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## WHY YOUTH MEDIA?

### WHY MEDIA, WHY YOUTH, WHY RESEARCH?

In 2012, the organisation Invisible Children tried to raise global awareness about child abuse in Africa by releasing the documentary *Kony 2012* on YouTube. The video was named after Joseph Kony, leader of a rebel Ugandan-based paramilitary group called the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Since the late 1980s, the LRA has been responsible for numerous human-rights crimes in several African countries. Many of its victims have been children, including tens of thousands forced into military service (BBC News Africa, 2102). Kony was wanted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court, but until *Kony 2012* few people knew about him. Within four days of its YouTube release, 50 million people had seen the documentary, numerous celebrities enthusiastically urged their fans to check it out, and the Obama administration was praising the thousands of Americans who had helped to raise awareness about the warlord and his crimes (Molloy, 2012). The video had been targeted at high-school students (Curtis, 2012), and was most watched by 13–17-year-olds (Shaughnessy, 2012). Young social media users appeared to be on the cusp of making the world a better place.

*Kony 2012*, it seemed, showed media at their best: depicting the world as it is, making young people care about injustices and encouraging them to do things to ensure that such horrors are never repeated. But many critics urged caution. *Kony 2012* was pilloried for oversimplifying the complexities of African history, Invisible Children's motives were questioned, and young social media users were ridiculed for thinking that sharing and liking online materials could change the world.

Whatever its merits, *Kony 2012* provoked an interesting discussion about media influence. What do we want media to do in the world? What are some of the practical problems in making media a force for good? What kinds of effects do media have? Where and when should we look for them? For example, should anyone have expected *Kony 2012* to change the world, directly? What if today's young 'slactivists' have at least started to think about their peers in other parts of the world? What outcomes might this sensitivity produce in the future? All of this boils down to three important questions: Why do media matter? Why do young people feature so prominently in contemplations on this issue? What are the different ways that scholars have conceived and researched media influence, as it is experienced among young people? These are the concerns of this book.

## MEDIA, YOUTH AND SOCIETY

So, this book is really about conceiving and researching the social influence of media, with a particular focus on how young people experience the world *as* young people. When one speaks of ‘media influence’, it’s tempting to focus on various ways that media are said to damage our social fabric. The idea that media harm society, and that young audiences are especially vulnerable in this regard, is a familiar refrain. Media are frequently blamed for making young people think and act anti-socially. When South Africa’s murder rate increased by 130 per cent in the decade after the introduction of broadcast television in 1976, critics blamed the nation’s first television generation (Beresin, 1999). In the US, former army psychologist David Grossman apocalyptically warned the lurid capacities of films and video games had become so adept at short-circuiting the natural human aversion to violence in the minds of young audiences that the situation warranted its own science – ‘killology’. In *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A call to action against TV, movie and video game violence* (1999), Grossman and Degaetano argued that video games don’t just glamorise violence; they teach teens how to be good at it. Their thesis was inspired by Michael Carneal, a 14-year-old Kentucky high-school student who stole a gun and hit eight peers with eight shots despite, he claimed, having only practised his marksmanship on video games.

The issue of media effects is far more complicated than these studies imagine. This is not to say that media do not affect how young people think about and live in their social worlds. Quite the reverse: a broader understanding of media influence leads to the conclusion that media are far more important than the positions offered by people like Grossman and Degaetano allow. The limitations of their position on effects is explored in Chapter 2, but for now this book proposes an alternative approach to media influence, framing that influence as political, historical and ordinary. The case for a political understanding of media influence, with a youth focus, is introduced through making four points:

- Studying how youth is represented in the media tells us a great deal about the public sentiments and concerns that defined particular historical moments. This is the basis for designating media influence as being political.
- A political take on media influence is supported by the international debate on media literacy, which defines the ability to understand and use media as a precondition for participatory democracy.
- The way that young people use media in everyday settings is an important measure for the depth of social inclusion.
- Studies of youth subcultures (groups of young people who used fashion and music to find their place in the world) have established that ordinary young people have used media resources to communicate political views and identities for a long time.

These studies also show that media influence can only be understood in the context of cultural history. Critiques of these studies have raised important methodological and conceptual questions about how youth and media are studied. Decisions about who to study, how to gather evidence, and how to interpret and present that evidence mean that media studies doesn't just examine the politics of representation, but also involves the politics of representation. The politics of research is an important practical consideration in research design.

## MEDIA, ORDINARY YOUTH AND SOCIAL HISTORY

Good or bad, the way that young people use media, or the way that young people are represented in the media, are both interesting topics to study because they show how media structure the ideas we use to make sense of the world. As an identity, youth is no longer wasted on the young; it is a role that many people play, with the media's help. British Prime Minister David Cameron, for example, began to build his political persona as a potential national leader by defining himself as a 'youthful' politician at the age of 40. We will reflect more on this case study later. For now, the idea is that media influence society when they create and share ideas about what youth is, because people use these ideas when they think about themselves and the societies they live in.

The task is to show how this happens in routine ways that have considerable – and recognisable – political outcomes. This chapter does this by presenting the tale of Ryan Florence, an English teenager who became infamous in 2007 when he was filmed pretending to assassinate Cameron. Florence's prank became a mediated political event because it was *made* to encapsulate politicised arguments about youth, as Cameron sought to redefine the public image of the Conservative Party that he led by presenting himself as a person who understood young people. The fact that an unintentional media event, perpetrated by a young man who didn't mean to make a political statement, became a bellwether for life in Britain in 2007 begins to explain why representations of young people in media tell us a lot about how media bring social reality to life. Exploring this question connects media studies with longer traditions in social history.

## THE FLORENCE/CAMERON INCIDENT

A winter's afternoon in January 2007 found David Cameron strolling through a Manchester housing estate discussing the topic of gun crime with local community leaders. The tyro leader was so engrossed in his conversations that he barely noticed the small group of male teenagers who passed him. Why would he? All were dressed in familiar teen style: training shoes, track pants and, of course, the 'hoody' that had become the de facto uniform of British teens. Naturally, then, neither Cameron nor his entourage noticed as one of the boys,

Ryan Florence, turned, fashioned his right hand into the shape of a pistol, and, smirking, fired an imaginary round into the unsuspecting politician. Images of the faux assassination were beamed around the world, as clear proof that – as Cameron repeatedly argued – Britain was a ‘broken society’, fractured by ingrained incivility.

For Cameron, the incident was serendipitous. In his 2005 campaign for election as leader of the Conservative Party, Cameron promised that his youth would help reverse a decade of electoral humiliation:

In an age where economic stability and prosperity are increasingly taken for granted, younger generations care just as much about quality of life concerns – the environment, urban space, culture and leisure – as the traditional policy boxes in which we’ve conducted our debates. I know this is how young people feel because this is how I feel. (Cameron, quoted in Sparrow, 2005)

Cameron engineered a series of media events that showed him empathising with young people, for example vignettes that sold his brand of ‘compassionate Conservatism’. Even if it started in happenstance, the Florence incident became one in a series of youth stories, where Cameron variously urged listeners to a London R&B station to ‘keep it real’ (BBC News, 2005), recruited the 19-year-old Olympic silver boxing medallist Amir Khan in his campaign to introduce youth community service (Pascoe-Watson, 2007) and had snot smeared on his back by a teenage prankster (Peterkin, 2008). If these stunts did not always stay on message,<sup>1</sup> Cameron’s run-in with Florence was at least spun in the politician’s favour. Against the charge that the teenager had made a fool of Cameron, or underlined the insincerity of one who could be so engrossed in explaining his commitment to youth that he walked right past a group of the very people he wanted to serve, a Conservative spokesperson said ‘this picture illustrates precisely the sort of problems of anti-social behaviour and the need for positive role models that David was talking about’ (Hoodie pic ‘proves Cameron point’, 2007). Citizens were assured that Cameron understood that social problems were matters for collective action, since they could see him being ridiculed and threatened by young people in pursuit of his beliefs. For a time, an obscure teenager from Manchester became a symbol of everything that was wrong with Britain.

## FLORENCE, CAMERON AND SOCIAL HISTORY

There are good reasons why this book should begin with an obscure teenage prank that just happened to be caught on camera. Social historians have made a persuasive case for focusing social commentary on the ordinary people that history normally ignores. Vic Gatrell’s *The Hanging Tree* (1994), for example, starts to explain why English public opinion quickly turned against public executions in the mid-nineteenth century (representing a remarkable change in attitudes toward justice and civilisation) by discussing the 1832 hanging of

14-year-old John Amy Bird Bell. Gatrell argued that Bird's execution was an unremarkable event that ended up catalysing an astonishing change in attitudes to capital punishment. Provocatively, Gatrell noted that much as the public despatching of a child is repugnant to today's sensibilities, our 'obvious' empathetic response to such a prospect would have been quite alien to the public mind of the early nineteenth century. Today's natural disgust at the image of a dead teen swinging from the gibbet would have seemed unusual in 1832. Repulsion and pity were impossible emotions until they were enabled by politicians who used newspapers to change the public's view of how the world was.

The most shocking thing about Bell's execution is that in the England of 1832 neither his crime nor his punishment was regarded as shocking; at least, not at first. As England's bloody Capital Laws scythed their way through the peasantry and working classes in the early-modern period, it was simply assumed that poor people would commit crime. So the idea that one child would deliberately stab another to death over a small amount of cash was not especially confronting. It did not violate assumptions about the innocence of youth, because no such assumptions existed (Gatrell, 1994). Despatching poor people like Bell seemed nothing but a sensible means of maintaining social order. Barbaric as it looks today, there was nothing about the life and death of John Amy Bird Bell that contemporaneously demanded that he should become a historical figure. He only became one because *writers* turned him into an icon of an attitude to justice that had seen its day. So, Gatrell's treatment of this execution teaches how ordinary events are infused with significance by scholarly work. In doing so, he established a blueprint for selecting case studies that we would do well to follow.

Bell was not the first teenager or child to be hanged in England; indeed, the practice had been relatively common in the eighteenth century (Gatrell, 1994). But his was the first case where an ordinary death stirred impassioned pleas against public executions that, eventually, helped produce a major constitutional change. The politician Edward Gibbon Wakefield wrote a heart-rending account of the boy's final moments, describing how the child-like Bird had even broken the hangman's heart as the noose was placed over the condemned's neck. Wakefield's account signalled the emergence of melodramatic, popular politics, where stories about the suffering of ordinary people infused political arguments with new emotional registers. Gatrell credited Wakefield with being one of the first politicians to grasp how 'vividly visualised narrative engagement . . . especially of an obscure boy's killing, would intensify and communicate emotion' (1994: 2) with an eye on promoting popular outrage that would lead to change.

Gatrell's point was that 'fleeting' historical incidents show how power becomes power when it happens in ordinary places. In this sense, we can say that Florence was to Cameron as John Amy Bird Bell was to Edward Gibbon Wakefield, the poor young soul who proved how uncivilised life had become. Like Bird, Florence was an unremarkable youth who was pushed into the political limelight by forces beyond his control. Yet things have changed, and

media have something to do with that. Unlike Bird, Florence had a sense of the bigger picture he was being painted into, and responded in a way that showed how media literacy is lived by young people who know they are being watched.

So, as a starting point, we can say that societies have long dramatised their fears and aspirations by dealing in images of youth, and these are now processes that many 'resource-poor' young people can participate in, should fate allow. For these reasons, the matter of how young people are represented in and use media is integral to the social history of democracy. This is why media influence is political. Florence's story allows us to define why this is so in three ways. Most obviously, the way he was used, and the way he responded to his infamy, displayed why representations of young people in media are ideological. Less obviously, the fact that he could respond placed the matter of media literacy – what young people know about media, and what they do with this knowledge – on display, where this notion of 'literacy' is a key concept that articulates media with democracy. Less obviously still, his story is an opportunity to reflect on the politics of media studies as a discipline. The study of media influence and young people is political in so far as it involves choices about studying certain people and events using certain methods that affect the kinds of young people and the kinds of media experiences that become public through scholarly accounts. That is, when studying young people and the media, it is important to consider how media research has its own effects, because it shapes what societies know about young people and therefore what they do about and for them.

## YOUTH AND DEMOCRACY

The Florence story was about how young people cope with situations that confront them with the full force of the media – understanding this can happen far more easily than one might imagine. Random as it was, the Florence incident raised issues that have been the subject of an extended international academic and political debate for the last quarter of a century on how young people manage media-saturated worlds. In these worlds, the matter of how young people understand media, and how they understand themselves as citizens with rights and responsibilities, are closely connected. The presence of this debate shows that the question of how media influence young people is often about the nature of democracy.

Florence was far from the first person to find his idea of fun being subjected to public scrutiny, and the things that young people do with media often place other youths in a similar spotlight. Young gamers, for example, have found themselves at the centre of highly charged constitutional battles. The matter of minor access to violent and sexually explicit games in the US has moved into a legal fight over how First Amendment rights to free speech square with a changing media age (Collier et al., 2008). Media practices like gaming affect social relationships by making people think about what youth is, what it deserves, and how it should be managed by governments and parents (Coleman and Dyer-Witford, 2007).



When parents and their children bargain over games, they are also figuring out how their relationship should work (Nikken et al., 2007). In this sense, gaming is an activity that creates the reality of youth.

Another way to look at this is to say that youth media habits are places where significant ideas about political rights are micro-managed. For Henry Giroux, the matter of how youth use media, and how they are permitted to do so, is the very stuff of democracy:

In many respects, youth not only registered symbolically the importance of modernity's claim to progress, they also affirmed the importance of the liberal, democratic tradition of the social contract in which adult responsibility was mediated through a willingness to fight for the rights of children, to enact reforms that invested in their future, and to provide the educational conditions necessary for them to make use of the freedoms they have while learning how to be critical citizens. (2003: 141)

## YOUTH AND MEDIA LITERACY

UNESCO agrees. In 1982, the organisation's International Symposium on Media Education issued the Grünwald Declaration. The Declaration identified media education as a lynchpin in the project of universal political enfranchisement, given the global reality that most of us live in media-saturated worlds. 'Rather than condemn or endorse the undoubted power of the media', the text read, 'we need to accept their significant ... penetration throughout the world as an established fact.' Media had to be conceived as 'instruments for ... citizens' active participation in society'. Media education was crucial. Simply, it had become impossible to exercise one's right as a citizen without understanding media.

When the 25th anniversary of Grünwald was marked by Carlsson et al.'s *Empowerment through Media Education* (2008), the enquiry into how well global literacy initiatives had fared since 1982 was explored with particular reference to the young and differing views on media influence. The book clearly showed the conflict between those who felt the pressing critical question was how to deal with the power of media industries, versus others who maintained the value of looking at how youth positively engaged with media resources. On one hand, the argument that media education can only work by closing the chasm between young people's media tastes and their formal schooling (Buckingham, 2006) was accepted by Abdul Waheed Khan (2008), UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for communication and Information, as the basis for future action. On the other hand, the book's editors and Davinia Frau-Meigs (2008) all argued that the reason why media education has never been so important was because media industries have never been so powerful, and national governments have never been less enthusiastic about regulating them. For Frau-Meigs, any sober analysis of global media industries shows a trend towards self-regulation that has been abused to peddle 'violent and other

harmful content' (2008: 170) onto youthful audiences who, Carlsson et al. argued, have been mostly left to fend for themselves. For Carlsson et al., the key issue was what *adults* need to guide youth in their choices, helped by media industries willing to 'assume its share of responsibilities vis-à-vis young people' (2008: 21).

Sanjay Asthana countered that youth cannot be politically engaged when viewed as 'problems' or 'people in making' (2008: 146) whose media habits need to be controlled. Cary Bazalgette (2008) warned that something is lost in starting from a position of hostility to the things that young people enjoy. Media studies inevitably replicates deficit models by looking at what young people don't know, rather than looking at the literacies and knowledge they develop in their own media practices. As Asthana and Bazalgette showed, the closer researchers get to young media users, the more sanguine they become about mediated democracy, and that media help young people in many respects.

The apparent disagreement between Frau-Meigs and Carlsson et al., on the one hand, and Asthana and Bazalgette, on the other, illustrates an important truth about media studies as something that is, in and of itself, a representational form: that is, the way that media scholars set about conceiving and studying young media users exerts its own influence on how young people attain a social voice, and on how they are represented to society. Seen this way, questions of theory and method are about much more than simply how to go about collecting valid and/or reliable data about what media do. To an extent, academics create the objects they set out to analyse, and it is remiss to discuss the topic of youth media without seeing research and teaching on the topic as cultural activities in their own right. The challenges of teaching media and cultural politics to young students who grappled with issues of race, class, gender and sexuality both inside and outside the seminar room have been recognised (e.g. Cooks, 2003). Bell hooks applauded the radical potential that studies of popular culture held as a means of uniting teacher and student in a common project of social criticism, but warned that this potential was often stunted by academics engaging in the 'voyeuristic cannibalisation' of popular culture for 'opportunistic' reasons (1994: 4). hooks felt media studies failed when academics were not genuinely committed to understanding the world from their students' point of view. What she meant was that it was impossible to address media and social power without considering the politics of research.

Let's think about John Amy Bird Bell again. The poor boy was exhumed twice. Once by Edward Gibbon Wakefield, and once again by Gatrell. Or, more kindly, Gatrell's social history was itself a representation: an expression that gave a particular meaning to Bell's story that, as Gatrell himself pointed out, differed significantly from how that reality was experienced at the time. In some ways, the question is less about what Bell was really like, and more about what the purpose of remembering him is. The same can be said of Florence, and in considering why we are also required to reflect on the purpose of media studies' engagement with young people. UNESCO's position on media literacy



has tried to understand and enable the media conditions that give young people a public voice, but media studies does not simply observe this; it has itself become a force that articulates those voices by researching them in particular ways, using particular methods that have accessed particular voices. It is imperative to ask how the ideas and methods scholars select to research questions about youth and media affects their conclusions. In this regard, Florence's story is also noteworthy because of the insights it gives to a particular debate in youth media studies: the legacy of subcultural studies, which was, in the 1970s, a powerful force in directing media scholarship away from the question of effects.

## RESEARCHING ORDINARY YOUTHS: SUBCULTURE AND THE POLITICS OF METHOD

Gatrell's opus on execution tells us there is nothing especially new about societies using youth in media to comment on the state of society – and his observation is internationally true. In the Netherlands during the 1650s, the Dutch press interpreted war and pestilence as divine retribution against drunken, sex-crazed teens who ignored the Sabbath (Roberts and Groenendijk, 2005). By some estimates, the English public have worried about working-class youth since the 1850s (Yeo, 2004). Between the turn of the twentieth century and the Great War, Danes fretted about young people gripped by alcohol, tobacco, pulp fiction and the movies (Coninck-Smith, 1999). In South Carolina during the 1920s, newspapers warned that a gang of young female arsonists represented an entire generation of deviant youth, created by the shift from rural to urban living (Cahn, 1998). These histories tended to treat young people as the targets of media and political campaigns over which they exercised little influence. The contribution of media studies to this topic has been to explore how the young *engage* with these framing processes, either as audiences who make sense of media messages according to what they know from their own social experience, or as 'actors' who use media resources to build meaningful lives. That is, when Ryan Florence seized the opportunity to disrupt a choreographed media event, he was following in a long tradition of young people using media to shape the meaning of the places where they live.

This was a major theme in British subcultural studies. In his influential book *Subculture: The meaning of style*, Hebdige defined subculture as 'the expressive forms and rituals of those subordinate groups ... who are alternatively dismissed, denounced and canonized' (1979: 2). Hebdige was talking about the various youth movements that had proliferated around the post-war British music scene, and he and other sociologists saw studying these groups as a means of putting the voices of ordinary youth back into the history of momentous post-war shifts in British culture. They were interested in what young people did with media amidst a world of meaningful objects (including clothes, social space, readings of history, drugs). The rationale for looking at youth groups with distinctive tastes in music and clothes was that post-World

War II social changes, like improvements to the public education system, rising industrial wages and immigration, made classed, raced and gendered identities feel suddenly fluid and contingent. When young people adopted styles and tastes associated with musical genres, their habits reflected more-or-less conscious, quasi-political efforts to make sense of what it meant to be young and British (Hall and Jefferson, 1978; Hebdige, 1979). Hebdige wrote that when the Mods of the 1960s donned suits, bought motor scooters, listened to Jamaican ska music and took amphetamines, they embraced the multicultural, class-mobile consumer society that Britain had become. In contrast, Clarke et al. (1978) described 1960s skinheads as 'counter-revolutionaries', determined to recover forms of working-class communities that were threatened by the very forces that Mods embraced.

In either case, subcultures connected the worlds of media and politics in two ways. First, they showed how young people lived cultural change by using media resources. Second, they showed how media industries used images of young people to alarm audiences with frightening tales of social anarchy, stoking the imaginations of people whose social worlds were changing in significant ways. Media turned people like Mods into 'folk devils'. A term coined by sociologist Stanley Cohen in 1972, 'folk devils' were young people who dressed in distinctive styles who the media used as 'visible reminders of what we should not be'. The creation and circulation of 'folk devil' images reflected an amplification of long-running historical trends that have been noted across time and space:

The behaviour and morality of young people ... has ... prompted regular unease. Here, the media have often been instrumental in orchestrating anxiety. Through a 'negative stereotyping' of youth, the media have constructed a succession of fearful images that have functioned as a symbolic embodiment of wider controversies – the media presenting youth crime, violence, and sexual license as woeful indicators of broader patterns of social decline. (Osgerby, 2004: 71)

This 'orchestrated anxiety' represented an *intensification* of established traditions in public political thought. As societies became more media saturated, so the John Amy Bell Birds of this world multiplied. Images of young people, bearing lessons of what the world was like or should be like, became more common, and began to affect how young people made identities by 'internalising' the images of themselves that they saw reflected in the media (Cohen, 1972).

## FROM SUBCULTURE TO MEDIA STUDIES

The subcultural concept of youth informs general media research, because it has taken on a meaning that can be applied to a far broader range of people and practices. To some, 'youth' is such a powerful index of how people use media to make identities that it no longer refers simply to the things that

young people do. Andy Bennett notes that many of the punks who appeared in 1970s subcultural studies are still *actively* punk, despite their approaching old age. And so

the term *youth* is no longer seen as straightforwardly linked with the condition of being young ... contemporary youth is seen to be lacking the perceived tendencies towards subversion and resistance deemed to have characterised the youth of previous generations ... many of the traits one connected with youth are now observed across a far broader age range. (2007: 23)

In this reading, youth is a commitment to ongoing political engagement with society. For Bennett, youth is something you do, not something you have (2007).

So, subcultural studies developed two ideas that explain why we should be interested in what happened when Ryan met David. First, young people use media and the language of style to comment on where they are in history. Second, the language of youth has ubiquitous appeal. The unpremeditated show-down on a nondescript housing estate dramatised both ideas. On one level, Florence was Cameron's John Amy Bell Bird, as the Tory leader grasped the opportunity to generate political capital by playing at youth. But unlike Wakefield's use of Bird, Cameron's strategy gave Ryan Florence a voice. Revisiting evidence on the life and death of John Amy Bell Bird, Gatrell found evidence that Wakefield's account of the wide-eyed innocent was questionable, and warned that there is little evidence to show what the youthful murderer was really like. We have a better sense of Florence's motivations, because he was widely interviewed in the national press. Speaking in the British tabloid newspaper *The Sun*, Florence explained: 'I did it for a laugh and a buzz. I thought it would be fun to showboat for the lads, so I went up behind him and made like I was pulling the trigger' (Patrick, 2007). Even if Florence was unaware that his behaviour was likely to become of public interest, the young hoody quickly embraced the spotlight, confidently associating his actions with David Cameron's political agenda and the socio-cultural state of Mancunian youth. As the BBC was later to report:

A teenager pictured giving a gun salute to David Cameron claims the Tory leader did not listen during his visit to an estate in Manchester ... Ryan, who claims to be a member of a gang called the Benchill Mad Dogs, said politicians were doing little for the area.

'What are they doing for us around here? Nothing,' he said ... 'David says he is coming around to stop the crime and that but what is he doing?' (BBC News, 2007b)

Even if we dismiss Florence's actions and argument as inarticulate, insincere and clichéd, they still reveal how media multiply the range of places and people where politics is dramatised through the idea of youth, making that

idea a battleground where power is won and lost. Academic work like sub-cultural studies help us conceive how and why this happens, despite the enormous shifts in media cultures that have taken place since that work took hold in the 1970s.

## **MEDIA PANICS AND EVERYDAY LIFE: LIVING LIKE A FOLK DEVIL**

We should also be interested in Florence's tale because stories such as his do matter to other young people living in similar circumstances. Florence's experience showed how mediated 'hoody panics' were realities that ordinary young people regularly had to deal with when going about their business. As a media event, it triangulated with evidence from my own research on youth and anti-social behaviour among people who defined themselves as 'hoodies'. This evidence supported the idea that young people were aware of national media anxieties about them, and that news events like the Florence story did affect their social experiences by generating fear and suspicion among adults in their community. Compare Osgerby's earlier description of moral panics with the following quote, taken from an interview with a 16-year-old from Liverpool, a city some thirty miles from Manchester, in 2006:

Before, I was what you call one of the hoodies. The trend was to wear all black, and something that wouldn't show your face. People would look at you and think, oh he's just a hoody, and deep inside you're not. You're just a person trying to make friends and get on with people. (Ruddock, 2008: 252)

This quote comes from 'Terry', a young person taking part in a study of how negative media stories influenced the lives of teens taking part in a fire-safety course run by the Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service. The course meant to improve relations between fire fighters and young people in a city where the former are not infrequently attacked by the latter. Fire officers worried about misrepresentations of the course published in the local press. This coverage, in their opinion, drew too enthusiastically upon national media panics about youth gone wild. One story in particular had incorrectly stated that all of the students had been convicted of criminal acts. This hampered the Fire Service's community efforts by offending students, not to mention their parents and teachers who were loath to co-operate with the scheme if it risked seeing their children/pupils being publicly vilified.

Unsurprisingly, then, Terry explained his situation in relation to media. In it, he aligned himself, stylistically, with Ryan Florence. Terry was talking about his wish to be social, and the way that mediated hoody panics made it hard for him to deal with normal teen anxieties about making friends. Terry's 'fun' was certainly a serious business. In an interview with a former student, it became clear that some sorts of fire offending weren't malicious,

but were about not having much to do. The student claimed that friction between local youth and fire fighters sometimes occurred around the building of illegal bonfires. This, the young man explained, was something that young people did for fun. Having attended the fire-safety course, he now understood the hazard that bonfires created. But when, in his younger days, fire fighters arrived to dismantle or extinguish a bonfire that he and his friends had taken days to build, the Fire Service had seemed to be just another adult institution bent on extinguishing the little pleasure there was to be had in boring places.

'Fun' was therefore a flashpoint between Merseyside youth and local institutions. It had also been politicised in media in a way that produced students as political subjects. Their criminalisation carried real threats, regardless of how important media were seen to be. Students on the course were rarely willing to discuss this in depth, mostly because they were too busy having fun. Students got to dress up as fire fighters, ride around on fire trucks and learn to use fire equipment. But since they had been represented in the local press as villains who should be punished, certain powerful adults believed that the course rewarded bad kids. When students were seen having fun in the media, moves were made to make that fun disappear. Bad news about them could affect them in tangible ways. Like it or not, the students were in a media game, and their only choice was to play or lose. And so the hoody example shows quite clearly that media representations of people like Ryan Florence create everyday issues for young people, in ways that are good and bad, and that this has political effects for them. This makes the mediated idea of youth a cultural matter that runs through society as a whole.

## **RESEARCHING ORDINARY YOUTHS: SUBCULTURES AND THE POLITICS OF GENDER**

The final thing that makes this analysis of hoody culture relevant to the broader practice of youth media studies are the people who are not it-girls. Their absence lets us talk about the politics of research. Early British subcultural studies were criticised for being stories about boys written by men (McRobbie and Garber, 1978). Starting this book with Ryan Florence hardly solves this problem. Angela McRobbie, a leading critic of the subcultural tradition, conceded that studies of boys in action had established how media power penetrated everyday life – but they had not explored just how commonplace this was, because they ignored women's experiences. Subcultural studies would remain incomplete until this was rectified. There is a wider issue at play here: who makes it into youth media studies and who does not, which becomes increasingly important in the face of diverse student bodies created by the mass, international tertiary education. There is a concern that McRobbie's warning has not been sufficiently heeded, because media, communications and cultural studies has become institutionalised in often racialised and gendered ways (McLaughlin, 1995; Cooks, 2003; Maras, 2007). So,

why tell a tale of British hoodies to an international audience? There are two explanations on offer.

First, the hoody is a compelling example of a 'folk devil', different since it represented a wider range of youth internationally, but also gave the young people it targeted some resources they could use. By April 2008, the hoody was being used as a global symbol of everything that was wrong with Britain. Florence's picture was spread around the world. A year later, *Time* magazine's international edition of 7 April featured a photograph of a young man wearing the garment against a backdrop of the Union Jack, bearing the headline 'What's wrong with Britain's youth?' (*Time*, 7 April 2008) Battles around youth were still, then, being symbolically fought through media in the language of style in a manner that scholars like Hall and Cohen would recognise. Yet the 'hoody' theme also invites us to explore how media matter in different ways to different people in different contexts with variable effects. Whether explaining situations to a curious adult or entertaining friends when presented with the sudden chance to grab media attention, media and culture are places where youth take action.

Second, the case study raises questions about how academic work gets done, and what students have a right to expect from their education. Media studies is just as involved in 'making' youth as a meaningful category as are the media (Cooks, 2003), and this has practical implications for the way that research is organised:

Our first epistemological observation is: that social and symbolic worlds are to be known not through some prescribed, fixed and logical method ... they are ... discovered by attending to many levels of practice through which meaning is generated, within particular social and cultural settings. (Gray, 2003: 22)

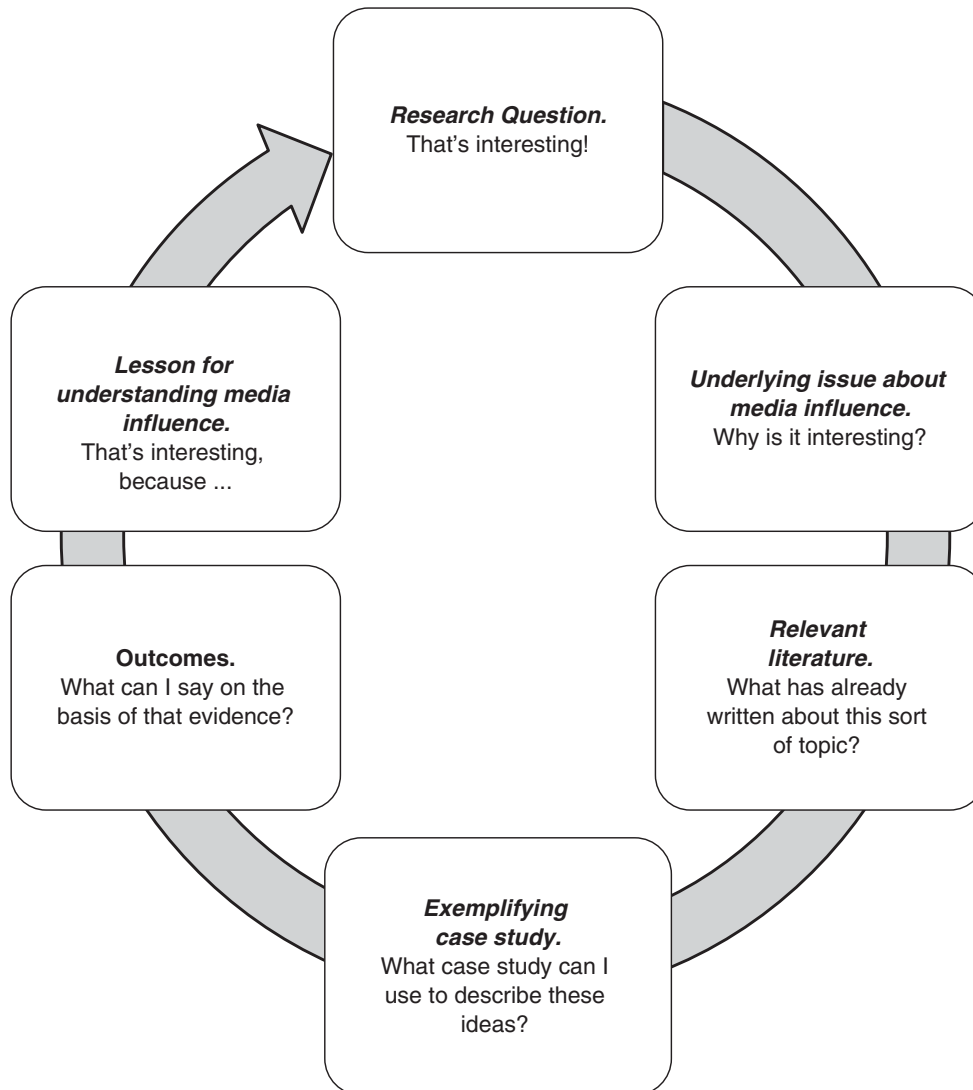
Selecting Ryan Florence as a symbol of what youth studies is about is itself an academic 'practice' that generates meaning. Florence didn't represent hoody culture until the media made him one; it's just as true that he doesn't 'represent' a history of thought on media, subculture and politics until we work on him, using theory and evidence. The methodological principle here is really quite simple. The task is not to prove that Florence was important, but rather using a combination of empirical evidence and theoretical levers to make as persuasive a case for his significance as we can. The process can be mapped. We may notice something in the media that seems worthy of attention, then go through a research framing process where we:

- sensitise ourselves to the themes that our case study might be about through reading academic work;
- determine what evidence we need (and what we can get) to make a case;
- decide what sort of case we can make on the basis of that evidence



- stitch theory and evidence together to persuade the reader that our story is worth his or her attention.

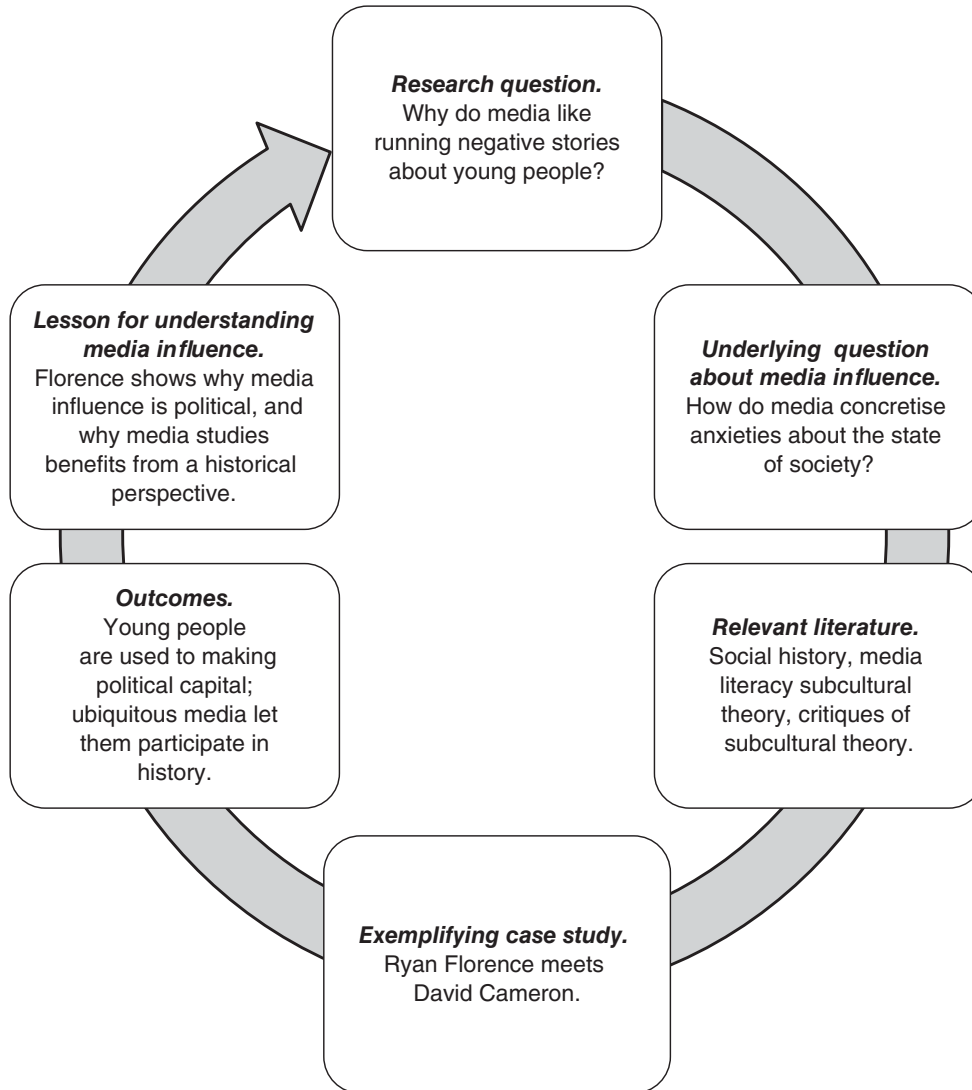
The general process is shown in Figure 1.1.



**Figure 1.1** Researching and writing about media influence: a six-step model

And with regard to this chapter, the process looks like that shown in Figure 1.2.

We can only understand how media shape the lives of young people by engaging with general principles in how to frame and study media influence. Anyone reading this is putting youth together as a meaningful idea, so at this point you might pause and think: Where would I begin? Who would I talk about? What ideas would I start with? And, of course, why bother? Each chapter of this book sets out to help answer these questions.



**Figure 1.2** Researching moral panics

## MOVING FORWARD: OUTLINING THE BOOK

The first section of this book defines significant concepts, approaches to case studies and choices of method when analysing media influence. Generally speaking, this section follows the advice of the seminal cultural-studies scholar Raymond Williams. Williams argued that the most significant effects of culture could be found in the ordinary things that people did to give their everyday lives order and meaning (1961). Studying 'ordinary' stories of culture in action is a founding interest in qualitative approaches to media, because in many ways it is only when people start doing things with media that the 'power' of those media

becomes a force in the world. Following in this tradition, the first five chapters consider how studies of ordinary young people doing ordinary things with media enriches understanding the *depth* of media influence. This argument begins in Chapter 2 by reflecting on the importance of 'ordinary' people in social scientific studies of media effects. In media studies, the term 'media effects' conventionally refers to research that uses quantitative data, derived from either experiments or surveys, to examine how exposure to media influences how people think or act. Effects researchers do not assume that media effects are always harmful, or that young people are especially vulnerable to them. Effects researchers explore how media interact with other social forces to foster general tendencies within social groups. These studies are about 'ordinary' audiences, because they look for subtle influences among 'normal' young people who, in many respects, know what media are doing to them and willingly subject themselves to these effects. Research on why soldiers in Iraq (normal people who find themselves living under pressures that are anything but) listen to rap is used to illustrate this point.

Chapter 3 uses debates on social media and public dissent to explain why the effects of social media are 'ordinary', in the sense that they help existing media forms and cultural practices evolve. This idea is illustrated by a story of how social media, local journalists and student protestors produced a change in policing practices in the city of Tallahassee, Florida. It is easy to fall back into 'direct-effects' thinking when faced with evidence that new phenomena, such as social networking, have radically altered the risks that young media users face, or have afforded them unprecedented opportunities to engage with national and international politics. In this chapter, we have seen the tension between arguing that 'older' ideas about how media work are still useful because today's media environment has a history, although the 'present' takes that history in new directions. Chapter 3 continues this theme by examining what is *not* new about digital media, and thinking about how technological change *stabilises and extends* the life of media forms, habits and practices that already exist. The chapter locates the topic of social media and youth activism in historical approaches to studying popular dissent and the history of crowds by using the work of another social historian, E. P. Thompson. Thompson developed a way to conceive the role that ordinary people played in major historical shifts; in his case, the Industrial Revolution. His method can be used to consider the role that young media users play in connecting social, mobile media with political change.

By this stage, the book will have established a social and historical take on the effects of media content and media technologies. Chapter 4 applies this framework to the analysis of international media flows, using audience theory to interpret what Chinese reality television says about trends in global media. Here, the focus on 'ordinary' takes the form of considering how potential conflicts between the Chinese state and international media formats are ameliorated by convergent media platforms that encourage depoliticised media habits among young audiences. These habits are significant, because they explain how the macro politics of international media industries can be connected to the things that young audiences do when they seek entertainment.

Chapter 5 uses the topic of girls and mobile phones to discuss how media affect social space by policing the boundaries between the public and the private; addressing the idea of the ordinary by describing how the things that teenage girls do with mobile phones in their own bedrooms are affected by public policy and cultural traditions. It describes why private moments in non-public spaces are the ultimate testament of the media's political significance. This becomes particularly clear when we consider how media affect the body as a political text, a matter that has been admirably explained in girl studies, which forms the conceptual core of the chapter. Chapter 5 focuses more squarely on notions of performance and identity, elaborating on the contribution of feminist scholars, and empirical studies of 'girls', to the broadening of understandings of citizenship and politics that have been highly influential in broadening the scope of the media/politics nexus.

The second section of the book applies these general principles in connecting the idea of the ordinary to the practice of research by revisiting popular topics in media studies: understanding media violence, advertising, political campaigning and celebrity (through the prism of media sport). The purpose of these chapters is to offer strategies for taking conventional media-studies questions in new directions. In particular, this section considers how relations between young people, the media, business and the state have changed in the digital age. Some suggest that we should stop speaking of audiences and start thinking instead of media users. The danger of this shift is that it underestimates the scale of participation in earlier times (Napoli, 2010), and draws attention away from other sorts of roles that young people play in media cultures: performers, workers, researchers and conscripts. It could be that young media users drive the 'mediatisation' of society. Broadly speaking, 'mediatisation' refers to the process whereby politics, culture and society become increasingly media-dependent (Livingstone, 2009, 2012). From an analytical point of view, this dependence means that young people who appear to be doing all kinds of creative and unpredictable things with media might speak to a more coherent, general process where 'media logic' becomes a defining feature of social thought. The second section of the book considers case studies where this possibility comes into play.

Chapter 6 uses the topic of school shootings to argue that media violence matters because it is a commodity of strategic value to message systems. The question of why young people accept media violence as a normal part of their cultural environment is as important as the matter of how it provokes some people into real violence. Additionally, the democratisation of media production through social media has also made moral questions about what it means to profit from violent images, a question for the public as well as film, television, music and gaming producers. This became clear in the context of the murders at Virginia Tech (where, if anything, Cho Seung-Hui appeared to have been provoked by the news) and Jokela and Kauhajoki, Finland (where news of the shootings broke in social media before the stories could be processed by professional journalists). School shootings reflect the general logic of digital media systems because as they are paradoxical media events, as the means of signification multiply (meaning more people can

tell public stories), so the range of stories that are told becomes narrower (where young people often tend to repeat the narratives of mainstream media). So, concerns that one might have about publicly available media content do not necessarily change when that content comes from ordinary media users rather than media industries. That is, 'active' young media users can re-create many of the messages that concerned media scholars in the pre-digital era.

Chapter 7 applies this idea to studies of how the alcohol industry has recruited social media users in promoting drinking as fun. Contemporary alcohol marketing is a case study on the capacity of new media technologies to work in sympathy with existing cultures (as developed in Chapter 3). When it comes to drinking, alcohol manufacturers have always tried to work with audiences by appropriating cultural traditions. The targeting of student drinkers through social networking is simply the latest incarnation of this centuries-old trend. Like school shootings, this is another example where the multiplication and apparent 'democratisation' of signifying practices may simply reproduce familiar, problematic media narratives on a larger scale, giving them a greater common-sense appeal because they seem to come from the public rather than media industries. At the same time, the chapter explores how this also means that students can use their everyday surroundings as a source of rich data on how media power works in media societies by connecting media content, cultural tradition and social space.

Chapter 8 applies notions of message systems and the evolution of cultural forms to the US presidential campaign of 2008. Barack Obama's victory was widely attributed to his capacity to use social media to engage young voters. Scholars have also regarded it as an event that was only possible because of fundamental changes in the nature of political communication, and the way that voters relate to the political realm. In this sense, Obama's victory illustrates the idea that changes in how young people use media reflect important general shifts in media culture. Chapter 8 explores this in relation to the growing importance of 'intimacy' in political communication, as it operates through convergent media cultures (Stanyer, 2012).

Chapter 9 considers why celebrity culture seems to be so attractive to young people, using a case study of a global celebrity who consciously draws on narratives of youth. The celebrity in question is street-skater-turned-*Jackass* star Bam Margera. In many ways, Margera's fame is based on his success in making a career of hanging *out* with his boyhood friends, and hanging *on* to an adolescent lifestyle. MTV series such as *Viva La Bam* and *Bam's Unholy Union* were essentially about Margera's parents' and fiancée's failed attempts to stop him spending all day everyday skateboarding, drinking and concocting elaborate, destructive practical jokes with his teenage peers. Margera's radio show on the Sirius satellite system, broadcast from his home studio, is rarely more than a litany of his group's escapades. However, viewed through Graeme Turner's work on celebrity (2004, 2010), Ellis Cashmore's analysis of David Beckham's celebrity career (1999) and David Rowe's description of 'media sport cultural complex' (2004a), Margera's career testifies to the role of sport in drawing audiences to and across changing media platforms. The opening credits for *Viva La Bam* end

with Margera making the claim that he can do 'whatever the fuck I want to'. This may be true, but Margera's autonomy is only possible because of the take-off of skateboarding as a spectacular media sport, the changing production focus of MTV, Sirius' decision to use extreme-sports stars to define its public image and the growing importance of celebrity as a means of dragging audiences between media platforms. As such, he allows us to examine why celebrity is a valuable vehicle for how media might affect the expectations that young people have from life.

Chapter 10 summarises the book by considering what model of media influence is appropriate to global media cultures where 'the creation of shared content takes place in a networked, participatory environment which breaks down the boundaries between producers and consumers and instead enables all participants to be users as well as producers of information and knowledge' (Bruns, 2007). Some scholars fear that this case for popular, widespread creativity (what Axel Bruns calls 'produsage') has been overstated, and that the 'boundaries between producers and consumers' are stronger than ever (e.g. Bird, 2011). This controversy addresses the core thesis that this book makes on media power. This book approaches media as message systems whose power rests in their ability to encourage particular forms of expression, and this matters politically since many of the debates about youth and media influence are really about competing versions of social reality: ideas of what is, and what is to be done. This message systems perspective likens media power to a conversation, where conventional media production practices affect who speaks, what speakers say and, crucially, who hears them. The point that Bruns makes is that the management of this conversation has become more difficult in the face of multiplying forms of media production that increase the number of people who have the opportunity to participate in the framing of reality. Consider the Florence/Cameron incident once more. David Cameron used media and the concept of youth to create the impression that Britain was 'broken', and he was the right person to fix it. However, in the presence of a diversified news industry characterised by multiple outlets and a strong 'tabloid' sphere that prioritised entertaining news, this very serious project was not treated entirely seriously, and nor were his framing efforts unopposed. There is also something curiously dated about this story. Florence was able to speak because of the presence of journalists who wanted to seek him out. Had it happened just a few years later, Florence wouldn't have needed them; one of his friends would have recorded the prank on a mobile phone, and the scene would have been posted on YouTube. This is the crux of the case for popular creativity; although media have always had to create 'open' spaces, where media content and events are open to various forms of interpretation and engagement, in order to be popular, the frequency and impact of these 'unexpected social outcomes' have intensified in the digital age. But how easy is it for young people to use media creatively in ways that make their lives better and, when they do, who profits most from it? How can we argue that new media environments where young people make and share more media content than they ever have before in fact solidify particular forms of media power, and why is this a question that matters? To consider these issues,



the conclusion considers how media production connects with social well-being among child soldiers and young victims of violence in Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Colombia: groups of disadvantaged, resource-poor young people who would really benefit from having a public media voice. These experiences, I will argue, encapsulate the central matters at stake in a new era of research on media influence.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Studying the topic of youth media means engaging with very basic questions about the social nature of media influence. Generally speaking, this influence takes the forms of a framing of social reality that has political motivations and political outcomes.
- This is not to take a deterministic or negative position. ‘Motivations’ and ‘outcomes’ can take many (often contradictory) forms, and can have unpredictable outcomes. Here, the question of how young people use media is a key factor in deciding the exact form that the media’s social impact takes.
- When discussing how representations of young people affect how we understand the world that we live in, we have to recognise that academic studies on youth and media are also ‘representations’. As with media content, when assessing academic research, we have to ask why studies are written in particular ways, using specific theories, methods and case studies. This is because different choices in each area produce different ideas of how media influence young people.
- At any rate, the literature on youth and media connects with important debates on the history and future of media studies.

## NOTE

- 1 ‘Keep it real’ was also the catch phrase of Sacha Baron Cohen’s ‘Ali G’ character. The joke behind Ali G is that he is a middle-class boy desperately seeking credibility by connecting with hip-hop culture. Some commentators therefore saw a good measure of irony in Cameron’s ‘Keep it real’.