

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: studying for a Masters degree

If you've picked up this book, it probably means you are just starting a degree in Media and Communications or one of the many sub-disciplines in the field, be that Journalism, Public Relations, Media Management, or Media and Campaigning, to name just a few. Firstly, welcome to a hugely exciting field. There was a time when people looked at media studies as not being a proper subject (boo!), but those days are long gone. Media and Communications courses are becoming ever more in demand, and ever more demanding. From late night editing sessions, placements in industry, lectures on theory from the Frankfurt School to Marxism, to the ethics of digital technology, and practical sessions on campaigning, sound engineering, marketing, and more, these courses are perhaps some of the most intensive around. Studying Media and Communications is far more than watching films and reading newspapers, it is about research, critical thinking, understanding the industry and the economics of media. It is about understanding and learning about people, society, interactions and how the world works, and who it works for, and who are excluded. As Professor Philip Thickett, former head of Birmingham City University's School of Media has said, 'media gives the people a voice or the skill to actually change people's views or lives [...] that is why media matters.'¹ And he isn't alone in thinking that media and communications is important, former Channel 4 chief executive Michael Jackson, Sunday Times editor John Witherow, and hundreds of others have started their careers on Media and Communications courses. And with the second highest employment rate in the UK, why shouldn't you want to also be part of this exciting and diverse field that seeks to break down the barriers of incomprehension and mistrust? In a world of fake news, spin and

¹ See Quin-Jarvis (2014) for other quote sources and wider discussion.

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populism, one group of media professors made the argument (in the words of the article's strapline) that the subject has not only come of age but had 'finally found its place in the zeitgeist'.² It is also a degree which, as its name suggests, is hugely sociable, with a focus on talking to other people, studying other people, writing about people, interviewing people, meeting people. There are people everywhere. So, it is also a great way to make connections and friends around the world, creating your own *global village* as Marshall McLuhan might have said.

Balancing all of these elements above, along with the exciting social life that a Media and Communications course affords can be difficult. You will need to maintain your studies, and focus, through a degree that is very challenging. Your institution will also want you to be both intellectually stimulated and to experience the pressures that you will encounter when you take up jobs within the media. You are going to be learning a whole heap of new skills and practice throughout your studies, and for the most part that is what your course, lectures, seminars and workshops are for. But there are two other elements that are common to all Media and Communications courses, that perhaps your standard modules won't help you with quite as much. These are, according to Professor James Curran, co-director of Goldsmiths Media Research Centre, 'the ability to write really well, a skill that most people don't have but makes a lot of media students highly employable', and in the words of Philip Thickett, 'the unspoken [requirement] of being on a pressurized course that reflects what people face in the industry'. These two skills, writing, and time management, form the backbone of what this book is all about. And if you have started this book by reading this introduction then you are already on the right path to great Media and Communication study skills. Even better, perhaps you read the blurb on the back first, skimmed through the contents pages and then thought, 'yes I'm going to read this'. These are some of the kinds of reading and study tactics that will be discussed through this book. We are getting ahead of ourselves though. Why should you keep reading this book? How will it help you in your studies?

There are hundreds of books out there that say they will help you in your studies, and thousands of pieces of advice. These range from the reasonably sound, such as Alexandre Dumas' system of using colour coded paper for writing in different genres, to the outright dangerous – French novelist Honoré de Balzac would drink 50 cups of coffee a day, a habit he shared with Voltaire – and in some cases just plain bizarre, such as Victor Hugo's idea that it is better to write in the nude (perhaps we should steer clear of French novelists and their advice). How do you know which is the right advice or whose to follow? How do you know what will work for you or your course? All difficult questions, and ones

² See Brabazon, T. et al. (2019).

that students around the world ask, regardless of their experience – and many of your lecturers might be asking these questions too, but they'd never tell you that.

This book isn't seeking to make the author his millions (it's free to download after all), and unlike other study skills books this one is designed as a daily companion to keep in your bag, to use as a reference guide in class, while writing essays, to help you negotiate group work, to give presentations and to get everything you can out of your studies. The book itself is filled with useful tips, quick methods, and plenty of places to practise the skills discussed. We also have a range of downloadable supplementary templates to help you organized and plan your studies and writing. This isn't just a book to read, it is a book that we will write together.

The book really covers two main themes, the first being about writing, and the second being more about general skills that will help you to navigate all kinds of other assessments and teaching techniques. Both are illustrated with templates, cheat sheets, activities, advice and links to other resources that might help you in your work. All these tips and resources have been collected together from many years of teaching. The author has also struggled with many of these things, and had to learn them the hard way... I only wish someone had written this book for me before I started my degree.

Everything in academia follows very specific patterns and forms, these are often the same across spoken and written forms and it is possible to learn these patterns, or at least to be aware of them, to enable you to produce better work within the *templates* of academia. This book is designed to help you do the best in your studies by helping you with the two elements highlighted by Thickett and Curran – writing and time management. And, unlike the patterns and templates it contains, this book can be read in any order, and you can skip and jump around between topics, but I do recommend starting with chapter 2 ... it will ensure you have time to read the rest of the book.

So, let's get going ...

References

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