & accreditation process		7	11
Contemporary texts and study of popular culture		20	56
Decolonise the curriculum and minorities		1	5
Course structure		4	8
CPD & subject knowledge		5	6
Curriculum choice and change		7	14
Curriculum reform process		15	59
DAvid Buckingham		2	2
Film studies - relationship to		5	6
Lack of confidence or inexperience in subject knowledge		4	6
Planning of lessons		2	5
Practical NEA issues		4	7
Sentiment - Contextual framework		2	2
Sentiment Content volume		17	53
Sentiment Course (Negative)		26	102
Sentiment course (Positive)		17	33
Positive comments - course content		4	11
Sentiment Exam board		3	9
Sentiment Exam board (Positive)		1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
Sentiment Inappropriateness of course to students		2	2
Sentiment leaving teaching		2	3
Sentiment of worry, fear, anxiety		13	23
Sentiment Practical Coursework		19	51
Sentiment Set Text		22	82
Sentiment Theoretical content		20	66
Student expectations		2	2
Student experience of MS course		4	7

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Pedagogic Lived Experiences\\Wider education issues

Name	Description	Files	References
Budget cuts to education		9	14
Education in general		3	9
Ofsted		2	4
Sentiment about teaching		1	1
Teacher wellbeing		5	13

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Professional identity and teacher agency

Name	Description	Files	References

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Professional identity and teacher agency\\Institutional Context & Issues

Name	Description	Files	References
Accountability and pressure from SLT		2	4
Equipment and technical resourcing issues		2	2
Institutional context		13	51
Issues - cohort recruitment and entry grades		4	9
Issues - staff and recruitment		1	1
Links to school funding		4	5
Student Entry Requirements		12	18
Student recruitment and retention		15	54
Vocational course - references to and comments		3	5

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Professional identity and teacher agency\\Marketisation

Name	Description	Files	References
Advertising and monetising resources		6	11
Marketisation		17	49
Keeping the facebook group free for members		1	1

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Professional identity and teacher agency\\Pedagogy (general context)

Name	Description	Files	References
Pedagogy (general education)		3	4

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Professional identity and teacher agency\\Resistance & Agents of Change

Name	Description	Files	References
Agents of change		1	1
Resistance		9	15

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Professional identity and teacher agency\\Teacher identity

Name	Description	Files	References
Background and history		4	6
Length of teaching and subject specific qual		2	2
Negative comments about other teachers		1	1
Professional identity - subject CPD related		41	73
Professional identity - resource creation		14	40
Professional identity - self		15	34
Teacher agency and autonomy		17	54
Teacher collaboration		5	7
Teacher experience and background		20	43
Teaching experience		7	7

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Professional identity and teacher agency\\Teaching professional role

Name	Description	Files	References
Teacher training		10	20

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Subject identity

Name	Description	Files	References
Set Theorists own views		1	1

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Subject identity\\Epistemological spirit & purpose

Name	Description	Files	References
Canon, knowledge hierarchy & assessment		10	42
Commodification		2	3
Critical Thinking & Fake news		3	6
Curriculum purpose of Media Studies		21	61
Decline in numbers taking MS		2	2
Decolonising the curriculum & reference to minorities		1	5
Employment		9	23
exam board		2	2

Name	Description	Files	References
Film studies - relationship to		1	1
Higher Education		14	33
Inequality of opportunity		8	13
Legitimacy		1	2
Indulgence		1	1
London-centric		1	1
Media history		2	7
Media in English		2	3
Media Studies specialist teachers		2	7
Practical work		1	2
Primary and pre-GCSE study		1	3
Relationship with other subjects		8	13
Vocational courses		5	10

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Subject identity\\Notion of 'Rigour'

Name	Description	Files	References
Rigour		17	64

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Subject identity\\Notion of 'Rigour'\\Political sentiment

Name	Description	Files	References
Political reference		16	37

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Subject identity\\Perceptions of media studies

Name	Description	Files	References
Perceptions of Media Studies		17	58

Nodes\\Phase 3 - Developing Themes\\Subject identity\\Student-centred

Name	Description	Files	References
Student ability		8	14
Student Cultural Capital		4	11
Student demographic		3	4
Student engagement or enjoyment		16	54

Appendix 6: Recommendations arising from research findings

Increase curriculum flexibility and reduce prescriptive content:

1. Give teachers more autonomy in the selection and optionality of texts for study;
2. Reduce or remove the need for set texts so they don't outdate quickly and can be more responsive to contemporary media contexts;
3. Adapt the curriculum so it is focused around the teaching of the key concepts in media, rather than on a textual approach. This could also include, as suggested by some teachers in the study, increasing the unseen element of the exam;
4. Reduce the level of prescription in practical production NEA briefs to encourage creativity and the development of technical skills;
5. Maintain the requirement for theoretical study but remove prescription of set theories/theories to encourage a more critical, appropriate and relevant engagement with theories. As originally suggested by Buckingham (2017), the wording of the subject content framework, regarding the study of theorists, should be changed from 'to include [names of set theorists]' and replaced with 'for example, [list of suggested theorists]' or similar.
6. Improve the accessibility of the subject to diverse student populations through a more inclusive, socially reflective and engaging curriculum.

Reduce emphasis on terminal assessment and increase practical production content:

- Develop a more balanced media studies curriculum that reflects real world practical application of understanding;
- Increase the practical production component above the current 30%
- Allow for the return to, and incorporate, group work assessment as part of the practical production stages to reflect real world media industry working practices.
- Create briefs reflect changing and contemporary real-world media industry practices and skills.

Reduce the volume of content coverage and privilege depth of study over breadth:

12. Adopt an assessment framework that takes a conceptual approach, rather than an exclusively textual approach, could cross-cut the nine forms and ensure a more critical, holistic and integrated understanding of texts, issues and debates.

Encourage innovative and creative pedagogic practices and critical thinking:

13. Maintain high quality exam board support and resources but encourage more variety and creativity in pedagogical approaches that diverge from the more didactic and reductive methods of 'approved knowledge' such as the exam board fact-sheets.

Support for high quality teacher training and continued professional development:

14. Media studies teachers should have access to a greater range of high quality subject-specialist professional development;
15. Develop clearer subject-specialist teacher training routes;

Ensure teacher educators are involved in subject curriculum development:

14. Teachers should be involved in consultations relating to curriculum reform and review, and which should be robust, well-organised, meaningful and genuinely reflective of their insights and experiences;
15. Consultations should include a representative spread of teachers, academics and other key figures vested in the development of the subject to gain a range of balanced and equitable perspectives, as part of a transparent process.
16. Attention should be paid to the link between teacher autonomy, trust, professional identity and well-being, particularly when significant curriculum change is being proposed.

Engage with policy makers:

12. Develop engagement between policy-makers, the subject associations and key organisations and bodies related to media education, to influence educational reforms and ensure that the needs of Media Studies are considered in future curriculum developments;

Continue to advocate for the importance of Media Studies as an academic subject:

18. Advocate for the study of media to be a compulsory component in the primary and secondary curriculums, to include not just education leading to media literacy but also creative and critical thinking skills, the worth of which would extend far beyond the confines of the individual subject discipline.