

“We’re all creative now: the impact of digital technology on the Media Literacy debate.”

Digital Media technology that was once the preserve of the select few is now available at the local computer store for anyone to use. Want to make a movie? You can. Digital slideshow? No problem. As the digital revolution continues to have a profound effect on the film and media sectors in particular and education in general, this paper will explore the impact of these developments on the media literacy debate.

I will start, though, by defining what I call I call ‘Yosser syndrome’, in homage to Alan Bleasdale’s darkly comic creation in the 1982 classic ‘Boys from the Blackstuff’. Yosser laboured (no pun intended) under the misguided view that all he needed were the tools of the trade and he could do any job. His apotheosis was when he marched defiantly onto a building site and demanded a job in his own inimitable way

Yosser “Gizza Job”

Murphy (foreman) “I only need a brickie”

Yosser “Yes, that’s me, I’m a brickie, I can lay bricks”.

Yosser picks up the bag of tools and starts building a wall. Unfortunately he has no skill whatsoever and builds the worst wall imaginable, ignoring the exhortation of his workmate “Yosser, you don’t know what you’re doing”

When confronted about his work by Murphy he defends himself “I’ve laid bricks before, anyone can lay bricks”

Yosser syndrome – the belief that all you need are the tools of the trade and you can be a tradesman, or in the context of this paper, all you need are digital media tools and you can be a Media Producer. This notion permeates and clouds too much thinking and policy around Media Practice.

Now, lets set the scene for the rest of this paper.

The UK Government has a broad agenda to raise the quality of technology-rich education and the creation of a knowledge economy based on the new communications technologies of the Internet. In

tandem with the articulation of these aspirations, the development of technological solutions by computer and telecommunication companies, in the fields of Media Production and Media Communications, have made the realisation of these goals much more achievable than was the case even 5 years ago.

We have two parallel strands, Government Policy and relentless technological change, that are having a profound affect on education in the UK. One has only to look back at the classroom of the early 1990s and compare it with the classroom from almost any time in the preceding 100 years to see what little change had taken place, to realise that what has happened since then has been, to use an over-worked but apposite cliché, 'revolutionary', at least in technological terms.

Digital technology now abounds in most schools, even if there are major differences of scope and emphasis between different schools and local authorities, as well as within and between the regions of the UK. This is not a trivial change. LCD projectors, Whiteboards and PowerPointitis have arrived with a vengeance. Even my local secondary school's prize evening in December 2004 was entreated to a PowerPoint presentation of the pupils exploits and achievements from the past year. And I have to say it was effective in bringing to life, with images and carefully worded captions, the school trips and other extra-curricular activities that most of the audience had little, if any, prior knowledge of.

This is a feature of technology rich educational environments – the desire to share, or more accurately perhaps, to publish the pupils or students work, not put it into a cupboard and forget about it. Websites, digital slideshows and linear movies are now routinely 'screened' to appreciative parents and, importantly perhaps, in the light of Government policies in many aspects of education, to representatives of funding agencies and boards of governors. College's such as Long Road Sixth Form College in Cambridge have lead the way in this type of activity, using the local cinema, in their case the Cambridge Arts Picture House, to screen their students work. The experience at Long Road involved another layer to this technology issue, that of the use of appropriate and accessible technology. Having struggled with their previous digital video editing equipment, the College found that switching to another platform and software solution, namely the Apple iMac and the Apple iMovie

software, meant that they were able to concentrate on the curriculum rather than the technology. According to Pete Fraser, the Head of Media, "The colourful nature of the iMacs does seem to encourage technophobic students to overcome their fears". Another Long Road teacher, Steve Thorne, said "With iMovie I can give them 10 minutes of my time and they are already on their way". This issue of the choice of technology is one I will return to.

Of course, engaging with the outside world is not a new concept in education. After all, music classes have enriched school life with concerts and recitations for years, whilst Art classes have had their displays and exhibitions to give but two examples. What is new, however, is that digital technology has enabled school students on Media Studies and Film courses to confidently present their work to a wider audience.

Once theoretical debates about media practice and production can now be informed by hands-on practical work using digital media production tools. Just as JM Forster noted that in the act of writing one clarifies one's thoughts and understanding, so also does the act of production clarify and deepen ones understanding of the media being produced.

Where, therefore, it was once said that 'the goal of media production is conceptual understanding'; it may now be said that 'the goal of media production is publication using digital technology', with conceptual understanding being implicit, rather than an explicit motivation.

A further issue is that of the growth of consumer digital technology. Throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century there has been a rapid and continuing growth in the use of communications technologies in the home, to the extent that the Internet is often reported as having overtaken the humble television as the primary source of entertainment. Although OFCOM reports that the TV was still the primary source of news during the 2003 Iraq War, for example, a significant alternative source of news and insight was from the 'Baghdad Blogger'. As the Times of India reported, "Bloggers beat conventional media" for early reporting of the Boxing Day Tsunami disaster, with both our own BBC and Guardian newspaper using blogs and web testimonies as vital ingredients of their coverage.

In the realm of entertainment, reality TV programmes such as Big Brother blur the distinction between TV and other forms of broadcasting, with more 'viewers' accessing the programme from the Internet than through the conventional TV. The continuing growth in the use of the Internet was shown in October 2004 when BT reported that the UK now has 5 million Broadband subscribers, with 50,000 new subscribers every week. According to the telecoms research firm Baskerville, this will mean that an estimated 32% of households will have subscribed to Broadband by the end of 2005. Some analysts predict an even more accelerated take-up due to the impact of OFCOM's ruling that BT must reduce broadband prices, the advent of enhanced Internet services such as Voice over IP and increasing competition, let alone the opportunities afforded by on-line shopping.

What does this consumer technological development mean for education? A clear issue is that of enhanced and extended learning opportunities, as access to knowledge is 'democratised'. Google's recent announcement of a programme to digitally scan books from the Harvard, Stanford, the University of Michigan, the University of Oxford and the New York Public libraries and make them searchable online is a pointer to the future. Time, cost and distance from information will no longer determine who has access to knowledge. Alongside increasing access to knowledge in the forms of written texts we also have the access to digital media tools on the home computer. Access to the tools of the trade is no longer a barrier for those wanting to create and publish digital media products, notwithstanding my earlier comments about 'Yosser syndrome'!

The result of this for education is clear, if you listen to the siren voices of the technocrats

"The writing is on the wall for education and educators. The survivors will be those who rapidly embrace a broad spectrum of technologies so they can offer the right mix of courseware in the most appropriate form to the widest possible audience..."

– American Hytech Corporation, www.ahc.net/submultimedia.htm, (website accessed 30 April 2004)

A more palatable, dignified and encouraging view is that

“...digital technologies are making possible a “learning revolution” in education. We believe that these new digital technologies can (and should) transform not only how children learn, but also what children learn, and who they learn with.”

– Creating a Learning Revolution, Nicholas Negroponte, Mitchel Resnick and Justine Cassell (MIT Media Lab), <http://www.unesco.org/education/educprog/lwf/doc/portfolio/opinion8.htm> , (website accessed 23 December 2004)

I have sketched out the technological issues that are confronting us – Government policy with its rhetoric of employability, creativity and a skills-based economy; rapid change in the technology within our schools and finally the growth in consumer technology. The ingredients are there for new learning opportunities. I would now like to highlight what research has taken place to investigate, develop and encourage new pedagogies. The most insightful was the BECTA ‘DV in Education’ project that ran from October 2001 to March 2002. It harks back to my earlier comments about the Long Road experience as it too used Apple iMacs and Apple iMovie software, along with Canon cameras and backing from Channel 4. Fifty schools were the beneficiaries of new digital video equipment to enable them to explore how they could use this technology across the curriculum. The evidence from this pilot survey was that the use of DV technology can

- increase pupil engagement with the curriculum
- promote and develop a range of learning styles
- motivate and engage a wider range of pupils than traditional teaching methods, so providing greater access to the curriculum

A second, larger, project followed on from this pilot survey, which, encouragingly for teachers of Media (!), found that

- high quality teaching remains the key factor in raising achievement
- high quality work showed a greater attention to the uniqueness of the ‘language’ of the moving image
- understanding and control of this language, *rather than simply the technology* (my emphasis), gives pupils access to expression through digital video

As Apple Computers were key elements in these developments it was not surprising that Apple themselves sought to build on this work by starting their own courses for teachers in the UK, and in April 2002 the first European 'Apple Teachers Institute' was held in Cheltenham College. Modeled on the North American ATI's that have run for many years, the 4-day course was entitled 'Learning in a Digital World'. I attended that course and found that it had attracted a wide range of teachers, from Primary through to Higher Education. All were actively engaged in digital technologies, either through the BECTA project or from their own initiative. Teachers were enthusiastically engaging with digital technology whilst at the same time I discovered many examples of frustration and exasperation with the restrictions placed on them by those in charge of IT equipment. School budgets had no heading for a DV camera to be purchased; delegates reported a lack of authority to purchase DV software or any other solution not favoured by those controlling the purse strings; the PTA being used to raise funds for vital equipment and so on. The biggest frustration of all was that they were barred from buying Apple Computers and therefore using the iMovie software that had proved so successful in the BECTA studies.

These observations back up further research, outwith the ATI, that the issue of Apple Computers being asked for by Media teachers may be met by an icy glare and a stony silence! One school I visited had to raise money through the PTA for a significant purchase, and was successful, but the money came with a proviso – *you cannot buy Apple equipment*. One might pertinently ask where the pedagogy is in that! Why is the technology tail wagging the education head?

As these developments unfold we have what has been dubbed the 'digital generation' growing up, taking this technology for granted and weaving it into their daily lives. In my view this is where we start to have major issues to address. As these digital technology developments continue to impact pre-school, primary and secondary education there is a 'knowledge gap' appearing between those that are benefiting from the advances in education and those outside of the system, not least the parents of the 'digital generation'. Higher Education has a particular problem because the student cohort is not uniform in terms of age, educational attainment and its engagement with digital technology. The digital generation may well be sitting alongside 'lifelong learners'; this group has not benefited equally

from the changes I have been talking about. There is an important pedagogical issue – how and what do we teach mixed ability classes in a technology rich curriculum?

Equally, there is concern from industry that digitisation is a threat to their craft skills. We have been here before. Desktop publishing was firstly met by disdain, only suitable for elitist nerds and technologists, and then resistance until it was an irresistible force that changed publishing and brought Graphic Design into the mainstream. But it took a decade or more to become widespread and accepted.

I would summarise a general ‘digitisation process’ by which a traditional analogue activity may be transformed into multipurpose digital data by the following sequence, which, like DTP before it, can take a decade or more to reach critical and professional acceptance:

- Firstly we have a new technology product
- This is met by professional denial
- Then it is taken up by the Elite (because it is expensive and/or only technocrats know how to use it)
- This leads to Technology Evangelism (the “look what I can do!” syndrome)
- Adoption leads to competitive advantage, which is transitory
- Finally, there is widespread adoption, and ultimately, consumerisation

The following quotes illustrate some of these points. Firstly there is the professional disdain and despair at what has been unleashed by this new digital technology,

“Through the 1980s and the early 1990s things became easier and easier to do. One less pleasant result was that people who should not even be allowed to spell ‘design’ considered themselves to be publishers, and the world had to live through years of round-cornered boxes, shadowed text, and dozens of fonts on every page.”

– Keith Martin, ‘Making it right in Movies’ in *MacUser*, Vol. 20, No. 10, (May 2004), p.17.

Then there is the understanding and realization that the perceived threat is not so real and immediate, from Simon Jary in a DIGIT magazine editorial,

“Now that so many more people are creatively literate, our visionary genius won’t be rumbled and humbled. Quite the opposite - talent, skill and imagination will be truly respected because now it’s better understood.”

– Simon Jary, Is everyone creative these days?, DIGIT magazine, June 2004, p.35

When the photographic darkroom was at the axis of change there was resistance as exemplified by this quote by John Lund, a practicing photographer and early adopter,

“For a number of years the photographic community was very hostile. I was lecturing in Santa Fe about Photoshop. This guy calls out: “Do you call yourself a real photographer?” And I said yes. He was really upset about the sea change he saw around him”

– John Lund, photographer, Inside the Publishing Revolution: The Adobe Story, p 120

A more considered view, again from Simon Jary in the same DIGIT editorial,

“A digital photographer can get lucky and produce the odd stunning shot every 512mb or so. It’s less likely that, after a few hours on iMovie or Premiere, the amateur filmmaker will produce anything to trouble the broadcast community. You can’t get lucky and suddenly design an interactive Flash web site. And DTP proved that a few fonts and a word-processor don’t make for a great corporate brochure.”

– Simon Jary, Is everyone creative these days? DIGIT, June 2004, p.35

Outcomes of digitization and fundamental technological change are not always predictable, as John Warnock, Head of Adobe notes, when commenting on a key development in the DTP revolution

“No customer had asked for Postscript. The market we were going after had 5 entrenched companies. There were 250,000 graphic artists then. Now there are at least 6 million”

– John Warnock, founder of Adobe, Inside the Publishing Revolution: The Adobe Story, p 51

Michael Rosenblum, speaking at the *Cyfrwng* conference at Bangor in March 2004, made the case for digital video-journalism, using the venerable Sony PD150, and was met by some anguished responses from those practicing the time-honoured craft skills.

It is sadly the case, at least for those who find their craft skills usurped by digital technology, that once the technology genie is out of the bottle it cannot be put back. We have to learn to live with technology, adapt and change with the times. Communications have been transformed by email, mobile phones and chat, print publishing has become DTP, photography has gone digital, education is being digitized, and we are now seeing music, radio and video as the battleground of a new publishing revolution. Euryng Ogwen Williams, Digital Consultant for S4C, characterizes this time of immense change as a Tesseract, with the changes so profound that the world that emerges at the end is unrecognizable from that which existed at the beginning.

One might ask what the impact of change is on industrial practice? This quote puts it succinctly “I end up with things I couldn’t do in traditional media. I’m not simulating anything. I’m integrating everything, traditional and nontraditional media.”

– Sharon Steuer, illustrator and author, *Inside the Publishing Revolution: The Adobe Story*, p 121

An E-skills UK and Gartner study shows the impact of new communications is being felt in the IT profession, “The entry of a new generation of youngsters from 2007 onwards, reared on the Internet and computer games will place new pressures on the IT department. This workforce will demand software applications that enable collaborative working and multi-tasking.”

It is significant that at this time we have, under Section 11 of the Communications Act 2003, OFCOM being handed the Media Literacy baton from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport and (perhaps) wondering what to do with it. There has been a consultation with a groundbreaking commitment to a third level of literacy, namely Media Literacy, to sit alongside the ‘traditional’ literacies of reading and writing. Media Literacy subsumes and encompasses a swathe of low-status ‘new’ literacies such as computer literacy, visual literacy and so on. If we return to my earlier

comments about IT issues, it seems to me that if we are to be true to the idea of a Media Literate society, with Media Literacy promoted by government through OFCOM, then we need to address the computer technology issue and put it in the hands of the Media teachers and not IT managers. I would go as far as to say that IT as a separate subject is an anachronism, important in its day but that day is quickly passing. The ghetto-isation of IT in my view is unsustainable as computers get 'easier' to use and as they morph into new form factors such as multi-faceted mobile phones and iPods, as well as other 'disruptive technology' that is yet to emerge from the R&D labs of digital technology companies. Whatever form it takes, IT should be cross-curricular, pervasive but not invasive, enabling tools that may be used when required and as appropriate within the whole curriculum.

The sooner we regard IT as tools and not treat IT as a pseudo-subject, the quicker we will be able to realise the potential of media technology across the curriculum; the key issue being the appropriate use of technology for a particular and specific purpose.

If we are to have a media literate generation then we need to flesh out what it means to be media literate. OFCOM are concerned about protecting children, labelling content, enabling parents and guardians to be able to make informed decisions about media issues, effectively taking the gatekeeper role previously ascribed to the broadcaster in the pre-digital mass communications era, without really addressing a central theme of media literacy in a digitally converged world – that of the removal of the boundaries between production and consumption. The digital generation is comfortable with, and engaged with, a range of technology that was hitherto unimaginable except in flights of Sci-Fi fantasy.

Education needs to respond. Levels of education need to be able to build upon the literacies of the prior rungs of the educational ladder, in order that we effectively engage and extend students. As I noted earlier, Higher Education has particular issues due to the cross generational cohorts it attracts. Less than 10 years ago the notion of image processing was alien to most students I came into contact with. It was an advanced, post-graduate topic in our IT Department. Now it is an assumed skill for students entering first year Media courses that I teach. Photoshop has entered the vernacular, if not

the dictionary (yet) as a verb; images are photoshopped. Now the issues are more to do with creativity and ethics rather than ability to use a particular piece of software.

As I have tried to show, Media Literacy 'education' is taking place at not only at the formal level within schools but also within many other contexts where learning occurs; for this to be made sense of there is an urgent need for 'joined up education', to take account of the literacies being developed at all levels of the educational ladder as well as outside of mainstream education. If we don't then we will not have fully engaged students on our Media courses, or maybe no students at all.

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