

Part I

Rationales

Why should we teach and study the media? Part I explores the changing arguments for media education, and the assumptions on which they are based. Chapter 1 considers the history of the field, and its fundamental aims and principles. Chapter 2 looks at children's changing media environment, and its implications for media educators. Chapter 3 addresses the notion of 'media literacy' and its uses and limitations in media teaching. Taken together, these three chapters set out to provide a comprehensive, contemporary rationale for media education.

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Why Teach the Media?

What are media?

My dictionary defines a 'medium' as 'an intervening means, instrument or agency': it is a substance or a channel through which effects or information can be carried or transmitted. A medium is something we use when we want to communicate with people *indirectly*, rather than in person or by face-to-face contact. This dictionary definition tells us something fundamental about the media, which forms the basis of the media education curriculum. The media do not offer a transparent window on the world. They provide channels through which representations and images of the world can be communicated *indirectly*. The media *intervene*: they provide us with selective versions of the world, rather than direct access to it.

As I will use it in this book, the term 'media' includes the whole range of modern communications media: television, the cinema, video, radio, photography, advertising, newspapers and magazines, recorded music, computer games and the internet. Media *texts* are the programmes, films, images, web sites (and so on) that are carried by these different forms of communication. Many of these are often called 'mass' media, which implies that they reach large audiences; although of course some media are intended to reach only quite small or specialized audiences. And there is no reason why more traditional forms such as books cannot also be seen as 'media', since they too provide us with mediated versions or representations of the world.

In principle, the questions and approaches outlined in this book can be applied to the whole range of media – from big-budget

blockbuster movies to the snapshot photographs that people take in their daily lives; and from the latest pop video or computer game to the best-known 'classic' films or literature. All these media are equally worthy of study, and there is no logical reason why they should be considered separately. The claim that we should study 'literature' in isolation from other kinds of printed texts, or films in isolation from other kinds of moving image media, clearly reflects broader social judgements about the *value* of these different forms – and while these judgements may be institutionalized within the curriculum, they are nevertheless increasingly questionable.

What is media education?

Media texts often combine several 'languages' or forms of communication – visual images (still or moving), audio (sound, music or speech) and written language. Media education therefore aims to develop a broad-based competence, not just in relation to print, but also in these other symbolic systems of images and sounds. This competence is frequently described as a form of *literacy*; and it is argued that, in the modern world, 'media literacy' is just as important for young people as the more traditional literacy of print.

Media *education*, then, is the process of teaching and learning about media; media *literacy* is the outcome – the knowledge and skills learners acquire. As I shall argue in more detail in chapter 3, media literacy necessarily involves 'reading' and 'writing' media. Media education therefore aims to develop *both* critical understanding *and* active participation. It enables young people to interpret and make informed judgements as consumers of media; but it also enables them to become producers of media in their own right. Media education is about developing young people's critical *and* creative abilities.

Media education, therefore, is concerned with teaching and learning *about* the media. This should not be confused with teaching *through* or *with* the media – for example, the use of television or computers as means of teaching science or history. Of course, these educational media also provide versions or representations of the world; and, for that reason, media educators have often sought to challenge the instrumental use of media as 'teaching aids'. This emphasis is particularly important in relation to the contemporary enthusiasm for new technologies in education, where media are frequently seen as neutral means of delivering 'information'. Yet

while it can have a fruitful critical dialogue with these areas, media education should not be confused with educational technology or with educational media.

Why media education?

Why should we be teaching young people about the media? Most rationales for media education tend to begin by documenting the statistical significance of the media in contemporary children's lives. Surveys repeatedly show that, in most industrialized countries, children now spend more time watching television than they do in school, or indeed on any other activity apart from sleeping (e.g. Livingstone and Bovill, 2001; Rideout et al., 1999). If we add to this the time they devote to films, magazines, computer games and popular music, it is clear that the media constitute by far their most significant leisure-time pursuit.

These points often lead on to broader assertions about the economic, social and cultural importance of the media in modern societies. The media are major industries, generating profit and employment; they provide us with most of our information about the political process; and they offer us ideas, images and representations (both factual and fictional) that inevitably shape our view of reality. The media are undoubtedly the major contemporary means of cultural expression and communication: to become an active participant in public life necessarily involves making use of the modern media. The media, it is often argued, have now taken the place of the family, the church and the school as the major socializing influence in contemporary society.

Of course, this is not to imply that the media are all-powerful, or that they necessarily promote a singular and consistent view of the world. Yet it is to suggest that they are now ubiquitous and unavoidable. The media are embedded in the textures and routines of everyday life, and they provide many of the 'symbolic resources' we use to conduct and interpret our relationships and to define our identities. As Roger Silverstone (1999) has argued, the media are now 'at the core of experience, at the heart of our capacity or incapacity to make sense of the world in which we live'. And, as he suggests, it is for this reason that we should study them.

In these terms, therefore, the argument for media education is essentially an argument for making the curriculum *relevant* to children's lives outside school, and to the wider society. In practice, however, many rationales for media education adopt a much less

neutral approach. Media education is typically regarded as a solution to a problem; and children's relationship with the media is seen, not so much as a fact of modern life, but as a harmful and damaging phenomenon that educators must seek to confront. As we shall see, the reasons why that relationship is seen to represent a problem – and hence the nature of the solutions which are offered – are quite variable. For some, the central concern is about the media's apparent lack of *cultural value*, as compared with the 'classics' of great art or literature; while for others, the problem is to do with the undesirable *attitudes* or *forms of behaviour* which they are seen to promote.

Like any other field of education, then, media education has been characterized by an ongoing debate about its fundamental aims and methods. Few teachers are initially trained in media education; and they therefore tend to approach it from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, and with diverse motivations. One way of tracing these different rationales and motivations is through a historical perspective. In the following sections, I will offer a brief account of the historical evolution of approaches to media education, specifically in the UK, although the broad lines of this development have been replicated elsewhere.

The evolution of media education in the UK

Recovering the history of educational change is not an easy undertaking. While it is possible to rely on published sources – for example, on 'handbooks' for teachers, on teaching materials and curriculum documents, and on professional journals – these can give only a limited insight into the realities of classroom practice. Yet on this basis at least, it is possible to divide the early history of media education in the UK into three broad phases (for more extensive accounts, see Alvarado and Boyd-Barrett, 1992; Alvarado, Gutch and Wollen, 1987; Masterman, 1985).

Discrimination

The most commonly quoted starting point in this history can be found in the work of the literary critic F. R. Leavis and his student Denys Thompson. Their book *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (1933) represented the first systematic set of proposals for teaching about the mass media in schools. The book, which was revised and reprinted a number of times over the

following two decades, contains a series of classroom exercises using extracts from journalism, popular fiction and advertisements. This approach was subsequently promoted through journals like the *Use of English*, which Thompson edited, and found its way into several official reports on education.

The central mission for Leavis and his associates was the preservation of the literary heritage, and the language, the values and the health of the nation it was seen to embody and to represent. The media were seen here as a corrupting influence, offering superficial pleasures in place of the authentic values of great art and literature. The aim of teaching about popular culture, therefore, was to encourage students to 'discriminate and resist' – to arm themselves against the commercial manipulation of the mass media and hence to recognize the self-evident merits of 'high' culture.

This process of training students in 'discrimination' and 'critical awareness' has been described by subsequent critics as a form of 'inoculation' – in other words, as a means of protection against disease (Halloran and Jones, 1968; Masterman, 1980). What remains notable about it in educational terms is its extraordinary self-confidence. Leavis and Thompson sought to enable teachers to expose what they saw as the crude exploitation and the cheap emotional falsity of popular culture; and they took for granted that, once exposed, it would be recognized and condemned.

Cultural studies and the popular arts

The next phase in this brief history brings us forward to the late 1950s and early 1960s, and to the founding moment of 'British Cultural Studies'. Most explicitly in the work of Raymond Williams (1958, 1961) and Richard Hoggart (1959), this approach offered a challenge to the Leavisite notion of 'culture'. Culture was no longer seen here as a fixed set of privileged artefacts – an approved 'canon' of literary texts, for example – but as 'a whole way of life'; and cultural expression was seen to take a whole range of forms, from the exalted to the everyday. This more inclusive approach thus began to challenge the distinctions between high culture and popular culture, and ultimately between art and lived experience.

The key text which sought to disseminate this approach to teachers in schools was *The Popular Arts* (1964) by Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, which offered an extensive range of suggestions for teaching about the media, and particularly about the cinema. This less obviously 'inoculative' approach to studying the media was also reflected in teaching materials and in official reports of

the time. Graham Murdock and Guy Phelps (1973), in a research study of secondary schools, found that the Leavisite approach was steadily losing ground as younger teachers sought to recognize and to build upon their students' everyday cultural experiences.

Nevertheless, this approach still sought to preserve fundamental cultural distinctions. Hoggart (1959), for example, clearly distinguished between the 'living' culture of the industrial working classes and the 'processed' culture which derived from Hollywood – striking a characteristically anti-American tone which was also apparent in the work of Leavis. Likewise, in Hall and Whannel (1964) and in the Newsom Report on English teaching which was published in the previous year (Department of Education and Science, 1963), distinctions between high culture and popular culture were not so much abolished as shifted. Thus, while teachers were now encouraged to consider films in the classroom – although preferably European or British films – the increasingly dominant medium of television remained quite beyond the pale.

Screen Education and demystification

In the 1970s, we can identify another paradigm shift, again deriving initially from the academy. The key development here was that of 'Screen theory', as expounded in the pages of the journals *Screen* and *Screen Education*. *Screen* was the most significant vehicle for new developments in semiotics, structuralism, psychoanalytic theory, post-structuralism, and Marxist theories of ideology. The difficult role of *Screen Education* was to suggest how these academic approaches might be applied to classrooms in schools – although this was a task that it addressed only intermittently (see Alvarado, Collins and Donald, 1993).

The most influential exponent of this approach was undoubtedly Len Masterman (1980, 1985). In fact, Masterman was highly critical of what he regarded as the academic elitism of *Screen* theory; yet his books *Teaching about Television* (1980) and *Teaching the Media* (1985) shared the central concerns of that theory with questions of language, ideology and representation. The fundamental aim here was to reveal the constructed nature of media texts, and thereby to show how media representations reinforced the ideologies of dominant groups within society.

Masterman strongly rejected what he saw as the middle-class, evaluative approach of Leavis and his inheritors – an approach which he suggested remained prevalent among teachers of English. By contrast, he promoted analytical methods drawn from semiology,

which were seen to offer the promise of objectivity and analytical rigour. (These methods will be considered more fully in chapters 5 and 7.) These forms of analysis were to be combined with the detailed study of the economics of the media industries (Masterman, 1985). Students were urged to put aside their subjective responses and pleasures, and to engage in systematic forms of analysis which would expose the 'hidden' ideologies of the media – and thereby 'liberate' themselves from their influence. *Discrimination* on the grounds of cultural value was thus effectively replaced by a form of political or ideological *demystification*.

Democratization and defensiveness

This brief history inevitably neglects some of the complexities of these various positions, and the historical contexts in which they were formed. A fuller analysis of the evolution of media education would need to locate these approaches within the changing social and cultural climate of their times; and in particular to relate them to the ongoing struggles for control over educational policy-making.

With these qualifications in mind, however, it is possible to read this history in terms of two contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, the development of media education is part of a wider move towards *democratization* – a process whereby students' out-of-school cultures are gradually recognized as valid and worthy of consideration in the school curriculum. In these terms, media education could be seen as one dimension of the 'progressive' educational strategies that began to gain widespread acceptance in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, students of English were increasingly encouraged to write about their everyday experiences; to discuss the poetry of popular songs; and to debate contemporary social issues. Such strategies attempted to 'validate' students' cultures, and to build connections between the cultures of the school and those of the home and the peer group.

This move reflected the growing recognition that the traditional academic curriculum was inadequate for the large majority of students, and particularly for working-class students. Even in the work of Leavis and Thompson, one can detect an acknowledgement that teachers had to begin by working with the cultures that students brought with them into the classroom, rather than seeking merely to impose the values of 'high' culture. In more recent years, this democratization of the curriculum should also be seen as part of a wider political move, which is apparent in different ways in the

work of Williams and in the project of *Screen Education*. The attempt to include popular culture within the curriculum represented a direct challenge to the elitism of established literary culture; and in this respect, it was implicitly informed by a wider class politics.

On the other hand, however, this history is also one of *defensiveness*. It reflects a long-standing suspicion of the media and popular culture that might be seen as a defining characteristic of modern education systems (Lusted, 1985). Despite the growing inclusiveness of the curriculum, all these approaches seek in different ways to inoculate or protect students against what are assumed to be the negative effects of the media. Such an approach is implicitly premised on a notion of the media as an enormously powerful (and almost entirely negative) influence, and of children as particularly vulnerable to manipulation. Teaching children about the media – enabling them to analyse how media texts are constructed, and to understand the economic functions of the media industries – is seen as a way of ‘empowering’ them to resist such influences. In the process, it is argued, children will become rational consumers, able to view the media in a ‘critical’ and distanced way.

This defensiveness may have several motivations, which take on a different significance at different times and in different national and cultural contexts. Particularly in the work of Leavis and his followers, there is a powerful form of *cultural* defensiveness – that is, an attempt to protect children from the media on the grounds of their apparent lack of cultural value, and thereby to lead the children on to superior forms of art and literature. While they are now distinctly unfashionable in some circles, such motivations nevertheless often underlie more apparently ‘objective’ or ‘political’ concerns. As in the case of Leavis and Hoggart, they are often reinforced by a resistance to what is seen as American cultural imperialism – which (for obvious reasons) is particularly prominent in English-speaking countries, and to some degree in Latin America.

More recently, it is possible to identify a form of *political* defensiveness, which is most apparent in the third perspective outlined above. Here the aim is to use media education, and particularly media analysis, as a means of disabusing students of false beliefs and ideologies. This remains a major motivation for media educators in many countries, although since the 1970s the range of concerns addressed here has increasingly encompassed wider forms of ‘identity politics’, particularly around issues of gender and ethnicity. From this perspective, it is the media that are seen to be primarily responsible for making students sexist or racist; and it is through media analysis that such ideologies will be displaced or overcome.

Less apparent in the UK, but a powerful motivation for media educators elsewhere, is what might be termed a *moral* defensiveness. In the United States, for example, media education is strongly motivated by anxieties about the effects of sex and violence in the media, and to some extent about the media's role in promoting consumerism or materialism. Here again, the media are seen to be primarily responsible for inculcating these false beliefs or behaviours – for encouraging children to believe that all their problems can be solved through violence, or through the acquisition of material goods. And it is through a rigorous training in media analysis that such dangers can be prevented or overcome (Anderson, 1980).

In each case, therefore, media education is proposed as a way of dealing with some very wide and complex social problems – and if the media are routinely identified as the overriding cause of these problems, media education frequently seems to be seen as the solution. In the process, the need to consider any of the more intractable causes of such problems – or any more thoroughgoing and potentially unpalatable ways of dealing with them – is neatly side-stepped. For example, if we can blame the media for the rise in violence, media education becomes a sensible alternative to gun control, or to addressing poverty or racism. Media education therefore comes to be seen, not just as an alternative form of media regulation – a liberal alternative to censorship, perhaps – but as a means of modifying more general attitudes and behaviours (see Bragg, 2001).

As in media research, these arguments tend to recur as new media enter the scene. For instance, the advent of the internet has seen a resurgence of many of these protectionist arguments for media education. Much public debate about children's uses of the internet has focused on the dangers of pornography, on paedophiles lurking in chat rooms and on the seductions of online marketing. Here, media education is yet again perceived by some as a kind of inoculation – a means of preventing contamination, if not of keeping children away from the media entirely. In this scenario, the potential benefits and pleasures of the media are neglected in favour of an exclusive – and in some instances, highly exaggerated – emphasis on the harm they are assumed to cause.

Yet however diverse these concerns may be, the positions that students and teachers appear to occupy here remain remarkably consistent. By and large, students are seen to be particularly at risk from the negative influence of the media, and as seemingly unable to resist their power; while teachers are somehow assumed to be able to stand outside this process, providing students with the

tools of critical analysis which will 'liberate' them. In each case, media education is regarded as a means of counteracting children's apparent fascination and pleasure in the media – and hence (it would seem) their belief in the values the media are seen to promote. Media education will, it is assumed, automatically lead children on to an appreciation of high culture, to more morally healthy forms of behaviour, or to more rational, politically correct beliefs. It is seen to offer nothing less than a means of salvation.

Towards a new paradigm

To some degree, all the approaches outlined above have remained influential. Yet in the last decade, media education in the UK and in many other countries has begun to move into a further new phase. While protectionist views have been far from superseded, there has been a gradual evolution towards a less defensive approach. In general, the countries with the most 'mature' forms of practice in media education – that is, those which have the longest history, and the most consistent pattern of development – have moved well beyond protectionism. (For accounts of the evolution of media education internationally, see Bazalgette, Bévort and Saviano, 1992; Buckingham and Domaille, 2001; Hart, 1998; Kubey, 1997; and Von Feilitzen and Carlsson, 1999.)

There have been several reasons for this shift. To some degree, it reflects changing views of young people's relationships with the media, both in academic research and in public debate more generally. The notion of the media as bearers of a singular set of ideologies and beliefs – or indeed as uniformly harmful or lacking in cultural value – is no longer so easy to sustain. Of course, there are still significant limits in the diversity of views and cultural forms represented in the mainstream media; but the development of modern communication has resulted in a more heterogeneous, even fragmented, environment, in which the boundaries between high culture and popular culture have become extremely blurred. Likewise, the notion that the media are an all-powerful 'consciousness industry' – that they can single-handedly impose false values on passive audiences – has also come into question. Contemporary research suggests that children are a much more autonomous and critical audience than they are conventionally assumed to be; and this is increasingly recognized by the media industries themselves.

To some extent, this shift is also part of a broader development in thinking about the regulation of the media. Technological changes

are making it increasingly difficult to prevent children gaining access to material that is deemed harmful or unsuitable; and regulation of this kind can restrict their opportunities for active participation. Among media regulators themselves, the emphasis is now moving away from censorship, and towards 'consumer advice' – of which media education is often seen as one dimension (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 1997). Meanwhile, there has also been a growing recognition among educators that the protectionist approach does not actually work in practice. Especially when it comes to the areas with which media education is so centrally concerned – with what students see as their own cultures and their own pleasures – they may well be inclined to resist or reject what teachers tell them.

To some extent, these developments could also be seen as the result of a generational shift. There is evidence that younger teachers today, who have grown up with electronic media, are more relaxed in their attitudes: they are less likely to see themselves as missionaries denouncing the influence of the media, and are more enthusiastic about young people using media as forms of cultural expression (Morgan, 1998a; Richards, 1998a). For this generation, a merely defensive approach to media education would be at odds with their own experience as media consumers, and would place them in a false, paternalistic position as teachers.

Taken together, these developments are leading to the emergence of a new paradigm for media education. Media education is now no longer so automatically opposed to students' experiences of the media. It does not begin from the view that the media are necessarily and inevitably harmful, or that young people are simply passive victims of media influence. On the contrary, it adopts a more student-centred perspective, which begins from young people's existing knowledge and experience of media, rather than from the instructional imperatives of the teacher. It does not aim to shield young people from the influence of the media, and thereby to lead them on to 'better things', but to enable them to make informed decisions on their own behalf. Media education is seen here not as a form of *protection*, but as a form of *preparation*.

In some respects, this rationale appears rather more 'neutral' than those described above. In broad terms, it aims to develop young people's *understanding* of, and *participation* in, the media culture that surrounds them (Bazalgette, 1989). Advocates of this approach emphasize the importance of media education as part of a more general form of 'democratic citizenship', although they also recognize the importance of students' enjoyment and pleasure in the media.

Broadly speaking, therefore, this new approach seeks to begin with what students *already* know, and with their existing tastes and pleasures in the media, rather than assuming that these are merely invalid or 'ideological'. This approach does not seek to replace 'subjective' responses with 'objective' ones, or to neutralize the pleasures of the media through rational analysis. On the contrary, it aims to develop a more reflexive style of teaching and learning, in which students can reflect on their own activity both as 'readers' and as 'writers' of media texts, and understand the broader social and economic factors that are in play. Critical analysis is seen here as a process of dialogue, rather than a matter of arriving at an agreed or predetermined position.

From this perspective, media production by students also assumes a much greater significance. Of course, the primary aim of media education is not to train the television producers and journalists of the future: this is a task for higher education, and for the media industries themselves. Nevertheless, the participatory potential of new technologies – and particularly of the internet – has made it much more possible for young people to undertake creative media production, and for teachers to do so with their students. By emphasizing the development of young people's creativity, and their participation in media production, media educators are enabling their voices to be heard; and in the longer term, they are also providing the basis for more democratic and inclusive forms of media production in the future.

Moving ahead: teaching and learning

One major aim of this book is to define, explain and illustrate this more contemporary approach to media education. In particular, part II offers a systematic and detailed account of the conceptual framework of media education, of its characteristic teaching strategies, and of the possibilities for media education in a range of curriculum areas.

However, the book also seeks to explore a series of unresolved questions and problems in the field; and to address some new challenges. To some extent, these questions reflect a general 'coming of age' of media education. In the past ten years, media educators have increasingly begun to reflect on their own practice, and to cast a more self-critical eye on the effectiveness of their work. There has been a new attention to questions about students' *learning* in media education. To some extent, these questions relate to

broader theoretical debates in academic studies of the media – debates, for example, about the relationship between pleasure and ideology, and about the place of ‘rational’ analysis. Yet there are also specific pedagogical issues here. How are we to identify what students already know about the media? How do they *acquire* ‘critical’ or conceptual understandings? How do they learn to use the media to express themselves and to communicate with others? How do they relate the academic discourse of the subject to their own experiences as media users? How can we evaluate evidence of their learning? And how can we be sure that media education actually makes a difference?

In addressing these and related questions in part III of the book, I will be drawing on the insights of classroom-based research conducted by myself and my colleagues over the past ten years. This research questions many of the grandiose claims of previous approaches to media education; and in many respects, it reflects a broader challenge to ‘modernist’ conceptions of education as a means of developing forms of ‘critical consciousness’ or rationality. Indeed, to some extent, it emerges from a more widespread rethinking of some of the earlier assumptions of ‘progressive’ educational practice (Buckingham, 1998). However, the aim here is not merely to deconstruct the certainties of previous generations of purportedly radical educators; it is also to provide the basis for a more coherent and inclusive conception of what *counts* as learning.

Moving ahead: a bigger picture

In addition to these more ‘internal’ questions, there has also been a range of broader developments that have complex implications for media educators. To some degree, they make the case for media education all the more urgent; yet they also suggest that it needs to be extended – and perhaps rethought.

The proliferation of media technologies, the commercialization and globalization of media markets, the fragmentation of mass audiences and the rise of ‘interactivity’ are all fundamentally transforming young people’s everyday experiences of media. In this new environment, children have increasingly come to be seen as a valuable target market for the media industries. Children today can and do gain access to ‘adult’ media, via cable TV or video or the internet, much more readily than their parents ever could; but they also have their own ‘media spheres’, which adults may find increasingly difficult to penetrate or understand. Digital media

– and particularly the internet – significantly increase the potential for active participation; yet for the large majority of children who do not yet have access to these opportunities, there is a growing danger of exclusion and disenfranchisement.

These developments, and their implications for young people, will be considered in more detail in chapter 2; yet it is important to stress that they are not simply confined to the domain of the media. On the contrary, they reflect much broader tendencies in the contemporary world, which have been widely discussed and debated by a range of social theorists. At least in Western countries, the shift towards a ‘post-industrial’ consumer society is seen to have destabilized existing patterns of employment, settlement and social life. Established social institutions, the rules of conduct of civil society and traditional conceptions of citizenship are increasingly being called into question. Meanwhile, economic and cultural globalization has precipitated a crisis in the legitimacy of the nation state, and begun to reconfigure the relations between the local and the global.

Many social commentators agree that the contemporary world is characterized by a growing sense of fragmentation and individualization. Long-standing systems of belief and ways of life are being eroded, and familiar hierarchies overthrown. Social and geographical mobility is undermining traditional social bonds, such as those of family and community; and the majority of young people today are growing up in increasingly heterogeneous, multicultural societies, in which very different conceptions of morality and very different cultural traditions exist side-by-side. In this context, identity comes to be seen as a matter of individual choice, rather than birth-right or destiny; and in the process, it is argued, individuals have also become more diverse – and to some extent more autonomous – in their uses and interpretations of cultural goods. Yet despite appearances, these new societies are also more unequal and more polarized than those they appear to be replacing.

These developments are also seen to have unsettling implications for education (Usher and Edwards, 1994). Educators, it is argued, can no longer see themselves as ‘legislators’, imposing the values and norms of official culture. The best they can hope for is to act as ‘interpreters’, making available ‘multiple realities’ and diverse forms of perception and knowledge. Meanwhile, the missionary rhetoric of public schooling – its claim to ‘emancipate’ students from power, and transform them into autonomous social agents – has been condemned as merely another illusion of capitalist modernity.

The nature and extent of these developments is certainly very debatable, although there is little doubt about the central role of the media – and of consumer culture more broadly – in the continuing transformation of modern societies. On one level, this would seem to reinforce the need for media education; yet it also raises some significant questions about its characteristic forms and practices. The ‘identity politics’ of contemporary media education, with their emphasis on rationality and ‘realist’ conceptions of representation, need to be questioned, as does the rhetoric of ‘democratic citizenship’ on which they are often based. Technological developments challenge conventional distinctions between critical analysis and creative production, and may create opportunities for very different – and much more ‘playful’ – forms of pedagogic practice. And as the legitimacy of the school as a social institution itself comes into question, we need to assess the potential contribution of media education to new forms of learning, beyond the classroom. All these are issues that will be taken up in more detail in part IV of this book.

A continuing story

This introductory chapter has sought to provide an overview of some of the key issues and arguments that will be explored in more detail in the remainder of the book. It has offered a brief outline of the history of media education, and suggested some of the factors at stake in its continuing development. However, it has sought to avoid the temptations of a teleological account – as though the bad old ideas of the past had simply been thrown out in favour of the good new ideas of the present. While this book will seek to explain and to justify the current ‘state of the art’ in media education, it will also question it and point beyond it. Like any form of educational practice, media education needs a clear model of the curriculum and a coherent theory of learning. Yet if they are to remain alive to changing circumstances, and to students’ changing needs and experiences, media teachers also need to reflect on their own practice, and to be ready to respond to new challenges. As this book will make clear, the evolving story of media education is thankfully very far from concluded.