

## ***The Digital Utterance: A Cross-Media Approach to Media Education.***

### **Abstract.**

This chapter draws on Bakhtin's term 'heteroglossia' to help sketch out a new conception of crossmedia practice, which while recognising distinct media as 'utterances', also celebrates a renewed dialogism between them. We will suggest that media that were once seen as separate, have always been intimately connected, and that a study of the texts produced by this connectivity (such as adaptations and paratexts) can illuminate complex interactions.

Recent developments in digital media have resulted in a great deal of crossmedia innovation. With shifts towards synchronous media consumption, and its immersive multi-attentional possibilities, through to transmediality, and the way it reshapes both producer and user practices, crossmedia extends the very idea of 'media'; in many ways, it could even be said to have become textual itself.

These changes have significant pedagogic implications, with a medium specific view of media being myopic and limiting in what it can offer students in an increasingly crossmedia world. Media education privileges existent academic silos, and curricula are therefore skewed toward a particular medium. We will suggest this distorts critical perspectives of crossmedia; a film studies scholar for example will view crossmedia through the historical and theoretical lens of cinema, yet cinema as an industrial practice now revels in its crossmediality. Even those that recognise the collapse of the normative media paradigm (e.g. Bennett et al. 2011) expend their energies discussing industrial or audience transformations, yet fail to acknowledge the need for parallel changes in media education.

Drawing on current industry practices, this chapter will call for a new pedagogy which allows for a position whereby crossmedia events are not seen as an array of loosely connected and interrelated texts, that are examined within now outmoded academic silos, but as a type of 'digital heteroglossia' where different media are seen as 'utterances' (or voices).

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## The Digital Utterance: A Cross-Media Approach to Media Education.

### Introduction.

Traditionally, the creative and media industries have been divided along fairly medium specific lines. If we take a rough chronological order: first came the press (and journalism) and soon afterwards appeared radio, cinema and television, followed by the 'new' digital forms media in the 1990s, and its attendant industries such as gaming, computer animation and effects. Broadly speaking, media education has followed these divisions; some university departments and faculties teach all of it, gathered under the umbrella term 'media studies' with others preferring to focus on film or television (or both). This we argue here, can privilege one medium over another and what we need is a new conception of crossmedia practice, which while recognising distinct media as 'utterances', also celebrates a renewed dialogism between them. We will suggest that media which were once seen as separate have always been intimately connected and that directly addressing both audiences and the texts produced by this connectivity (such as adaptations and paratexts) can help illuminate increasingly sophisticated interactions.

This chapter then is born out of a frustration with the way media subjects are taught at university level (particularly in the UK). Indeed, it is our view that media education began to move away from the practices and processes of the creative media industries in the late 1980s, heading towards the 'high theory' of literature, cultural studies and psychoanalysis. As David Buckingham put it:

'Media teaching has been historically dominated by 'critical analysis' – and indeed, by a relatively narrow form of *textual* analysis' [original italics] (2003: 49).

It is quite conceivable that this was partly due to something of an inferiority complex on the part of media studies; the wish to be taken seriously, as a 'credible' academic pursuit, led to media education being colonised by other disciplines. Medium specific silos, which began to emerge in the 1980s, have been replicated across university faculties, just at the very moment new crossmedia practices became significant and older more established sections of the creative and media industries were being 'remediated' (Bolter & Grusin, 2000) by emerging 'new' media forms. Media education, which has served to privilege existing academic silos and curricula, has as a consequence become skewed toward a particular medium – such as television or film. This has only functioned to distort critical perspectives of crossmedia practice; a film studies scholar, for example, who only views crossmedia texts through the historical and theoretical lens of cinema, yet cinema as an industrial practice now revels in its crossmediality. We are convinced then that nothing has done more damage to media education than by

(now) imagined distinctions between literature, cinema, radio, television, radio and new media – and this has not been helped by the medium specific nature of the university curricular that we describe. Some, such as Jonathan Gray, perhaps offer a way out of this morass:

[W]hile “screen studies” exists as a discipline encompassing both film and television studies, we need an “off-screen” studies to make sense of the wealth of other entities that saturate the media and that construct film and television’ (2010: 7).

With media phenomenon addressed as having both on and off screen faces, ‘paratexts’ are potentially just as coherent a way of understanding the relationship that media have with each other media as ‘primary’ texts do themselves.

To help us understand these multiple texts, and their interactions, we propose a new framework for analysis, which draws on the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, particularly his notion of ‘utterances’ and ‘heteroglossia’. Bakhtin’s work – focussing largely on literature – suggests that we experience novels within a larger context and in relationship to other books and authors. The result is a conversation (or dialogue) which exceeds simple influence - as influence would suggest a singular association and a one-way interaction from past work to present:

[I]n the novel, dialogism energises from within the very mode in which the discourse conceives of its object and its means of expressing it transforming the semantics and the syntactical structure of the discourse. Here the dialogical reciprocal orientation becomes, so to speak, an event of discourse itself, animating it and dramatizing it from within all of its aspects’ (cited in Todorov, 1984: 60).

In Bakhtin’s view, language is a social force, which alters due to listening, reading and responding. This social concept of language is called the ‘dialogic’ and Bakhtin argues that this dynamic between texts goes back and forth, each in dialogue with all past, present and future conceptions. Past works of literature are as altered by the dialogue as the present one, just as the present version can be altered by future works. This interaction of all the voices in a text is called a ‘polyphonic dialogue’ – many such voices of equal authority and therefore texts can be ‘heteroglossic’. Bakhtin used this dynamic view of language to look at other such interactions, as we do here. The result is that we continually experience dialogic works within a larger context and as having multiple voices. For Michael Holquist, this dialogism ‘is a way of looking at things that always insists on the presence of the other, on the inescapable necessity of outsideness and unfinalizability’ (2002: 195).

So, for Bakhtin, literature is just one of many languages, and these languages now exist in parallel with cinema, radio, television and new media. Robert Stam has described the media as a complex network of ideological signs, what he terms an 'ambient heteroglossia' (1989: 220). However, as new digital forms of media arrive, and older forms become 'remediated' (within them), media history is flattened out and what we call a 'digital heteroglossia' emerges; with all media arrayed on a spectrum as varying stable and unstable situated 'utterances'. These utterances then (cinema, radio, television, etc), and the dialogism between them, help illuminate crossmedia texts, ones that now defy any medium specific framing; it is this dialogism between utterances, and the resulting texts, which should be of concern to all of those involved in media education.

### The Industrial Context.

There are well established industrial practices that bridge a rigid delineation of media, and we can look to the BBC's commissioning and development approach to see the ways in which major European broadcasters have acknowledged the need to work 'beyond the medium'. Phenomena that would once have been seen as *of one medium* have long stepped across distinct media platforms, something clearly demonstrated within cinema (particularly if we consider comic book adaptation or film merchandising). Crossmedia has gone from something of a sideshow, to a strategic necessity, and it is easy to see how adopting crossmedia based business models has much to offer those companies attempting to gain benefit *in house* from integrated business practices (Dettki, 2003; Ots, 2005). Crossmedia distribution can diversify risk (with rights more appealing if assignable across multiple platforms (Picard, 2002)), and as 'Hollywood grows fonder of franchises and multi-platform brands or characters' (Gray, 2010: 39) media conglomerates of all persuasions 'increasingly view... brand names [that span media] as strategic economic assets' (Osgerby, 2004: 34).

The majority of crossmedia can be said to be 'platform led', in that it starts life on a solitary medium, before moving on to additional platforms; for example *Doctor Who* (1963 - present) began as a broadcast television series before it then stepped in to the world of, what historically would have been seen as, spin-off or tie-in. There also exists a more 'conceptual' mode of crossmedia, one that inhabits 'the space between platforms, and finds utility in appropriate platforms' (Woodfall, 2011: 208). This second mode is far from the norm, but there are development practices in place that hold to this ideal, with the BBC's '360 degree commissioning' approach in particular delivering exemplars like *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (2010). This project is of interest here as at its conceptual heart sat a countdown of the British Museum's most significant artefacts, yet the countdown itself was conducted on the BBC's website and on BBC Radio 4, not through television; this *split* format left the radio relying on the web to create a visual rendition of the museum's artefacts, and the web in turn was enriched by the depth of comment afforded by the radio. This (near Platonic) conceptual form could be said to retain a coherence even as some of its

constitute parts are peeled away, whilst the original medium of the platform led mode (in which one lead platform acts as a 'tentpole' to those that follow (Davidson, 2010: 16)) can perhaps be seen to equate with the idea of a primary text.

Beyond this distinction we can also create some sense of demarcation between asynchronous crossmedia, and that which offers a more synchronous experience. *The Voice* (2011 - present), a talent show which integrates a multi-screen experience through the (mobile and web accessible) Twitter feeds that are incorporated directly into its linear television broadcast, offers us here an example of synchronous crossmedia in practice. An awareness of the chronological development of a (cross) media production and (the often different) order in which the audience experiences that media, is something that clouds any fixed reading of the synchronicity (or otherwise) of crossmedia. Looking at the history of *The War of the Worlds*, we can follow the trajectory of a media phenomenon that would once have been seen as a drawn out trail of adaptation. It started life in 1898 as a book by H. G. Wells (2005), with various radio, screen, musical, game and comic book interpretations following, yet if we picture an audience's interaction with media as being at least as significant as the chronology of the media's development, and recognise that the audience is able to access each utterance in any order they choose (through any 'rabbit hole' (Jenkins, 2006, p.124)), we can then imagine how an individual can experience *The War of the Worlds* in a manner analogous to a contemporary and more acceptably crossmedia media franchise like *The Matrix*.

In a similar fashion we can picture how a film like *Star Wars* (1977) can operate as a starting point for a media franchise (and in that sense is 'platform led'). When *Star Wars* was first released in the late seventies it occurred to no one at the time to construct a complete fictional universe to complement it (Brooker, 2002; Rose 2011). Those individuals who forged a connection with *Star Wars* may have been able to consume multiple toys and other tie-in products (like trading cards, costumes, models, lunch boxes, etc.), but the original wave of merchandising 'did nothing to help tell the story of the films' (Kappel, 2004, p.183); it could be argued therefore that it was only in the almost accidental success (and post hoc solidification) of Lucas's vision that a crossmedia path was suggested for others to follow.

Crossmedia as a contemporary practice could be wrapped up within the conception of media as an *event*. This could help us tie together the many complicated streams that feed in to crossmedia whilst moving beyond an obsession with seeing it as strictly neoteric. In large multiplatform coverage of national moments such as the *Olympic Games*, we can see event and crossmedia as one and the same; with consideration in turn perhaps shifting from how we share media, to what we share. Whether crossmedia

is near accidental or designed in a fully conceptual manner; whether we see it as an overarching means of linking a number of smaller utterances or we leave it un or under-acknowledged; crossmedia is firmly established as a way of practice, and within some areas (the UK's children's media industry for example) it is near default.

It is over five years then, since the BBC woke up to crossmedia as a viable model, yet media education as a discipline still refuses to fully validate a (conceptually led) 'project' based approach over a (platform led) 'programme' based one. Just because the BBC makes grand claims for its crossmediality however, it doesn't mean the rest of the UK's media community (or anywhere else's media community for that matter) have followed step. Yet a broader reading of the global market (particularly in the US) suggests that the BBC doesn't stand alone in its approach (even if there are questions to be asked on whether it has fully embraced its own rhetoric).

### The Learning Context.

So, despite changes in industry practice, and parallel conceptual re-alignments, media education is still very much wedded to the idea of medium specificity. This is a core dilemma for the discipline, as it becomes further and further divorced from the heteroglossic nature of the production and consumption of media texts. This is not just a problem of teaching a subject removed from current practice, but for education more widely, for as Deborah Cartmell notes:

'Surely, there's not an English teacher anywhere who doesn't use film to illuminate Shakespeare, or who doesn't ask students to translate a literary texts to a context that is relevant to their own situations. However, this process, utilized by so many educators, is rarely interrogated or explained' (2010: vii).

If we take the two utterances of cinema and literature, we can see historically that they always have been closely aligned. Sergei Eisenstein (1949) was happy to admit that his theory of montage had been stolen from the novels of Charles Dickens. Similarly writers such as Franz Kafka were very open and honest that they were far more influenced by cinema, than by literature (see Zischler, 2003). Some of the first films were adaptations of literary works; the early signs of dialogism and crossmedia appeal. The only difference between then and now, is time; the distances between texts is getting ever narrower as the *asynchronicity* of the analogue world makes way for the *synchronicity* of the digital one; it may have taken decades for a novel to come to the screen in the analogue era, but with film rights being bundled-up with publishing deals, the adaptation often follows hard-on-the-heels of publication. From its earliest days, cinema has begged, borrowed and stolen from its older cousin, but in turn literature has been reshaped as well; the novel now is a very different from in the age of cinema. Cinema's influence on literature has

been fairly profound, but largely unacknowledged; as other media - such as television - appeared, this dialogism only became further heightened.

This then suggests that different texts (and therefore different media) have always been intimately connected. Since the 1980s however universities have organised themselves – and their curricula – along film, television, radio and journalism lines; medium specific silos emerged, and all with their attendant critical canons. Later in the 1990s, digital media such as animation, effects and gaming were added to this ensemble, but almost as separate entities. This was right at the time when older and more established platforms (or utterances) in the media and creative industries were starting on their transformation into far more ‘heteroglossic’ forms, as a process of ‘remediation’ geared-up. These different media had always been connected to an extent, but now there were the beginnings of a far more dynamic relationship of exchange, and in a far more obvious and visible way. As Christine Geraghty correctly points out, many teachers are very comfortable within their silos:

‘For whenever, “media and communications” is mentioned in official dispatches, there will be those who go unrecognised in this designation – those who teach cultural studies, film studies, journalism, radio, television studies, critical theory – and those for whom “communications” or indeed “media studies” may mean something distinct and separate as a discipline, not apparent when they are casually yoked together in their usual alliance’ (2002).

These differing lenses of medium specificity have also colluded to create a fetishism of technology, as our university departments and faculties engage in an arms race to acquire the latest state-of-the-art equipment. There is a view that students will chase those departments with the best technological tools, but the fact is that students today often have the tools at home to create very credible media texts. As Julian McDougall puts it:

‘The technology young people use these days...will often be more sophisticated than what we are offering, and they may find our interventions into their everyday digital culture clumsy and awkward, rather than inspiring and empowering’ (2006: x).

In some respects, many students have quite a march on their teachers already, so much so that their work is often unappreciated, or worse, misunderstood – particularly if it does not slip easily into a singular associated utterance. Marc Prensky states that ‘using the technology is the student’s job. The teacher’s job is to coach and guide the use of technology for effective learning’ (2010: 3). However, the reality is that the creative student, eager to pursue their passions at university, now has to decide which medium to

sign up for. We have witnessed for ourselves our students struggling to reconcile their wide and varied interests in contemporary media practice, with a particular medium (and attendant critical canon), for the purposes of gaining a place on a programme, where they will spend several years isolated from the rest of the digital heteroglossia.

Since the late 1990s, many people have been engaged in what are described by some critics as 'Web 2.0' phenomenon. For David Gauntlett:

'At the heart of Web 2.0 is the idea that online sites and services become more powerful the more that they *embrace* this network of potential collaborators. Rather than just seeing the internet as a broadcast channel, which brings an audience to a website (the '1.0' model), Web 2.0 invites users in to play [original italics]' (2011: 6).

Although the focus here is primarily on online productivity, Gauntlett encourages us to see the term as a metaphor for any creative collaborative activity; and what is the creation of media text, if it is not collaborative? Many of our students are now engaged in the sorts of cross media Web 2.0 activities which result in fan fiction (fanfic) writing and fan filmmaking. Indeed, there are now more online film repositories (and festivals) than ever before, so even 'old' media is finding a good home online. Fanfic writing has always been created as a response to media texts of all kinds (see Berger, 2010) and Web 2.0 has offered new affordances for its creation and distribution (for example, at the time of writing, there were over 74,000 *Harry Potter* fan written stories and podcasts on [www.harrypotterfanfic.com](http://www.harrypotterfanfic.com) and incredibly over 458,000 on [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)).

### Organising the New Dynamic.

Young people today – and therefore our students – live in an era of heightened re-purposing and appropriation; they are their own authors (or auteurs) of content. Their social practices are largely (if not always) non-medium specific – they fail to recognise the misguidedly imagined distinctions between different media. Pedagogically then at least, media education is several steps behind; today's media student has probably spent a decade creating a variety of media texts for a variety of different purposes and audiences, long before they apply to study one aspect of the creative and media industry. Students interested in media are now in many ways responding to the cross-platform 'heteroglossic' appeal of media practice; our culture is saturated with adaptations, remakes, re-imaginings, sequels and prequels, many of which have a very promiscuous relationship at best, with any one single media utterance.



Allied to this are the new crossmedia texts which are emerging from the dynamic dialogism different media now have with each other. Cinema is now just one utterance, alongside all other utterances, in a multi-voiced digital heteroglossia. Many of these utterances depend on an array of other texts, and paratexts, in different media, for their very existence. So, relationships of dependency alter and fluctuate across the digital heteroglossia. Some of these texts will have a significant element of participation – such as videogames. With video games readily borrowing the kinetic grammar of film, the games industry now rivals the industry it owes so much to; games are marketed – and are anticipated by millions of gamers – in much the same way as many Hollywood movies. So, concentrating on just one media (such as cinema) can give a very distorted critical perspective. Any consideration of cinema now requires a deep understanding of film's influences, as well as what it has in turn *influenced*. In this respect, a study of the texts which are created by the dialogism that exists between different media – such as adaptation – can offer a counter to much of the medium specific teaching that takes place in our universities; in one regard (cross) media studies is a solution to *medium* studies – a now out-dated and myopic approach.

The challenge for media education is to create the conditions whereby a student's prior experiences and activities are valued, credited and appreciated. Those of us involved in media education must get more sophisticated at aggregating the social and cultural practices of our students in their own learning; educators must become co-creators of content and knowledge with their students. This chimes with Alex Kendall's co-constructivist 'pedagogy of the inexpert' provocation, in which she claims that both *the educator* and *educated* operate within a field of dynamic textual utterances (Kendall & McDougall, 2012). A crossmedia curriculum, where students are given poetry, essays and photographs, and then asked to adapt these works into different media, and then to reflect on that process, adds to a rich literacy, which is part of an array of other dialogically connected literacies. Many of our students' social and cultural practices are in some way connected to either cinema, gaming or television – all of which are dialogically connected. So, visual media is often at the centre of what young people are interested in. Our students are fans of media, and if we are able to guide them in finding the sources and influences which inform media texts, then we will make students fans of their own learning too. We must help our students to find new audiences for their work, as the internet abounds with fan films and online short-film festivals. Today's media student must compete with many millions of creative individuals, all putting their work online. More does not necessarily mean better and only the best crafted work will stand out.

Comic books are a medium, particularly in their multiple superhero franchises, that have distinctly 'crossed over', and Scott McCloud, when discussing the 'learning process', uses comic books as an example of how those 'creating any art work in any medium [tend to take a contrary] journey from end to beginning' (1993, p.182). He suggests here that we travel through a number of stages, starting with style,

craft, structure, idiom and form, before we eventually hit on the art work's real idea or purpose. This is an approach we could be accused of propagating when we fail to engage students beyond mastering the (singular) medium. In failing to fully acknowledge the modern world's media practices we could be accused of instilling habits that stunt a student's creativity to just one platform. If we teach literature in isolation, for example, how can we expect students to comprehend the multiple utterances that step in and out of literature; in asking them to see medium before media, are we restricting their vision?

As media technologies become easier to use and cheaper to obtain, what value can we add to a student's education that they couldn't acquire themselves through careful observation and mimicry of media's established practices? Is it in stepping back to the textual (whilst avoiding self-regarding excess and obfuscation) that the answer lies? Are we correct in arguing that a broader reading of texts reveals a crossmedia reality? Perhaps so, but in stepping past an obsession with form, we could still leave students stranded in only being able to conceptualise media from one *text bound* standpoint. Students will also need to be encouraged to see the *project* and the *event*, as well as the *story*, the *journey*, the *connection* and the *message* that sits within and astride the heteroglossic media. We will need to ask them to think of *brand*, of *campaign* and of *intellectual property*, all whilst directly addressing, and getting the *attention* of the *audience*. This ultimate acknowledgement of the audience's significance resonates with Sonia Livingstone's (1999) suggestion that the more fragmented the audience's engagement with media becomes, the more we should pay attention to understanding audience practices, as well as with David Gauntlett's (2008) accusation that media educators are too interested in the media, and not interested enough in the people. It is of some significance to this argument that crossmedia's immersive multi-attentional possibilities also help shift the conception of audience from receiver (of utterances) to that of creator (of utterances), or even in some manner help locate audience as utterance.

While we would want to avoid presenting some form of manifesto for a cross-platform approach to media education, our antidote to the types of medium specific myopia we have explored in this chapter, is instead to call for those in education to consider the following points when designing future curricula:

- Think media, not medium;
- Think audience and agency;
- Think collaboration, connection and creativity;
- Think story and texts;
- Think message and meaning;

- Don not assume your specialism (or interest) is the only lens through which you can teach.

### Conclusion.

Now turning to the forces that act on media education from without – those which can skewer the central principles we outline above - are we prone to being swamped, rather than informed, by the ideologies of those disciplines that surround us? And in being buffeted by the on-going anti-media studies discourse that afflicts us, do we suffer from a lack of confidence in our own worth; are we then in thrall to other discipline's theorists (and research/pedagogic practices), and in turn hope that they will help reinforce media studies as a 'real' and credible subject? In some ways an inherent freedom to reach across disciplines is liberating, but we equally run the risk that rather than being enriched by other academic traditions, we may be torn apart by their competing gravitational pulls. The question then, is what do we hang on to when tugged upon by these conflicting forces? Perhaps again it is in that deeper recognition of the centrality of both texts (unshackled from platform) and of audiences (and of the stories and messages we address them with) that we can locate our anchor. There are thankfully many within media education that operate from an across media meta position, but there are also many of us that hold far too tight to our historical medium specific positions.

Of course each academic tradition will have a centre of gravity according to its history, but do those that teach marketing communications for example ask their students to devise campaigns that sit just within print media or on bus stops? Are they not far more likely to encourage students to address message-to-audience, regardless of the medium? Similarly journalism students are asked to create news content across multiple platforms, yet within media education as a whole we are surfeit in courses that fail to look beyond the historic practices and technologically platforms that they were born to.

Those that teach media have a specialism, and status, within their particular field, whether that be through practice or theory. There is the potential therefore to see a crossmedia approach as one that encroaches on individual areas of expertise and some may feel exposed if asked to teach across unfamiliar terrain. There are few among us that feel fully confident operating, let alone teaching, within a crossmedia paradigm, but let us not fool ourselves that crossmedia is a passing fad (and that we can hunker down until it blows away and leaves us to get on with what we seem to know best). Crossmedia could perhaps in some ways be accused of being a failed ideal (Bennett, 2012), one that is fading away as television, film and radio reassert themselves; whilst admittedly, 360 degree practices could be seen as just an add-on to the real business of commissioning (with crossmedia operating as little more than a

means of driving attention back to a core platform). Yet it matters not how these practices are perceived, or whether they are *marketing* or otherwise, they have become near default in many areas of the media industry, and it would be unwise to pretend otherwise; we, like it or not, and like our students, are operating in a 'beyond the medium' world.

The position taken here in no way aims to lay waste to the expertise of those that teach from within a medium or theoretically specific position, but it provokes those that do, to acknowledge their stance (or even agenda), and challenges them to question if medium specific interpretations of media are helping or hindering their students. If the BBC's 'Creative Future' led re-organisation can, partly at least, turn a monolithic corporation away from a technologically determinist position, and towards a more *person* led one, then why does media education struggle to see the ways in which heteroglossic phenomena like *Big Brother* or *Doctor Who* can seriously challenge siloed interpretations of media? There is no suggestion that craft skills are now redundant (far from it), or that ideology and power for example, or representation and identity for another, are not worthy prisms to observe media through; but if, as Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) would argue, historic disciplinary boundaries are weakening, or even suspect, and we are able to collectively peek out of our respective silos, we may find a means of validating *media* studies over *medium* studies, and in turn, free our students to operate in 'real world' (cross) media environments.

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