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The Importance Of Social And Political Literacies: In Defence Of Cultural And Media Studies

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In 1991, teaching in a BA (Communication) in South Australia, we wrote the following:

Cultural & Media Studies' major concern is with the historical formation, social organisation and cultural communication of meaning (the forms of, say, information and pleasures/ "entertainment") which have definite social and political effects or outcomes for different sorts of audiences of such media as television, film, video, radio, the printed press, magazines, literature, etc. To put this in another way, *Cultural & Media Studies* describes and analyses the government or management of the human and technological resources and techniques used in the production of socially effective meanings...

Cultural & Media Studies undertakes specific rather than generalising or universalising work on particular, limited topics concerning the material ways in which people operate and change various cultural and media institutions and technologies. It does not offer, prescribe or claim to explain everything about the entirety of life or the whole of society or culture, or to identify some proposed essences of these. Its intellectual work aims to describe and analyse these in historically informed and socially useful ways. It is a professional field of teaching and research equipping and empowering its practitioners with advanced skills of composition and reading in flexibly specialised ways. It does not claim to be 'objective' in any scientific or absolute philosophical sense but neither is its professional framework 'biased'.

Culturally, socially and politically, matters are too complex and differentiated for such claims to have any plausibility whatsoever. Accordingly, any moral truths and political conclusions you, as students, take from or attach to the *Cultural & Media Studies* interdisciplinary work are your own responsibility. (Greenfield & Williams, 1991)

This was part of an introduction of students to the interdisciplinary education provided by *Cultural & Media Studies*, in which an objective was to train flexibly skilled democratic citizens, able to describe and analyse the role a variety of media play as integral parts of people's daily lives.¹ It strikes us as quite foreign to the picture of *Cultural Studies* presented in Keith Windschuttle's recent philosophical critique of "media theory" (1998). Here it appears as a damaging theoretical incursion into the real, daily operation of those media, through the misleading, or at best, wasting time, of students working to acquire the skills and professional ethos of journalists.

Windschuttle's critique is easily taken up and repeated and, perhaps, persuasive because its themes are well-established ones: a liberal humanism whose alibi is a more or less transparent reality which, to be understood, requires little more than Orwell's "prose like a window pane" and an appreciation of the agency of self-possessed individuals. Or are we too harsh? Windschuttle's "three principles" of journalism -- an empirical methodology, a relationship with the audience, and good writing -- seem in themselves admirable. But these straightforward principles entail assumptions that "media theory" -- or Windschuttle's understanding of it -- is a cynical argument directed to unacceptably challenge and fraudulently unseat these accepted principles; they are therefore not so straightforward.

If an empirical methodology is challenged by theory that eschews generalising and calls for "specific...work on particular limited topics" (Greenfield & Williams 1991), then perhaps this is not a method exhorting empirical evidence but rather an empiricism that denies its own situation. If journalists' relationship with their audience is challenged by description and analysis of how audiences, markets and constituencies differ and how their tastes and interests -- while actively and meaningfully wielded by them -- are nonetheless shaped up by the practices found in media and other institutions, then this journalist/audience relationship is perhaps less one of respect for the readers than a lazy acceptance of an industry rationalisation that media simply provide 'what people want'.

If a commitment to good writing is challenged by a commitment to developing advanced skills of composition and reading in flexibly specialised ways, then perhaps the principle of good writing is less a commitment to communicate than a refusal to communicate, a refusal to engage with the technical languages appropriate to specialised analysis and a misunderstanding of the obvious need to address different audiences differently.

Windschuttle may object that these challenges we attribute to "media theory" do not accurately represent the heart of *Cultural*

Studies. Certainly, Windschuttle presents the field of intellectual work he abhors as unified by a notable absence of his three principles for good journalism -- shot through, instead, by linguistic idealism, a loss of belief in human agency, and appalling (standard) English. But as Cunningham and Flew (1998) and Turner (1998) have already written, this is a caricature of the field. It carries no such unity.

For instance, if ideology-critique has been a defining focus in *Cultural Studies*, another and somewhat contrary theme -- media and power -- has also existed in *Cultural & Media Studies* (where the ampersand signals a materialist grounding of the study of cultures in their associated media of communication). Hence, our focus in 1991 on the government of populations and associated questions of power rather than on ideology. This orientation, developed in Australia during the 1970s and 1980s and dispersed throughout a number of universities, eschewed linguistic imperialism and psychoanalytic and structuralist accounts of subjectivity; but without returning to the idealist stance endorsed by Windschuttle as the only way to educate journalists.

Instead, a focus on governmental power -- on media as persuasively and informatively relaying an array of knowledges and techniques operative in guiding and shaping the mental and behavioural attributes of people, though in non-determinist ways -- establishes a materialist view of the importance of media, which does not reduce it to the imposition of ideology on unwitting audiences, nor reduce its operation to the straightforward 'accurate reporting' of a real world (Windschuttle 1998:14).

Significantly materialism does not figure in Windschuttle's account of intellectual orientations. Though one strand of materialist inquiry -- Marxism -- is ridiculed and retired as a serious contributor to "media theory", no further countenancing of an alternate tradition to linguistic idealism or to realism occurs in Windschuttle's argument. Our contention is that if Windschuttle did consider other materialist contributions to "media theory" then two of the things he wishes to claim as all on the side of journalism practice -- attention to empirical evidence, and taking agency seriously -- could not be presented as missing from "media theory". (Or, more accurately, from the kind of analytics used in the governmental approach indicated above to describe and analyse -- rather than simply critique -- the routines, operations and outcomes of media workers and institutions.)

One way Windschuttle could have avoided this narrow view would have been to take on board the sociological strand of *Cultural & Media Studies*, rather than focussing on *Cultural Studies* as essentially a renovated (and traduced) literary criticism put through the wringer of various structuralisms such as semiotics

and more latterly, postmodernism. Doing so, he would have needed to mention sources such as Raymond Williams' historical sociology of culture (with its rejection of ideology critique as "a recognisable form of idealist philosophy" (1981, 29-30); or Denis McQuail's sociology of the media and its attention to the varied traditions of 'effects studies' and to the liberal-democratic view of audiences in the uses and gratifications approach. These and other inputs to "media theory" make it a far less homogenous thing than Windschuttle allows to emerge in his *Quadrant* article.

Williams, in a discussion of "the news", gave an account of the value of "media studies and cultural studies" to journalism. He argues that it is because of the "immediate pressures" under which journalists work:

"[T]hat a detached analysis of methods and conventions is necessary. What we do, under pressure, and especially what we do as professionals, is what we have been trained to do, what we have got used to doing, what at deep levels we can take for granted so that we can get on with an immediate job. And there is no profession which can fail to learn from someone making explicit just the training, the usage, the taking for granted, that underlie all practice. These can then be consciously affirmed, or consciously amended. This is how all rigorous professions work". (1989, 117-118)

Williams makes an argument here for the need to acknowledge the frameworks, the ways of making sense, the 'literacies'² within which practices are carried out. It is the role of *Cultural & Media Studies* to foster students' social and political literacies -- their means to make broader sense of the outcomes of media workers' routines and practices than whether they conform to the undeniably crucial industry protocols of accurate reporting -- and their awareness of those literacies in play in the societies in which they live and work.

For Journalism students *Cultural & Media Studies* introduces a range of social and broadly political issues and problems in ways that explore their intimate connection to media output and usage; this is their interdisciplinary strength. Whatever Windschuttle has to say about some elements of *Cultural Studies* as it is or has been taught in Australia, in passing it off as the whole of "media theory" he risks damaging, rather than enhancing, pedagogy in the area of media and cultural industries -- which, crucially, include journalism.

NOTES

1. While we are not teachers of journalism we have for many years taught

journalism students in allied and adjacent courses ranging from Cultural & Media Studies, to Politics and even Literary Studies.

2. This usage of 'literacy' to name a particular, institutionally organised and imparted set of knowledges and techniques is the same found in, for example, Williamson's (1997) definition and discussion of 'media literacy' in the special issue of *Southern Review: Literary & Interdisciplinary Essays on New Literacies* (30.3).

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