

Media Education in the Time of 'Brexit'

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Editor's note: this editorial was written before Donald Trump became President Elect of the United States. Billy Bragg recently spoke of the 'unintended consequences' of Brexit, starting with Trump and likely continuing in France where Marine Le Pen is confident of evoking Brexit + Trump +++. Whilst this piece reflects on the implications for the related fields of media and media education in the light of Brexit, the situation has, of course, moved on. Perhaps the assumptions on which our key conceptual framework hinge, that the global education project mirrors broader egalitarian objectives to distribute cultural capital, provide equality of opportunity, respect diversity and resist prejudice, aren't so sacred after all?

In 2013, at that year's Media Education Summit, hosted by Sheffield Hallam University, we made the decision to reconfigure our conference to make it truly international by relocating to outside the UK for the very first time. We all felt that we had reached more-or-less critical mass for the UK, and now our aspirations were to grow this network of media education researchers and *MERJ* contributors.

Using a link established by our former PhD student, Marketa Zezulkova, the 2014 Summit was hosted by Metropolitan University Prague, in the Czech Republic. As anticipated, a much wider constituency of media education and media literacy scholars attended, particularly from the US. We began our now regular joint issue with *the Journal of Media Literacy Education* (JMLE) and last year we were hosted by the Engagement Lab at Emerson College, in Boston, US. These international Summits created the conditions for emerging areas of cross-EU collaborations, from the Salzburg Global Seminar to UNESCO, as well as invitations to collaborate on Horizon 2020 bidding. And then 'Brexit' happened.

One of *MERJ*'s editors was on holiday in Barcelona when the result was announced, and spent a lot of his time explaining himself to puzzled Spanish friends. A completely coincidental encounter with a British academic, now working in Australia, prompted her to offer the advice, 'Get out while you can!'. On returning, the Brexit aftermath resulted in quite a major family feud and a falling out with a close colleague. As the dust settled, the divisions in UK society became quite marked, as it was clear that those areas which had a

high participation in Higher Education voted very differently to those parts of the country which had lower numbers going on to study at universities. Also, it seemed that the over-50s had been far more hard-line than younger members of society. Social media platforms abounded with accusations that the younger generation had had their futures stolen from them. Scotland also voted overwhelmingly to remain (62%) and consequently has a fairly convincing case for another independence referendum.

In the lead-up to the EU referendum, many UK and EU University vice-chancellors had warned of the dangers leaving Europe could have for research funding. Claims (and, in some cases, outright lies) were made by both sides, and the quality of informed debate was exceedingly poor. That said, the UK deciding to leave the European Union came as quite a shock to many in HE. As *MERJ* editorial board member, David Buckingham puts it:

‘The media obviously play a central role in the political process, and one key role of journalists should be to hold politicians to account. Yet in this case, both the politicians and the media signally failed to promote a proper democratic debate. As expected, most of the right-wing newspapers were biased in favour of Brexit – a fact that was confirmed by Loughborough University’s research: many of them simply rehearsed the distortions of the Brexiteers without question. And, as in the subsequent debate over the Labour Party leadership, social media provided little more than superficial opinions and loud-mouthed abuse.

The post-Brexit rhetoric at least suggested that the HE sector in the UK was overwhelmingly in favour of remaining. Since the referendum, *VICE* has reported that UK universities now have serious concerns that new post-Brexit visa controls proposed by Home Secretary Amber Rudd, would damage diversity. *Times Higher Education* and *The Guardian* have both reported that University Vice-Chancellors are drawing-up emergency contingency plans, particularly in terms of recruiting and retaining academics from outside of the UK – the latter giving the number of staff planning to leave the UK at 15%. *The Telegraph* reported that non-British nationals from the LSE were effectively being blocked from advising the government in post-Brexit negotiations and planning – leading Brexiteer, Michael Gove, had similarly dismissed the interventions of ‘experts’ in the run-up to the vote. Schemes such as Erasmus+ seemed overnight to have been removed from the UK’s reach, while Higher Education leaders in the UK were quick to maintain a ‘business-as-usual’ attitude. The Minister for Universities and Science, Jo Johnson, announced that EU students would still have access to loans – but only for UK HEIs with high TEF scores, presumably – while at the same time implying that only uneducated people had voted to

leave the EU in the first place.

Media education, particularly media literacy, has been part of fairly substantial and visible debates across the EU for the last decade, at least. While UK researchers have played a significant role in these conversations, the UK government has now seemingly abandoned media literacy as a policy objective altogether. There has been very little UK funding for related research in this area, and the access, albeit fairly piecemeal, to EU funding streams could now be under serious threat. It is unlikely that the UK government will evenly re-distribute the research funding it would have paid into the EU schemes across the British Universities in the same way – the huge claim about how much extra funding the National Health Service (£350m per week) would get was removed from the 'Leave' campaign's website just days after the vote.

At last year's Summit in Rome, hosted by John Cabot University, over 90 media educators and media education researchers reflected on a post-Brexit EU landscape. As in previous years, participants came from all across the Europe and the US, while the discussions in parallel sessions and over drinks, were dominated by this one issue. So, what are the challenges for us as media educators? For David Buckingham:

The vote for Brexit raises a crucial issue for media educators: that of the role of the media in developing – or indeed constraining – public knowledge. The question of whether to leave or remain in the European Union was a complex and multi-faceted one, which the referendum reduced to a simple yes/no answer. Even so, one thing the debate surely needed was an informed discussion based on evidence and reasoned argument... We need people to be critical of the media, but we also need them to engage with the need for media reform, and to demand change.

The generation (most) media educators want to reach are growing up with a proliferation of terrorist attacks on EU nations, the refugee crisis (and the confused European response to it) and commonplace xenophobia towards Islam, hostility to migrants, the increase in hate discourse across social media and the horrible alliance of 'year zero' presidential candidate Trump and 'post-truth' Brexit architect Nigel Farage.

Meanwhile, the UNESCO Global Alliance for Media and Information Literacy recently convened in Latvia and responses from delegates, EU and European Commission representatives and the UNESCO rapporteur to these developments centred on the (laudable) view that media education could be used as a safeguard against hate discourse. But it is currently quite hard to see how UNESCO statements about the importance of addressing hate speech translate meaningfully for those members of society who are

'information resistant' (UNESCO's term) and/or reluctant to engage in public debate – those in the margins, but happily so.

The proposition from some panelists that media education could / should have prevented Brexit was, to a UK delegate, hard to swallow when we know that younger people, immersed in social media and largely oblivious to the 'old school' press rhetoric of fear and loathing largely either voted to remain or were excluded from the referendum by age.

Taking the EU vote into consideration with a US election campaign unlike any other, it seems that the issue is compounded by a jaded 'they don't work for me' disillusionment with the political machine – which is far more complex than just general voter apathy. Donald Trump's popularity does in part result from the fact he is not viewed as career politician, as significant elements of the US electorate outright reject the dynastic entitlements of the Bush/Clinton eras. In truth, Trump has flirted with running for president since at least 1998. Similarly, Nigel Farage is seen in much the same light, despite having been a member of the European Parliament since 1999. All over the EU, 'anti-politics' politicians are gaining traction at both local and national levels. The UK's EU vote has been a fillip to far-right political parties and organisations throughout Europe, from Marine Le Pen's National Front in France, to the AFD's recent election victories against Angel Merkel in Germany.

Meanwhile, refugee camps across the continent proliferate, as people seek shelter from the conflict in Syria, which all adds fuel to some quite poisonous rhetoric. According to the EU's own criminal intelligence agency, as many as 10,000 unaccompanied refugee children are unaccounted for, and those lucky ones which made it to Sweden last year told horrific stories of abuse and exploitation. While we are careful to avoid the claims made by some technological evangelists about the civic capabilities of social media, it is clear that media education researchers have a role to play; today's EU youth are the most connected and networked in history but the least likely to be civically engaged. Additionally the Brexit vote perhaps demonstrates that media education and some broader geo-civics for the over-50s is also what we now perhaps need. There is still work to do, and our networks of association, allied to *MERJ* and the Media Education Summit are now more vital than ever.

To that end, and as an antidote to our 'Brexit-shock', this issue of *MERJ* is once again eclectic and international. We publish research from India putting media education to work to engage primary students with unexamined beliefs about their religious identities in association with the distinct 'other'. Two articles, from Portugal and the UK respectively, deal with the news industry and news literacy, journalism education and storytellers telling stories of lived experience. From the United States, we share a high school ethnography of

teachers using critical pedagogy and media literacy education to help students deconstruct representations of gender. We publish research into the 'paradoxical challenge' of media literacy in Thai schools and a new take on protectionism as the 'media-wise decision process' from Belgium. The pressing issue of gender representation, body image and self-esteem is the subject of a media literacy research intervention from Canada. Finally, we present a prescient report of a documentary project from Greece, whereby teenagers explored their own identities.

Our book reviews in this issue take in Henry Jenkins' new collection on media activism, Sonia Livingstone and Julian Sefton-Green's longitudinal study of UK school students' networked lives and Renee Hobbs' collection of media literacy scholars reflecting on integral scholars in their pedagogic formation, the 'intellectual roots that ground the complex, multiply defined constructs' of our field of enquiry. *MERJ* will continue to publish work which embraces this complexity, a profoundly cross-cultural endeavor.

Whilst *MERJ* looks forward in this spirit, this issue marks two departures. Laura Hampshaw has moved on to a new post; we wish her all the best and are grateful for her substantial contribution to *MERJ* since its inception. Julian is also stepping down from his co-editing role after this volume, with Richard continuing as editor. Julian would like to thank the editorial board and all authors and reviewers who have supported *MERJ* during the seven years he has worked on the journal. Onwards.