Et Tu Media Education? CitizenFour, *The Panoptic Web and the new 'Usersphere'*

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> The spy agencies had hijacked the internet – once a platform for individuality and self-expression. Snowden used the word 'panopticon'… (Harding 2014: 12)

In the second issue of MERJ, we asked in our editorial, 'is Wikileaks a media text?' (2010). We provided no clear conclusions, but still (understandably) answer came there none, from the many contributors to this journal, and participants at our annual Media Education Summit. This may indicate an ambivalence regarding the mass leaking of classified documents, from media education teachers and researchers, or shrugged acceptance. As a corollary, in 2013, an NSA analyst, Edward Snowden, leaked thousands of documents as a means to illustrate how the US government had enacted a mass surveillance programme – the greatest the world had ever seen – in the aftermath of 9/11. As the *Guardian* journalist who brokered the story, Glenn Greenwald put it: 'Technology has now enabled a type of ubiquitous surveillance that had previously been the province of only the most imaginative science fiction writers' (2014: 2).

Snowden's revelations would go on to reveal that the US government had been complicit in the continuous and uninhibited mass surveillance of its own citizens. Indeed, with the help of 'back-doors' situated in many telecoms, search engine and social media organisations, this web snaked right across the world. The UK government had created the conditions whereby much of this activity had been allowed to happen. The oft-minted phrase, 'global threat of terrorism', was used as the excuse. By the very least, it was clear that the NSA had bypassed a legislative framework designed to prevent this very type of abuse of executive power. Snowden, forced to flee, had his passport cancelled and is now exiled in Russia. He, along with Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, are now by-words for 'whistle-blower'. On Snowden's current circumstances, William Scheurman demonstrates some regret, when he says that: 'Sadly one of our most eloquent critics of state surveillance now finds himself, partly because of the Obama administration's draconian response, at the whim of a former KGB spymaster' (2014).

It began in June 2013, when Greenwald, was sent several encrypted emails – which he ignored. The source persisted, and contacted Greenwald's close friend and collaborator, the

filmmaker Laura Poitras. To prove he was indeed a senior intelligence analyst, Snowden sent encrypted files, which contained Presidential Policy Directive 20; this was President Obama's enacted plan for a series of cyber-attacks all over the world. Over the next few months, Snowden revealed that large internet companies were collaborating with the NSA, through a programme called PRISM. Snowden was able to hack into the US intelligence agency's NSAnet intranet, and the UK's GCHQ's equivalent, GCWiki. It seemed that rather than scaling-back the previous Bush administration's penchant for secret courts, rendition and surveillance, the Obama presidency had gone further than even that era's STELLAR WIND wiretapping activities. The NSA now had a programme, called SIGINT, which with the help of GCHQ's cable-head outside Bude, in Cornwall, had allowed the US to attach intercepts to undersea fibre optics cables, all over the world.

Greenwald and Poitras flew to Hong Kong to meet the now absconded Snowden, and the tense 8-days of interviews in a downtown hotel, filmed by Poitras, resulted in the Academy Award-winning *CitizenFour* (2014). In between strange fire-alarm tests and suspicious phone-calls – which precipitated moving to a different hotel room – a tale emerges of a post 9/11 paranoia, which led to the world's greatest democratic power spying on the entire global communications infrastructure, with the complicity of some of the world's biggest telecoms companies. It did this by using a number of different systems; to triangulate data from Metro cards, debit cards and cell phone use. One telecom company alone provided 320 million records – *every day*. With the help of GCHQ, a programme called OPTIC NERVE even gathered images from webcams (3 – 11 per cent of which contained nudity, at any given time). In the film, this material is described as 'metadata in aggregate' – which means it can stretch back over your whole digital life, and retrieve every single digital and analogue communication a person has ever made. This metadata is termed 'content' by Snowden, which is further explained as the 'story of you'. The problem arises that while this story maybe made up of facts, it could still be inaccurate. As MERJ contributor Will Merrin puts it:

> [A] picture builds-up of huge, heavily funded, secret, state-based surveillance systems with little democratic oversight, able to access records of (and sometimes the content of) email, video and voice chat, videos, photos, voice-over-internet chats, file transfers and social networking data…In such a situation, everyone is guilty. (2014: 159)

One thing the Snowden revelations tell us, which has huge implications for all of us involved in media education, is that while Wikileaks may not constitute a text, then each

individual citizen is certainly now one: a unique moment in a new global 'usersphere'. While Snowden was motivated by people's inability to oppose state-power (which it was his job to amplify) it is clear in *CitizenFour* that while journalists and EU governments expressed outrage at the level of surveillance, young people globally were far more circumspect; a theme which runs through the documentary is that the US has skilfully created the conditions for self-policing – there is now an open expectation that we are being watched (or could be), and as Snowden forcefully argues, this will only limit the boundaries of people's intellectual freedom. As Bauman, et al, express it: 'Surveillance today is so pervasive and has so many dimensions, that it has simply become part of everyday life' (2014).

In a later interview for *The Nation*, Snowden develops this further: 'It's about liberty. When people say "I have nothing to hide," what they're really saying is that "my rights don't matter"...' (2014). Et tu, media education? If young people (the 'Wiki-generation'), often, misguidedly perhaps, referred to as 'digital natives' (Prensky 2010), are 'not surprised by anything' anymore, then what implications does this have for media education?

In an absorbing study, Jie Qin analysed the news coverage in the press and on Twitter, during the initial reporting of the leaked documents and the aftermath as the story become more about Snowden himself – which in *CitizenFour* he expresses was the very thing he didn't want to happen. Her results are interesting: the UK's press coverage was largely fairly neutral, or it supported Edward Snowden's actions and viewed him as someone who was part of a growing trend in young people who had voted for the first time (for Obama) and saw one of his most major policy announcements (to unravel and scale-back his predecessor's use of dubious retrieval systems) reversed. In the US, it was another story, with the majority of the press supporting the Obama government.

CitizenFour itself would be the subject of legal action by a retired Navel officer, who attempted to block the film's eligibility to be considered for the 2015 Academy Awards. The new 'usersphere' was far more supportive of Snowden, and the sustained leaking of government and military secrets more broadly. By analysing hash-tags, Qin's study found that: 'Social media users associated Snowden's case with other whistleblowers, bipartisan issues and personal piracy issues' (2014).

If we can assume then, that the 'usersphere' is made up of largely younger people, and more specifically, the sorts of young people who will be sitting in our classrooms and lecture theatres in the future (and of course interacting with us on VLEs and our own social media platforms), then is this a (small) sign that these issues can result in more meaningful civic engagement? And if this engagement is now more likely to be monitored, then is this something to worry about? Bauman, et al, thinks not:

> Given the magnitude of the data…analysts do not read all of the content, but rather visualise the graph of the relations that are identified and focus on what seems to be the most significant sections showing specific nodes of connections between data…Fears about Big Brother are thus largely irrelevant. (2014)

But, for liberal writers, such as Greenwald, that's not really the point:

> [P]eople radically change their behaviour when they know they are being watched. They will strive to do what is expected of them. They want to avoid shame and condemnation. They do by adhering tightly to accepted social practices by staying within imposed boundaries, avoiding action that might be seen as deviant or abnormal. (2014: 173)

Merrin also disagrees, citing several instances where ordinary citizens were accused of (and sometimes found guilty of) perceived 'cyber crimes', arguing that: 'If we all become media producers, we need to know how that production maybe used against us' (2014: 160). This, for us, is what defines the new 'usersphere', where, 'the user differs from the audience, therefore, in being personally responsible' (ibid: 161). For Merrin, it is precisely this view of a networked world that current media education provision negligently ignores.

For a recent action research project, we worked with a group of A Level Media students learning about 'we media and democracy' to try to facilitate a more 'porous' approach to expertise. We used the metaphor of the 'bring and buy sale' – students bringing their lived expertise as enthusiastic mediated citizen-students, teachers 'selling' them in return our academic expertise – within broadly Vygotskian objectives for scaffolding experiential knowledge. During this 'scheme of work', students were 'sold' contrasting media theories and political philosophy from Plato, Mill, Tony Benn, Marx and Althusser, Chomsky, Adam Curtis, Gauntlett, Natalie Fenton, Morozov, Rushkoff, Jenkins, Renee Hobbs, Shirky and Zizek. They brought to the classroom their lived experiences of 'being mediated' in relation to these conceptual frameworks. In simple terms, the teacher is the expert on theory, the students are the experts on media:

> Especially for the younger generation, the internet is not some stand-alone separate domain where a few of life's functions are carried out. It is not merely our post office and our telephone. Rather it is the epicentre of our world, the place where virtually everything is done. (ibid: 6)

When it came to *CitizenFour*, it felt like the limits of Media Studies were being stretched like never before. The subject has been at a crossroads since web 2.0, and we've rehearsed that debate, and the question of 'what counts' now for Subject Media many times in the pages of MERJ. But now it was about more than whether a YouTube meme of a talking dog is a media text worthy of study, or whether Dan Laughey is right to return us to notions of enrichment through access media with cultural 'value'. With these A Level students we were starkly at the intersection of their lifeworld-systemworld, talking to them about their privacy. It felt much more intrusive than delving into their media tastes, but at the same time there was a sense of renewal for media teaching. If it is the case, as Bruce Schneider argues in his analysis of the business models of social media corporations – and students' mediated experiences brought to the 'bring and buy sale' suggest it is – that 'the companies are analogous to feudal lords and we are their vassals, peasants and – on a bad day – serfs. We are tenant farmers for these companies, working on their land by producing data that they in turn sell for profit' (2015: 22) – then this educational intervention was pretty high stakes, certainly not 'Mickey Mouse'. Awkwardly, perhaps, this was very far away from 'doing text', pretty far away from anything to do with 'the media' at all.

In this case we were looking head-on at Merrin's argument – published in *MERJ* 5:2 – that 'Media Studies should not only serve the user in its teaching but also become a campaigning organisation, fighting for their digital rights' (2015: 59).

So, the problem for us is to successfully guide our students as responsible (and safe) digitally networked citizens, and to do the kinds of work which holds those in power to account, while encouraging our students to do the same. If the web is now a fully realised panopticon, as *CitizenFour* seems to strongly suggest, then it is going to be young people, and by definition our students, which wrest it back into being a more the kind of plural 'usersphere' we all want.

But it's not easy, and educational contexts and situations are often the spaces where students' online activities are scrutinised. Many schools block access to social media platforms, while teachers and school administrators trawl twitter looking for criticism from their student-bodies. There have even been cases of teachers posting essays on Twitter – if only to ridicule student work. In the UK, a school governor, and former OFSTED chief, faced press outrage when she posted lewd comments on her (public) Facebook page. Those of us who work in schools and colleges find that telling our students to 'clean-up' their Twitter-feeds before university application time, is now just common sense. In Higher Education, students are told to do the same when applying for jobs or postgraduate study. How many university recruitment officers reach for Google when the UCAS forms start coming in? As educators, and education researchers, we are operating in a pedagogic

panopticon, created by a system of almost 'total' institutional oversight (Goffman 1961); a risk adverse academic climate, as the result of the gradual marketisation of education.

> A citizenry that is aware of always being watched quickly becomes a compliant and fearful one. (Greenwald 2014: 3)

As researchers, now using social media as a means to capture young people's use of media – which constitutes much of the work we have published here since 2010 – the work is severally impeded if the 'usersphere' becomes a self-policing dead-zone; our ability to do the work we want to do is compromised by the ethics of a surveillance culture. While Michel Foucault's conception of an all-seeing panoptic system 'assures the automatic functioning of power' (1995: 201), he also, at the same time, conceptualised the panopticon as a type of 'laboratory' whose function was, 'to try out pedagogical experiments' (ibid: 204). And this is what we must try to do: if the current UK National Curriculum now expects all 7-year-olds to understand algorithms, then we all need to play a meaningful part in creating an environment in which the activity generated for impactful research can realistically open-up reflections on 'everyday' media activity. If the Edward Snowden affair 'triggered the first global debate about the value of individual privacy in the digital age' then media literacy research needs to be involved in that conversation, before it peters out.

To that end, in this issue we publish Eirini Arnaouti's account of Greek teenagers' use of video, which she describes as a 'complex and hybrid process'. Alena Hesová, Barbora Křížová and Tereza Skácelová's latest work looks at media use within families, specifically the interactions between parents and children, while Luis Pereira and Lizzie Jackson have been working with those not in education, employment or training (NEETs).

Related to that project, our first research forum piece this issue is from Jamie Coles, Fred Sherratt, Bill Olivier and Stephen Powell who are developing new work-based learning activities. Stuart Poyntz revisits the question of whether models of 'key concepts' continue to matter to media education, arguing that, in the era of 'Media and Information Literacy' they are even more useful as a counterpoint to forces of rationalisation and participation that privilege *doing over thinking*.

This editorial has posed old questions in new contexts, about media education as a political project in the face of mediated 'big power'. It is fitting, then, that we devote 'Laughey's Canon' to *Manufacturing Consent*, reappraised for our times by Des Freedman. And the challenges for the development of future journalists within the broader project of media education are explored in Karen Fowler-Watt's forum piece, where she reflects on the process of an edited collection as practitioner research. We are excited about

seeing these themes develop further at the Media Education Summit in November 2015, to be hosted by the Engagement Lab at Emerson College, Boston, with keynotes from Sara Bragg, David Gauntlett, Eric Gordon, Belinha de Abreu, Carrie James and Stephen Jukes. Stephen will talk about these new challenges for journalists and, moving on after a decade leading the Faculty of Media & Communication at Bournemouth University, these thoughts will be doubtless enlightening and 'from the patch'.

MERJ is hosted by the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice, which is ten years old this year. Our next editorial, to coincide with an anniversary event looking back at CEMP's contribution to the field of media education research, will offer a thematic review of all the research published in the pages of *MERJ* and presented at our Media Education Summit over the decade. We'll be paying tribute to all of our contributors and working outside of the kinds of metrics for impact that privilege the privileged. Instead, we'll express some judgements about how the field has moved on and the interesting work we've been able to help people share, as well as the gaps we've been unable to fill and the limitations of our endeavours. 'Impact' should include a range of things – large scale interventions with tangible societal benefits, research informed policy shifts, new ventures in pedagogic research methodology, and, perhaps most 'impactful' for both *MERJ* and CEMP, enabling a teacher to try something different in the classroom and share her outcomes in a conceptual 'breathing space' from the discourse of OFSTED and school improvement. Our summary of 'where we've been' will include all of these.

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