Professional Resource Review
Making Media Studies: The Creative Turn in Media and Communications Studies

Antonio Lopez
John Cabot University, Rome Italy

In British media education circles, on occasion I've heard the following insult: "Playing with Legos is not media education." This epithet references David Gauntlett, who has written extensively about media studies and media education, including a wide-ranging discussion about creativity and identity that draws on the use of Legos (Gauntlett, 2007b). Gauntlett is often treated like the village atheist of media studies, in particularly as evidenced from the backlash against his infamous essay, "Media Studies 2.0" (Gauntlett, 2007a). In it he challenged many cherished assumptions held by traditional media studies by arguing that because people are now using media to "make stuff," the major themes of media studies scholars—audiences, institutions, texts and production—have been destabilized, or to put it in Silicon Valley jargon, disrupted. So, in a nutshell (the original essay has many more points and arguments), the emergence of "prosumers" fundamentally undermines the separation between media producers and audiences (more on this later).

Making Media Studies is a collection of previously published and updated works by David Gauntlett, including his infamous essay, "Media Studies 2.0." It explores ways in which the traditional media studies paradigm has been disrupted by prosumers and the practices of everyday people and DIY "makers" who are using the internet to learn, make things and share ideas. He argues that media studies practitioners need to learn from the maker movement to encourage more creativity, design thinking and conversation. Gauntlett positions himself as an

optimist and criticizes overly negative approaches to internet culture that he sees as common among media scholars. This review applies Gauntlett's thinking to current debates in media literacy education, drawing out lessons for media educators about ways to rethink pedagogy and to balance critical inquiry with a makers approach.

David Gauntlett doesn't shy from controversy; he relishes being a public intellectual at odds with establishment academics, and uses YouTube and other online media to engage the public. In *Making Media Studies*, Gauntlett remains in constant dialog with his critics, which at times comes across as a bit smug and with a little too much attitude. This is unfortunate, because it distracts from the more salient ideas he presents that are particularly useful for media literacy educators. For example, drawing inspiration from "maker culture"—a movement that hybridizes DIY, technology, crafts and hacking—Gauntlett aspires for a discipline that engages media with the same kind of curiosity, creativity and design approach as makers. To be sure, Gauntlett practices what he preaches, which is that scholars should stop from just critically observing the internet (and media) at a distance, but rather participate in networks to "make things happen."

Though *Making Media Studies* is David Gauntlett's most recent publishing effort, it's not necessarily new work; it's more of a "remix." It cobbles together several of his quintessential missives, such as "Media Studies 2.0" (which was later expanded and re-republished as a Kindle e-book), along with his responses to rebuttals, and other chapters that were originally published as journal articles and online interviews. He explains in the introduction that the original "Media Studies 2.0" article is the only thing that is the same as his Kindle e-book; everything else has been updated. The result is a bit of a hodgepodge. On the other hand, if you haven't read Gauntlett's other books, *Making Media Studies* effectively summarizes his main ideas from the past ten years. Having used "Media Studies 2.0" in my courses over the years, I'm glad to see it updated in print. Though I don't always agree with Gauntlett or his style, I have also utilized several of his books (Gauntlett, 1996; 2007b; 2011) for background research, and used one as a textbook (Gauntlett, 2008). So, I was somewhat frustrated that *Making Media Studies* is more an exercise in repurposing than offering something entirely new.

Gauntlett seems to anticipate this disappointment when he writes that he doesn't offer particular solutions for "making media studies"; that is, this is not a handbook about how to put his aspiration to incorporate "making" and creativity into media studies practice. When I first picked it up, that was certainly my expectation and hope. The book explores six main themes: media are a changed ecosystem; media are triggers of experience and make things happen; people make stuff because they want to; making and thinking can lead to "critical making"; little things make a big difference; and make something happen. If you find the language a bit simplistic, this is how he writes (perhaps to annoy the dreary snobs of media studies, imagined or real, that he finds himself in opposition to). He'd probably call it "accessible." These themes appeal to me as they align nicely with arguments I've made about thinking of media in terms of ecosystems, and media texts as "boundary objects" that change meaning

according to use and context (López, 2014). In terms of inspiring media literacy education, I can imagine how Gauntlett's aspirational approach could be applied to curriculum development through the method of "backwards design." In this approach you start with a desired outcome, such as a policy paper and accompanying website advocating for an open media commons, and then design the curriculum backwards to scaffold the knowledge and tools necessary for the final project. This is valuable if we want students to cultivate solutions and arrive somewhere useful and practical so that they will be empowered to solve problems and, ideally, create a better world to live in.

Gauntlett offers a definition of media as a trigger for doing something, for sparking conversation. This is in opposition to the discredited concept that media are simply a form of transmission from producers to passive audiences. Gauntlett asks us to think of media as platforms (like apps) where we can see ourselves as participants as opposed to just consumers; as such, he basically conflates contemporary media with the internet. He cites YouTubers, Minecraft modding, crowdfunding, and the "long tail" as positive, empowered examples that allow for more participation and diversity of experience. This is undeniable. Yet he then calls the rise of internet surveillance a "weird emergence," but it is not weird at all if you acknowledge the logic of state power and capitalism as integral to the structure of the internet. Still, the Internet, he points out, is not just a bunch of cables and processors, but consists of social practices and creative potential. He is right, but he still gives little consideration for political economy, perhaps because he wants to counterbalance critical scholars that he believes overemphasize the negative side of the internet. In particular, he spends ample time attacking James Curran's political economy approach in *Misunderstanding the Internet* (Curran, Fenton, & Freedman, 2012), contending, "economics cannot be used to resolve an argument about people's experience, or knowledge, or feelings" (p. 122).

David Gauntlett argues that media are defined more by what people do with them (as opposed to what media do to people), but this is not necessarily a fresh observation—it has been around media studies for quite a while. Nonetheless, Chapter 3 has a useful conversation about ways to go beyond the transmission model and offers ideas for reconceptualizing media studies to orient towards the user experience. However, the idea that media are defined by the experiences they trigger may be oversimplified in that it masks/avoids important emerging issues in internet culture. For example, there is a problem with the kind of conversation (or quality of discourse) that has transpired in an age of fake news, disinformation, coordinated propaganda, and information design that has more sinister implications than benignly creating culture. Just as I'm wary of the term "community" as having some magical implication for communal spirit, I find this notion that just because we engage in design thinking, creativity and conversation, that all the other problems arising from an internet that enables extremism, bullying, xenophobia, ideological bubbles, surveillance, and blind faith in technology will miraculously disappear (to be fair, he doesn't dismiss the concerns of surveillance outright, he just chooses not to dwell on them). Indeed, without any apparent irony, Gauntlett writes often about Googling (including Googling himself) as a way of validating knowledge, without regard to the

inherently dangerous ways in which Google search algorithms are limited and biased.

Unfortunately, his aspirational approach to promote making and creativity comes across as an either/or proposition, rather than a method that embraces both creativity (optimism) and the critical inquiry of media texts (cynicism). He said we can be pessimistic or optimistic about the prospects of the internet, so he prefers to be optimistic. Reading Gauntlett should at least prompt media literacy educators to clarify their position. My preference is agnosticism, which embraces pragmatism and activism, in order to acknowledge that totalitarian scenarios are a real threat and remain a possible future, while also holding out hope for a more democratic form of technology use and development. Honestly, as an early adopter of the Internet and web (long before it became what it is today), I started out as a utopian, but I no longer feel that way and subscribe to the more ominous warnings of Lanier (2010) and Morozov (2011). Lanier warns that the internet is destroying the ability of artists to make a living from their creative work and standardizes identities into preset categories. Morozov writes that the Internet has become a policing tool that strengthens state surveillance and the repression of dissidents. Gauntlett does acknowledge these problems; when it comes to practice Gauntlett would certainly advocate for more Wikipedia (open systems) and less Facebook (closed systems), and does encourage us to think of the Internet as a commons. However, internet critics like Curran are prime defenders of the public sphere as a kind of commons, yet Gauntlett dismisses the critical view by stating the "optimistic stance is at least preferable to the grim elitism of those who seem to wish we could go back to a world where professional people made professional media which professional researchers know how to deal with" (p. 130).

As an old punk rocker who was schooled in DIY culture (the reason I become a media literacy advocate in the first place), I concur with David Gauntlett's making and doing framework, which is why I've always maintained a space for his ideas and provocations. I like his Ivan Illich approach, in recognizing that wisdom come from amateurs too, echoing Antonio Gramsci's point that all people are born as intellectuals but not all are designated the status nor the resources to become one. But as an old school DIY-er, I also remain pretty skeptical and distrustful, maintaining some critical distance when engaging in everyday media practice. I learned from the DIY subculture that just because you can make, do or say something, it doesn't automatically mean you should. Gauntlett writes that creativity "fundamentally signals a positive intent" (4), but Nazi skinheads are also empowered to be creative participants of the internet, and as we saw in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, there are a lot of savvy mom and pop media operations, but not necessarily enough critical consumers of information and propaganda. Indeed, self-styled silos and algorithm-driven echo chambers are dangers that counter the celebrated all-good creativity of maker culture. To draw attention to this is not engaging in snobbery, but is being pragmatic in the face of mob-like behaviors that lead to real-world violence beyond the Internet.

Regrettably, Gauntlett downplays content analysis and deconstruction as old school and passive. Gauntlett still sees TV as a passive activity without regard to fan culture, meme-making and other engaged practices that are coming out of the highly creative ways that TV is being made and interacted with these days. He nods to the existence of creative programming, but states that there are enough talented media critics in the newspapers, and there are far too many journal articles producing mediocre analysis to make criticism a worthwhile activity for media scholars. TV producers, actors and writers do actively engage audiences, so there is iterative feedback in which fans directly and indirectly co-produce mass media. TV is also achieving intricacy on a par with great literature, requiring complex thinking habits that engage transmedia and interaction.

Just as importantly, the study of media texts can be creative and does not necessarily have to be passive. If we conceptualize a media text as an object to think with (in the way he sees Legos as tools to think with), then media analysis can indeed be highly active and creative. The creation of video essays, which is increasingly popular in film studies, offers the chance to both critically engage media texts, but also tell stories and study the languages of media. As someone that teaches both media production and analysis, I find it hard to separate the two: making and analyzing media can and should be an iterative process. Learning insights in rhetoric and visual language also empowers students to become more effective communicators.

Suggestions for how to change practices are peppered throughout, such as calling on academics to not just criticize media, but to participate in networks and to make things happen. What these "things" are remains to be seen. One important issue that's omitted is a discussion of the institutional barriers to making and doing media studies. He does say that a making and doing orientation will force us to rethink education, but doesn't propose how to change policy. Academics and educators are pressured by their institutions to produce certain kinds of research and outcomes (mostly driven by a neoliberal philosophy that treats education like a business). Without an appropriate political solution or critical stance, the resources necessary for professional development and experimentation are not automatically available. Beyond curiosity and a desire for self-improvement, where will the institutional support for Gauntlett's aspirations come from? Most likely digital media corporations, or in his case, companies like Legos.

So, according to David Gauntlett's framework, what do we need to know, or what should we be teaching? He summarizes by stating that we need to know: *how things work* (technical and economic knowledge); *how things feel and fit* (emotional and embodied knowledge); and *how to make a difference* (creative and political knowledge). These touchstones offer effective language for engaging non-specialists in discussions of developing/integrating media studies pedagogy, and are good for conceptualizing the goals of media literacy education. I agree that media literacy education needs a "making" approach that fosters creativity and conversation, but it also needs to be balanced with critical inquiry. Those who have been around long enough will recall the historical tension between media production and analysis in media literacy education goes back to dual influences

of media studies (film/TV/news analysis) and youth media (video production, student journalism) strands of practice in the 1970s-90s, which still remain today. It adds to the ongoing tension around individual versus social learning, clear in Paolo Freire as applied to youth media and media education pedagogy, and revised in Henry Jenkins' ideas about participatory networks.

These tensions are updated and renewed in Gauntlett's work in relation to the contemporary maker movement, provoking legitimate questions that can be applied to media literacy education. For instance, how can media literacy education be more like the maker movement? Or, what practices are already like that, and how can we do better to encourage more conversation and creativity? What are the boundaries limiting these changes? Here we need to engage political struggles over issues like standards, funding and training, and just as importantly, deal with participation gaps resulting from economic and cultural digital divides. Optimism can't just be magical thinking. There must be politics as well.

As mentioned earlier, David Gauntlett defines media as a trigger for conversation. *Making Media Studies* is at least that: it should generate a discussion for media literacy educators to push themselves beyond traditional models of media, and to engage in more doing (whatever that may be). To go beyond creativity for creativity's sake, students can do hybrid projects that encourage both making and critical inquiry. For example, students can perform news curation of a current event that would instigate them to engage in a variety of media literacy practices (information literacy and textual analysis), while also creating media and utilizing web platforms. Students can be encouraged to explore end-user agreements and research the owners and investors of the platforms they use so that they can understand the trade-offs of using "free" services. At a minimum, any creative media project should include institutional analysis and ethics.

While presenting himself as optimistic, I still find David Gauntlett's approach a little dismissive and polemical (to be fair, "Media Studies 2.0" is a manifesto of sorts). Gauntlett nods and winks at the legitimate concerns of data mining, tech company agendas and surveillance, but glides right over them, presumably because it's well trodden territory. More likely, he's grinding his ax against the media studies "blob" and its "grim elitists," which gets old after it's repeated for the umpteenth time. His battle with straw men (and a few actual scholars) gets in the way of the interesting and useful ideas provided in the book. I find the either optimistic or pessimistic stance not useful; as stated, I prefer to be agnostic.

We can hold both positions about the prospects of Internet culture while being simultaneously productive and critical. Gauntlett does hint at this possibility in his brief discussion of "critical making," which is "a way for researchers, designers and artists to explore concepts—especially concerned with the social study of technology—through making things" (p. 150). With this kind of orientation, the possibility for collaboration across disciplines is exciting, so I hope he plans to write more about this in the future. Ultimately, I believe media literacy educators can benefit from Gauntlett's probes and provocations. We should be up to his challenge, which is to engage networks and to *make* media

literacy education. For this reason, *Making Media Studies* is a worthy media object to think with.

References

Curran, J., Fenton, N., & Freedman, D. 2012. *Misunderstanding the Internet*. London; New York: Routledge.

Gauntlett, D. 2011. *Making is connecting: The social meaning of creativity from DIY and knitting to YouTube and web 2.0*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gauntlett, D. 2008. *Media, gender and identity: An introduction*. London; New York: Routledge.

Gauntlett, D. 2007a. Media studies 2.0. Retrieved from http://www.theory.org.uk/mediastudies2.htm

Gauntlett, D. 2007b. *Creative explorations: New approaches to identities and audiences*. London; New York: Routledge.

Gauntlett, D. 1996. *Video critical: Children, the environment and media power*. Luton, Bedfordshire, UK: University of Luton Press.

Lanier, J. 2010. *You are not a gadget: A manifesto*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

López, A. 2014. *Greening media education: Bridging media literacy with green cultural citizenship*. New York: Peter Lang.

Morozov, E. 2011. *The net delusion: The dark side of Internet freedom*. New York, NY: PublicAffairs.