MEDIA PRACTICE AND EMPLOYABILITY
From Project Skills to Real-World Skills

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- understand the relationship between your media degree, media-practice projects and transferable employability skills;
- understand the value of media-practice project work to your future employability;
- understand how you might design your career path whilst engaged with media-practice project work;
- examine potential career routes and destinations from your media degree course.

Introduction

This chapter concerns itself with the link between media practice and employability, considering how a range of important skills appropriate to the jobs market can be developed through engaging with media-practice work on your degree course. Media-practice projects can be considered as ongoing work experience. They are more than just making media texts or products for coursework and developing practical or technical skills.

In a sense, we are starting at the end with an exploration of your potential career route upon graduation. This chapter aims to help broaden your horizons and focus on the skillsets you may need for a variety of different routes from your media degree. It will focus on a wide range of transferable skills into a number of career areas in the media, creative and communications industries.
Career/Personal Development Portfolios

It is valuable to keep a record of your media-practice work throughout your degree course in the form of a portfolio. This will help to keep your ideas in one place, it will be useful for your career planning and it may be useful for assessment purposes. You can also refer to it to inform any critical analysis and reflection that may be required of you on your course.

Such a portfolio is essentially a reflective journal. A reflective journal can take any form – written, video or in an audio form. Potential employers recommend keeping a journal or portfolio. A report prepared by the CBI (Confederation of British Industry) and the NUS (National Union of Students) entitled *Working Towards Your Future: Making the Most of Your Time in HE* (2011) recommends keeping a record of your developing employability skills as you go along. Such a portfolio, sometimes labelled a personal development portfolio (PDP), will ideally reflect your experience and also give evidence of your learning. The CBI/NUS suggest that ‘there’s a big difference between asserting that you can learn and change and being able to point to concrete evidence of having done so’. They recommend you could do this through answering the following questions.

- What went wrong with something you were organising or doing?
- What did you learn from this situation?
- What did you do different the next time round to avoid the same problem arising? (CBI/NUS, 2011: 36)

**EXERCISE**

**Career/Personal Development Portfolio**

This is a good point at which to start a portfolio for yourself. Decide what format you will use for it. A range of apps are available online for building a portfolio. Alternatively, you could produce it in an audio or audio visual form. So, make a start with your portfolio and resolve to keep it updated from now on! You can pick and choose from the exercises in this book to add to it. Hopefully, you will end with a useful tool to assist you in entering your career when you graduate.

**Career Routes and Destinations**

Let’s start by looking ahead to graduating from your degree and thinking about what your career destination might be. Imagine it is the day after the graduation ceremony and the subsequent celebrations. You are no longer a student, you have your whole future ahead of you, and now it is time to enter the ‘real’ world of work! What plans have you got in place? How will you use your degree to enter that rather scary world?

A good starting point is to clarify what characterises the career area into which you might enter on graduation. To consider what transferable skills and knowledge you have developed
through your degree as a whole, and through media-practice work in particular that will be
useful to the workplace.

Suitable Careers with a Media Degree?

If you use the keyword ‘media’ when searching online for jobs, you will be presented with quite
a narrow range of careers, such as in media sales. Try broadening your search terms by looking
at the creative industries. By looking at the creative industries as a potential employment field,
rather than the narrow field of media careers, you are already broadening your horizons into a
wide field of employment areas appropriate to your degree qualification, skills and experience.
There are at least three sectors that may be appropriate areas to start your careers search from
your media studies degree. These sectors are defined by Prospects.ac.uk as: ‘Creative Arts and

What Are the Creative Industries?

The creative industries are wide-ranging and fast-moving sectors. A search will reveal the follow-
ing list of just a few of the potential careers that might be suitable for you on graduation, armed
with your media degree:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>public relations officer</th>
<th>film runner</th>
<th>magazine journalist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>animator</td>
<td>advertising account executive</td>
<td>communications consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>radio producer</td>
<td>computer games publisher</td>
<td>video runner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>press agent</td>
<td>books publisher</td>
<td>media planner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>marketing executive</td>
<td>scriptwriter</td>
<td>creative director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>video editor</td>
<td>information officer</td>
<td>magazine publisher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>media producer</td>
<td>researcher</td>
<td>broadcast journalist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 1.1
Potential careers for media degree graduates

And many more!

So, the creative industry sector is a broad field for potential employment and an appropriate
route from a media degree. It is also important to many other employment sectors. For example,
marketing and public relations departments exist in most non-media organisations, both large and
small, corporate and third sector, so you may end up working in an organisation that has little
connection with the media itself, but within the media side of that organisation.
EXERCISE
Highlighting Potential Jobs/Employment Areas

Look at the list of possible jobs to come out of a media degree in Figure 1.1 above and highlight one of the potential jobs that might be of interest to you, or one that you know little about at the moment. Investigate the following aspects of the role:

- The job description.
- The person specification.
- The location.
- Where the jobs are advertised.
- A live example of a job advertisement.
- The trade press associated with the job.
- The promotion and career structure.
- The salary levels.

Follow this up by finding a case study of someone currently working in the job in focus. Careers case studies can be found on a number of websites online. Start by looking at the websites suggested in the further reading section at the end of this chapter.

Using your research as a basis, create a handout, a presentation, a web page or an infographic poster aimed at your peers on your degree course. Your aim should be to give them all the information they need about the job you chose to focus on. You could add this to your career/personal development portfolio to give you a starting point in your career planning. Repeat this exercise for any other jobs that you think might appeal to you.

What Is It Like to Work in the Creative Industries?

In our experience, graduates go into the creative industries sector due to a passion for the work and lifestyle rather than for just the money. Often, they could earn more in a different area of employment, or have much better job security but they are attracted to working in the creative sector.

In order to start to think about what sort of career would suit you, the following exercise will help you to examine your general aspirations in career terms.

EXERCISE
Career Pros and Cons

When thinking of which employment area might suit you best, it is worth thinking about what constitutes ‘good work’ for you. This will be a very individual thing. To explore this, pick out five features from the table in Figure 1.2 that define what constitutes ‘good work’ for you personally. Put these in rank order
from 1 to 5 and give a brief explanation of why you have chosen each. This should help you to start to focus on your general needs career wise, rather than being too specific about particular jobs at this stage in your career planning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lots of variety</th>
<th>Control over own workload</th>
<th>Lots of interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lots of salary potential</td>
<td>Amount of responsibility</td>
<td>Possibility for flexible working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibility for teamwork</td>
<td>Potential for involvement in decision making</td>
<td>Lots of independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training opportunities</td>
<td>Travel opportunities</td>
<td>Opportunities for professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for career progression and promotion</td>
<td>Good job security</td>
<td>Good work colleagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to control work–life balance</td>
<td>Ability to develop leadership and management skills</td>
<td>Social aspects of the job</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 1.2**
Career pros and cons

Now, think about how the characteristics of work in the creative industries below chime with your own evaluation of what constitutes a ‘good job’ for you.

- Very creative
- Driven by deadlines
- Driven by targets
- Often includes travel opportunities
- Often involves long hours
- Sometimes involves unsociable hours
- Often freelance and self-employed
- Sometimes part-time work and a portfolio career
- Level of income unpredictable
- Involves lots of teamwork
- Involves a lot of autonomy and need for being proactive

Are you still convinced?

Next, look at each of the characteristics of work in the creative industries above and identify some evidence from your experience so far that suggests that you should pursue this career area further. You could give examples of when you have had to work long and flexible hours, for example, and evaluate how this suits your personality type and your career aspirations.

Add the results of this exercise to your portfolio for future reference. This will help you when thinking about what characterises the sort of work you would like (and not like!) to experience in future.
Degrees, Media Studies and Employability

Having identified some of the key features of the work sector you might enter on graduation, we now turn our attention to thinking about how your university experience in general and your media studies degree in particular will help prepare you for employment in the media and creative industries sector.

Many careers and employability advisory services suggest that almost any degree you do will prepare you for a career in media. Clearly though, a degree in a media-related area will put you at an advantage. On your media-based degree course, you are focusing on the development of the following generic skills, which amongst others will be useful for a future career in the media, communications and creative industry.

- Critical analysis skills
- Research skills
- Commercial awareness
- Cultural awareness
- Teamwork skills
- Creative skills
- Writing skills
- Flexibility
- Working to briefs
- Time management
- Communication skills
- Critical reflection skills
- Problem solving
- People skills

Reflect on some of the above and think about how your course to date has helped you to develop and improve these skills. Think also about specific examples and contexts where you have applied them, such as through project work, essay work, through media project or essay work.

Learning from Alumni about Potential Career Routes

Alumni are graduates or former students from your degree course. All universities have a department dedicated to keeping in touch with their alumni. You can learn a lot from finding out where graduates from your degree have gone onto after graduating and you can learn a lot from your degree course’s alumni. The following exercises will help you to do this.
EXERCISE

Destinations

This exercise will help you to explore the career destinations of previous students from your degree course. Take a look at the destinations statistics and information about where media graduates go after their degree. In the UK, you can find this information on the HECSU (Higher Education Careers Services Unit) website at www.hecsu.ac.uk. Here you can download the latest report entitled ‘What Do Graduates Do Survey’. This is a survey of UK graduates undertaken annually six months after graduating which analyses where students from different degree courses are working at that point in time. There are clearly problems with the fact that the survey is based on careers only six months after graduation, but it does give a sense of where graduates go after their degree. Have a look at the findings for your own degree area.

Using this information as a basis, create a handout, presentation or infographic poster about the career destinations of students from your own degree course. Aim this at your peers or at prospective students of your degree. Think about what you have learned from this research that impacts on your decision-making process for your career plan. You could add the results of this exercise to your career development portfolio for future reference.

EXERCISE

Alumni Web Pages

Another way to learn from the alumni of your university is to look at your university’s alumni web pages. For this exercise, pick out one case study of interest to you and your degree or future career aspiration. Share the chosen profile with your peers, explaining how the person has progressed in their career since graduation. You might consider the following questions:

- What degree course did they do?
- What career are they in now, and how did they reach that career?
- How did they use their degree in order to enter the career area?

EXERCISE

Interviewing Alumni

Alumni from your degree course are a rich resource of knowledge and advice for you and it is a good idea to reflect on their experience and knowledge to inform your own decisions about your career path. A valuable exercise is to question alumni from your degree course about how they have achieved what they have and where their degree has taken them, how and why.
MEDIA PRACTICE AND EMPLOYABILITY

For this exercise, think about the questions you would ask of alumni of your degree course about your potential career route. Think about what you would like to know or learn from them about their career since graduating. Choose six of the questions from the table in Figure 1.3 and arrange an interview with an alumnus of your course or with someone who is in the career area you aspire to. Once you have conducted the interview you could produce a case-study video or audio piece, write it up as an article for your student-union newspaper or prepare a presentation for your peers. This would be a useful exercise to add to your developing career/personal development portfolio.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions for interviewing alumni of media degrees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When did you graduate and what was your degree title?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you give a timeline of your career since graduating?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you achieve an acceptable work–life balance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was your first job advertised? If so, where was it advertised and how did you find it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important was your degree result to your career so far?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much networking do you do in your daily job and how important is it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important is the use of social media in your work? Which do you use and which do you not use and why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which three skills you learned through your degree course do you use in your job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the difference between being a student and being a professional?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your job involve teamwork?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is a typical working day or week for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What professional development and training do you have in your job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the career progression routes in your job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you see your job as having social aspects?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have to observe a dress code in your job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your workplace environment like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the most important skill in your job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What one piece of advice would you give to students who aspire to a career in the media, communications and creative industries sector?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 1.3
Questions for interviewing alumni of media degrees
EXERCISE
Job Advert for Your Ideal Job

The following exercise will help you to focus on specific jobs that you might be interested in and to find out the detailed requirements of them. Use what you have learned so far about your ideal career to produce an advert for the job you would like on graduation. Most job adverts include the following information:

- The job title.
- The location of the job (be specific about city and country).
- Details of the salary range.
- The name of the company.
- A job description including a list of roles and responsibilities.
- A person specification describing the ‘ideal’ candidate.
- A list of skills and experience in a bulleted list identifying those that are essential and those that are desirable for the role.
- Details of the organisation with information about the sector and its position within it.
- Information about the organisation’s culture and aspirations.
- Instructions about how to apply for the job (CV and cover email/letter, application form, etc.).

Use this to construct your ideal job description. Once you have produced this, you could follow it up by preparing a presentation for your peers about the job you have researched. Your presentation should aim to give them a detailed insight into the job you are focusing on. This would be a good piece of research to add to your personal/career development portfolio.

Examining Employers’ Expectations

So far, we have looked at the career sector you might aspire to enter on graduating from your media studies degree. We have looked at the sorts of jobs that exist in the media, communications and creative industries and how you might start to work towards them whilst on your degree course. Let’s now think about matching the skills that employers are looking for with the skills you are likely to develop on your degree course generally, and also specifically through any media-practice project work you may be engaged with.

Most employers are less interested in the degree subject you studied than the wider range of skills, qualities and experience you can demonstrate. Employers generally value the skills associated with the student’s degree such as the intellectual and practical skills, but importantly a variety of ‘soft skills’.
According to Cottrell (2008: 35) these are very general personal skills that include such areas as:

- self-awareness;
- self-reflection;
- showing initiative;
- motivation.

Interpersonal skills are also seen as important, for example having:

- teamworking skills;
- leadership and management skills;
- communication skills;
- cultural awareness.

Finally, skills around managing projects are important, such as:

- problem-solving and project-management skills;
- being flexible;
- ability to work to a brief.

A report produced by the CBI (Confederation for British Industry) titled *Future Fit: Preparing Graduates for the World of Work* (2009) suggests that: ‘Underpinning all these attributes, the key foundation, must be a positive attitude: a “can-do” approach, a readiness to take part and contribute, openness to new ideas and a drive to make these happen’ (CBI and Universities UK, 2009: 8).

In addition to this, having a wider cultural awareness relating to the workplace links directly to your experiences as a student on a media degree. By working on both analytical and practical modules, you will be able to make links between practice and theory, and this will provide you with the ‘cultural references’ and ‘vocabulary’ that creative industries employers find attractive in an employee.

It is clearly important to have a range of skills for work in the creative industries sector including ‘soft skills’ as well as ‘hard skills’. ‘Soft skills’ are transferable between many different jobs and include general communication skills, project-management and people skills as detailed above. ‘Hard skills’, on the other hand, are directly related to a specific job, for example the use of specialist software and technical camera skills. So clearly, the soft skills involved in your media projects, such as ‘communication’, ‘problem-solving’ and ‘people skills’ are just as important, if not more so, than ‘hard skills’ such as ability to operate a camcorder or to edit using a specific program. Additionally, ‘soft skills’ can potentially be transferred to any number of jobs when compared to ‘hard skills’.

The table in Figure 1.4 lists examples of person specifications for work in the media and creative industry sector. They have been synthesised from a large number of person specifications for a range of jobs in the creative industries. You can see how important the ‘soft skills’ described above are to employers.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Has proven exceptional communication skills, both written and verbal.</th>
<th>Is capable of managing own workload in order to meet conflicting deadlines.</th>
<th>Has ability to remain focused and see a project through to completion to a high standard.</th>
<th>Is customer and market focused.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shows evidence of good planning and time management, self-organisation and self-discipline.</td>
<td>Shows initiative and is proactive and able to work independently.</td>
<td>Is able to work with others and in a team effectively.</td>
<td>Is dependable and takes responsibility for own actions and keeps commitments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has research ability and analytical skill.</td>
<td>Is innovative and creative; good at problem-solving.</td>
<td>Has interpersonal and relationship management skills.</td>
<td>Understands direct marketing principles, processes and channels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands copywriting fundamentals.</td>
<td>Understands the application of technology to secure the best marketing outcomes.</td>
<td>Has budgeting knowledge and experience.</td>
<td>Understands the principles of negotiation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has excellent writing and communication skills.</td>
<td>Has an enthusiastic and outgoing attitude.</td>
<td>Has fantastic organisation skills.</td>
<td>Holds a clean driving licence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has excellent and proven administrative skills.</td>
<td>Shows excellent communication, presentation and interpersonal skills.</td>
<td>Is well organised and flexible in their approach to their work.</td>
<td>Is able to work to given deadlines and cope with periodic sudden increases in workload.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is a clear team player.</td>
<td>Can demonstrate good customer-service skills.</td>
<td>Is technology-friendly and has familiarity with operating a range of audio-visual equipment.</td>
<td>Has a genuine knowledge and interest in film and television industries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has demonstrable research skills.</td>
<td>Has good knowledge of web technologies, content management systems and digital communication platforms and awareness of web trends.</td>
<td>Has excellent written and verbal communication skills.</td>
<td>Demonstrates excellent interpersonal skills and the ability to build positive working relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has clear experience of managing social media channels in a professional setting.</td>
<td>Is prepared to work for gaining the experience needed.</td>
<td>Is highly motivated and goal orientated.</td>
<td>Is enthusiastic, outgoing and resilient.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
How many of the ‘soft skills’ areas can you find evidence of having at this stage in your degree?

Let’s move on to considering the sorts of skills you might start to focus on now.

**EXERCISE**

**Mock Jobs Search Exploring Person Specifications and Key Skills**

This exercise aims to get you thinking about the specific skills (including hard and soft skills) required for the jobs that interest you. Most job advertisements include a job description, followed by a list of responsibilities that come with the job and a person specification or list of requirements of the applicant. This will be a list of the skills and knowledge that are essential to the job.

For this exercise, look at websites where there are graduate jobs advertised in the sector you are interested in. There are some suggestions of places you might look at the end of this chapter. Bookmark around four of the jobs on offer that appeal to you and look at the person specifications for each of your chosen jobs. Create a list of the person specs and/or requirements for all of the four chosen jobs by cutting and pasting from the adverts. Next, paste all the lists of person specs and job requirements from the four jobs you are looking at into a word cloud app. This should help you to identify the most common skills, knowledge and qualities required for the jobs you are focusing on as in the example in Figure 1.5 below. The four jobs in this example were graduate-level digital marketing and communications jobs.

Identify the most commonly occurring words (i.e. those that are largest) in the word cloud you have created.

- What sort of skills, knowledge and experience are employers looking for?
- What do you need to do for you to be ready to apply for such jobs?

You could follow this up by producing a handout, an infographic poster or a presentation about your findings to share with your peers. Adding the results of this exercise to your personal development portfolio will help you to see your career development more clearly.

**FIGURE 1.4**

Person specifications for jobs in the media and creative industries

| Is polite and tactful with the ability to act with discretion and sensitivity in dealing with confidential matters. | Has the ability to prioritise, multi-task and work under pressure. | Shows the ability to work successfully both within a team and on one’s own initiative. | Shows a willingness to work occasional evenings and weekends and unsocial hours. |

| Is polite and tactful with the ability to act with discretion and sensitivity in dealing with confidential matters. | | | |

| Has the ability to prioritise, multi-task and work under pressure. | | | |

| Shows the ability to work successfully both within a team and on one’s own initiative. | | | |

| Shows a willingness to work occasional evenings and weekends and unsocial hours. | | | |

| How many of the ‘soft skills’ areas can you find evidence of having at this stage in your degree? |

| Let’s move on to considering the sorts of skills you might start to focus on now. |
Summary

We have seen in this chapter that thinking now about the sector in which you might ultimately end up working and the general skills you can build throughout your media degree can be very useful to you. Being engaged with practical media project work whilst on your degree is a useful place to start building the required skills, experience, knowledge and networks to find employment in the media and creative industries sector.

It is not just the practical skills you will gain and develop through media practice that makes media project work important to your future career, but an awareness that the organisational structures of the creative industries are similar to those of your media project work. Any media-practice project work you do at university is an important simulation of the sector you may graduate into. You will gain valuable employability skills through media-practice work on your degree. These skills areas will be visited throughout this book as you develop your media-practice project work.

In Chapter 2 we will move on to consider the personal and teamwork skills required for successful projects. We will be reflecting on the idea that employers require evidence of deep understanding and proven skills in many areas, which you will need to demonstrate.
Further Reading

The following websites will be useful to you in your careers research in addition to any you find yourself. Your employability department should be able to point you to specific sites for job adverts for your particular career area.

- **Creative Choices** – ccskills.org.uk – this website is aimed at young people who are taking their first steps in careers in the creative sector. It includes careers advice, job adverts and profiles of a range of jobs in the sector.
- **Creative Skillset** – creativeskillset.org – this website has a good A to Z of job roles in the creative industries as well as listing job vacancies.
- **Guardian Careers** – theguardian.com/careers – this website has some focused advice around general careers as well as some case studies and profiles of jobs in many sectors of the media industries.
- **Mediargh** – www.mediargh.com – this website has some careers advice but is more focused on advertising media jobs and internships. Very popular with students.
- **Prospects** – www.prospects.ac.uk – this website is very often used in higher education for developing employability. It has useful careers advice pages and some very useful case studies and profiles of jobs in different sectors. It also includes adverts for jobs, internships and work experience.
- **Shooting People** – shootingpeople.org – this is a website focused on the independent film sector with job adverts and opportunities to connect with a community of film-makers.
- **The Unit List** – www.theunitlist.com – this website focuses on jobs in TV with some advice aimed specifically at television careers.

An excellent core textbook for supporting your higher education experience with some useful exercises around employability.

An essential guide to the make-up of the creative industries with some useful case studies and interviews with people in the industry about their career.