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Responding to the Birmingham debacle

Maire Messenger Davies: **The Draft Communications Bill: more bad news?**

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Research assessment: what do we think of the exercise so far?

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You what Guv? Bad academic writing, collected

Down the bar with media and cultural studies

Picking up the (Communications) Bill

Maire Messenger Davies assesses some of the implications of the Labour government's draft

Many bodies, including the broadcasting unions and the Directors' Guild, have expressed concern about the deregulatory and 'liberalising' provisions of the UK government's recent Draft Communications Bill, which, as of January 2003, is currently going through Parliament. The Campaign for Broadcasting and Press Freedom in a booklet *Why the Communications Bill is Bad News* (Tom O'Malley, London: CPBF) claims that the Bill will undermine public service values and 'will massively commercialise the media in the UK producing a deeply negative effect on their objectivity, range and quality'. Other bodies such as the Voice of the Listener and Viewer have protested at the exclusion of children's programmes as a specially protected category.

Media academics obviously have a legitimate interest in this Bill as an object of study, and as an object of political concern – indeed Tom O'Malley, the author of the CPBF leaflet, is an academic at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. I was asked to co-ordinate a response on behalf of MeCCSA to the Draft Communications Bill, with a specific concern for HE interests, rather than more general political or industry-based concerns.

We decided to focus our response as coming from a

group who work under similar requirements of public service as do the broadcasters. In particular, our public role is to conduct research into, and to provide critical scrutiny of, the kinds of assertions proclaimed in Annex B of the draft Bill ('Public service broadcasting remits'). This Annex stresses the need for 'high general standards in all respects (and in particular in respect of content, quality and editorial integrity)'. It also emphasises the importance of 'meeting the needs and interests of different audiences'. Examples given include (in the language of the Bill) programmes of an educational nature; a high standard of original programmes for children and young people; concepts such as 'fair debate', 'diversity of cultural activity in the UK'; and 'a reasonable proportion and range of programmes made outside London and the South East'.

A particular concern in the new Bill is the much narrower, and more industry-based role of the new overall regulator, Ofcom, which will incorporate existing regulatory bodies – the ITC, the Radio Authority, the Office of Telecommunications and the Broadcasting Standards Commission. Up to now, these regulatory bodies have not simply functioned to inhibit 'dynamic and competitive communications and media markets' to quote section 5.1 of the Bill on Ofcom's general duties and pow-

ers. They have provided public forums, and – importantly for academics – research funding, through which the needs of audiences and the standards of public discourse, as well as what is meant by ‘fairness’, or ‘diversity’ or ‘reasonable,’ can be systematically investigated through independent research. A number of MeCCSA members have been commissioned to carry out research for the ITC and for the BSC and through their reports have helped to represent diverse public voices, not just those of the industry, but also those of audiences, and of ‘vulnerable’ groups among audiences, in the formation of policy. Examples include the BSC-funded projects, *Men Viewing Violence* undertaken by the Stirling Media Research Institute and *Consenting Children? The use of children in non-fiction television programmes* by myself and Nick Mosdell.

***Who will initiate the kinds
of public debates
supported by the ITC and
others in the era of
Ofcom?***

The ITC has also provided a publicly-accessible library of archive material, now to be taken over by the BFI – which will make it less accessible. The BBC’s library has also been broken up. As deregulation gathers pace, the disappearance and dispersal of valuable broadcasting archives becomes a source of real concern to scholars such as ourselves – and also to the public.

The primary concern, which we wanted to convey in our response, was with the very narrow brief of Ofcom. We had a number of questions. Who will initiate and support the kinds of public debates and inquiries initiated by the ITC, the former IBA, and the BSC, in future? Will the research and archiving functions of the existing regulatory bodies be taken up by Ofcom, and if not, what other steps will be taken to preserve these functions? The membership of Ofcom (only five people) is also more limited and less diverse than that of existing regulatory bodies. The kinds of educationally creative broadcasters, some of whom are members of MeCCSA, working in colleges and universities, have a valuable role to play in establishing public service values, but are not well represented in proposals for membership. The informed public debate which is necessary to establish standards, fairness, quality, service – i.e. the criteria of public service broadcasting itemised in the draft Bill – needs to be a function of the new regulatory arrangements too. We argued that academic researchers have traditionally had a role to play in this, and would like to continue with this role.

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Some writers and some books never get the acclaim they merit. *Credit Due* is a space where MeCCSA members can put this right. In the first of this series, Peter Redman discusses a product of ‘the Birmingham school’ often missed in surveys of Brit cult studs.

Masculine adventures

Graham Dawson’s *Soldier Heroes* – a magisterial survey of the war adventure story as ‘cultural imaginary’ and key resource in the making up of heterosexual masculinities – may seem a strange choice for a column of this kind. After all, in certain circles, the book is both well known and justly celebrated. However, it is fair to say that *Soldier Heroes* (Routledge, 1994) is not as widely read as it deserves to be. In particular, although having its origins in collective work at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, it is far less well known than many of the earlier texts to appear from this institution. As such, it is perhaps not too much of an over-statement to say that the book is one of the great ‘lost’ works of the Birmingham school.

Although clearly part of a CCCS tradition, *Soldier Heroes* is not simply a restatement of familiar Birmingham themes (valuable as some of these continue to be). Indeed, in its use of critical autobiography and Kleinian theory, the book was and remains innovative. In recent years, as the Lacanian-tide has moved into partial retreat, Kleinian and object relations theories have undoubtedly become more familiar. However, what continues to distinguish *Soldier Heroes* is its thorough and highly productive integration of Kleinian theory with a more conventional cultural analysis.

At the heart of Dawson’s account is the argument that the war adventure genre offers boys and men a culturally sanctioned version of masculinity, one that makes ‘imaginative sense’ of, or promises to resolve (though in a manner that is partial or unsatisfactory), both psychic and social contradictions. Crucially, this means that the war adventure genre and the forms of masculinity it makes available cannot be reduced to a point of origin in either the external social world (the material relations of production and consumption; signifying practices; social interaction) or the internal world of the psyche. Instead, as Dawson argues, the psychic and social realms should be seen as mutually constitutive – characterised by endless ‘spiralling exchanges’. Thus, Dawson argues that the war adventure story is simultaneously a cultural form with its own materiality, history and effects, and a powerful ‘narrative phantasy’ active in the unconscious (the ‘ph’ being the conventional way in which Kleinians identify this as a primarily unconscious practice).

As a cultural form, the war adventure story is constantly reanimated by – and to some extent, dependent on – boys’ and men’s unconscious identifications with it. As a ‘narrative phantasy’ that attempts to manage psychic conflict, it is dependent on the material practices of production and consumption that make the genre both available and significant in the first place. As Dawson writes

(p. 52), 'It is only by supplying this full range of determining conditions that a fully historical account of the imaginary masculinities like the soldier hero becomes possible.'

Needless to say, in the space available, it is not possible to do justice to the richness of Dawson's account as he sets about supplying this 'full range of determining conditions'. Some sense of this richness may, however, be gleaned from a brief foray in the concluding chapters of the book where Dawson uses a critical autobiographical method to explore his own childhood investments in the genre. In line with his general argument, Dawson is anxious to avoid the inference that these investments were purely unconscious. For instance, as a precondition for its take-up in boy cultures, he traces the growth, in the late nineteenth century, of a mass market in products associated with the war adventure genre (toy soldiers, popular stories and so on). Similarly, he explores how, as a young boy, playing war games provided him with the means to make domestic space his own and to erase his relative powerlessness within this. Nevertheless Dawson also argues that boys' subjective investments in adventure reveal the 'specifically psychic attraction of idealized heroes as figures of identification' (p. 34).

His starting point in this argument is the Kleinian proposition that psychic life involves a 'constant struggle, unconscious in the first instance, for a narrative phantasy capable of reconciling struggle and subsuming differences' (p. 34). From this perspective, the figure of the soldier hero can be understood as a culturally available resource which, through unconscious identification, can be used to 'manage' psychic conflict. For example, Dawson recounts his childhood fascination with a favourite war story in the *Victor Book for Boys*. The story was organised round a polar opposition: its protagonist ('Sergeant Miller') embodying all that is clever, brave and triumphant; his Italian enemies all that is contemptible and weak. As Dawson argues, in Kleinian theory an extreme opposition of this kind would be seen as reflecting psychic 'splitting' – an unconscious defence

mechanism by which anxiety-provoking feelings are 'split off' or disavowed, and projected on to an external other. In this light, Dawson suggests that his intense childhood fascination with the story derived precisely from its ability to facilitate such unconscious splitting. In effect, identification with the heroically potent Sergeant Miller enabled the young Dawson (at least in unconscious phantasy) to disavow feelings of weakness and vulnerability.

As this perhaps begins to suggest, the significance of *Soldier Heroes* lies in its sustained combination of Kleinian and historical and materialist modes of analysis, and in the detailed exploration of the inter-connections between psychic and cultural processes which it thereby achieves. To my mind, the depth, range and sophistication of this account remains both impressive and instructive.

However, recent events at Birmingham University mean that *Soldier Heroes* is also important for other, less happy, reasons. With its emphasis on inter-disciplinarity; its origins in collective work; its materialist theoretical orientation; and its ambition to specify the complex over-determination of cultural phenomena, *Soldier Heroes* demonstrates the continuing vitality of the distinctive approach to the study of culture developed at the CCCS and its institutional successor, the Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology. Birmingham University's ill-conceived and brutally enacted decision to 'restructure' the Department appears to have squandered the intellectual legacy *Soldier Heroes* represents – an act of intellectual vandalism that surely impoverishes us all.

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He is currently writing on questions of narrative and cultural identity.

Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities, by Graham Dawson, was published by Routledge in 1994.

... talking paradigms

Karl, what's a paradigm when it's at home?

Not right now, mate ... I'm trying to work out how my mobile phone works ... it's supposed to speak in fifteen languages or something.

No, no ... tell me - it'll pay back this round I've just got in there you go: one packet of cheese 'n' onion and a pint of the black stuff.

You're joking ... I'll never drink a whole pint of Bovril! Oh, okay ... 'paradigm' is one of those words everyone uses but few understand. Its current importance begins with a massively influential book from 1962 by Thomas Kuhn titled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

Sounds vaguely familiar never read it though.

Well, before Kuhn a lot of people thought science was about building theories based on induction from experience and experiments. Kuhn reversed this, saying that the theory came first and problems, data and experiences were based on that, rather than the other way round.

Okay, so a 'paradigm' is a theory?

Ah, well there's the rub: Kuhn was pretty vague. Sometimes he seems to mean a theoretical framework, other times a whole science or even a worldview. Basically he said that any community of scientists has an unquestioned theory or set of beliefs they share as a group – their 'paradigm'. Most of the time they're working on filling this out, constructing experiments to extend it into new areas or solve contradictions and gaps. After a long while, though, this 'normal science' builds up so many contradictions and problems that the paradigm gets thrown into crisis. Then we're into a period of 'revolutionary science', a crisis where a new paradigm gets chosen, which is then slowly filled out, and so on.

So he said science is all about choosing and improving paradigms?

That's the gist of it, my friend. It threw the understanding of science on its head. Instead of the world shaping knowledge and that knowledge defining a scientific community, here we have a community choosing a way of thinking and that 'paradigm' shaping the world they experience. So, a new paradigm means a whole new world for those who share it! What's more, Kuhn argued that there's no place outside a paradigm from which to choose between competing paradigms – they're 'incommensurable', so the choice of a new one isn't so much logical or rational as like a religious conversion or leap of faith. Luckily these revolutions aren't very frequent, so scientists don't just collapse into confusion.

But my lecturer listed a number of paradigm shifts we're having right now.

But she also thought Postman Pat was a fundamental break with modernist Man Pat. The problem is that Kuhn's ideas were only half-digested. Instead of seeing normal science as valuable, many think progress means being in crisis and declaring total breaks with the past. So they're busy making up new paradigms which nobody else uses as they're too busy dreaming up their own! And where physics has undergone one or two revolutions in a century, we've lost count of ours. Worse than that ... though Kuhn didn't say this himself, many take 'incommensurable' to mean communication is impossible between competing paradigms. So, we end up with a whole host of competing approaches, each claiming a whole new world of its own has emerged, and no rational way of choosing between them – a right relativist mess.

Okay, Karl, so what's relativism mean then?

Reading – The Conference

Tim O'Sullivan reviews MeCCSA's 4th annual conference, held in December 2002 at the University of Reading's Bulmershe campus

They came by plane, by train and by automobile. Some bearing gifts and some bearing lists of Christmas shopping yet to be done. Their guiding star in the week before Christmas was the annual MeCCSA conference that took place at the University of Reading, in the School of Education on the Bulmershe Campus. By popular demand, the form of the Conference had this year reverted to a three-day residential event and about 100 delegates attended a full programme that ran from mid-day registration on Wednesday through to lunchtime on Friday. The residential nature of the conference and its festive occasion resulted in great conviviality and animated networking around the formal structure of the programme and the facilities were generally good. There were some delegates however; who found the timing of the conference, in the week before Christmas – and for many, in the final week of teaching in a long term – less than helpful.

The programme this year was strong and varied and attracted contributors and delegates not only from throughout the UK but also from institutions further afield, from Ghent, Bologna, Siena, Paris, Vienna and Puerto Rico for instance. This might be taken as an index of the increasingly global character of the field and the visibility of the platform that MeCCSA offers beyond its national boundaries. Certainly, at least two of the panel sessions dealt explicitly with transnational themes and

European dialogue and the opening and closing plenaries also reinforced this.

The first plenary got the Conference off to a challenging and stimulating start with two keynote presentations. On the one hand, Eve-Ann Prentice's critical reflections on her work as a war-reporter in the Balkans brought a welcome, reflexive, practitioner perspective to the programme. On the other, Stuart Allan presented a timely analysis of news media networks and their frenzied attempts to make sense of the events of September 11/01. At the other end of the Conference, in the closing plenary, Cees Hamelink gave an insightful, insider account of the World Summit on the Information Society and its failure to tackle fundamental issues concerning the dynamics of the global cultural industries and their contradictions. In between these on Thursday, the Conference in its own version of 'Daniel in the Lions' Den' was pleased to welcome to a plenary session, John Caughie, representing the Arts and Humanities Research Board, who gave a helpful and candid overview of the current practices and schemes of the Board and in particular, the Visual Arts and Media Panel which he convenes.

If these plenaries – including the AGM – were the principal stepping stones through the Conference, to adopt a consumerist sort of holiday programme mode for a

moment, what else was on offer? Well, you could choose around seven from over twenty sessions, each of two or more presentations, themed or in a number of cases organised into more substantial panels. If read as a ‘barometer’ the Conference programme revealed a number of preoccupations in contemporary work.

Audience research and the dynamics of cultures of media consumption formed the basis for a significant – if not dominant – theme and related sets of presentations. These encompassed thoroughgoing debates on the state of the field as well as specific attention to particular sites and their distinctive milieu. One of the strongest threads running through these emerged in panels on Celebrity – with thoughtful presentations on Bob Marley and Jim Carrey juxtaposed against the mediated ghost of Sir Ernest Shackleton as well as the hybridity of current developments (I’m a Celebrity – Analyse Me!). A useful panel on Academics as/and Fans however, ensured that the cult of the mediated celebrity and personality, did not exercise an altogether uncritical or undue sway over the proceedings.

As if to counterbalance, if not complement the emphasis implied in these presentations, the ‘Politics and the Media’ strand of panels addressed matters more institutional and historical in their remit. This took in the *Daily Express* and images of suffragette militancy from 1913, the Internet and the public sphere, the lessons to be learned from Channel 5, as well as the flexing contours of the broadcast political interview. This strand of panels was also echoed in other areas of the programme with fruitful presentations on commercial strategies (in Malaysian and European contexts) and panels dealing with the conversational formats of TV News (from the Ross Priory Group) and contemporary discourses around the media.

In the gaps between these panels and their themes, other presentations focussed on critical accounts of the repre-

sentation of gender and around questions concerning the digital ‘real’. There was some address to questions of pedagogy, including an important presentation reporting on the Media Employability Project (see www.mediaemployability.co.uk). On Thursday morning, the panel dedicated to ‘Researching Film’ foregrounded matters of access and archive to very good effect.

The Conference this year also provided a platform for a number of important meetings for established and developing groupings, The Radio Studies Network and The Women’s Media Network, as well as a meeting to propose the establishment of a new electronic journal ‘Participations’, devoted to furthering the study of audiences (watch the MeCCSA website for further information).

For those who made it to Reading, this was an invigorating Conference with a healthy generational mix. Thanks should go to the publishers who attended and contributed to the event, for their support, displays and sponsorship. Finally, for her willingness to ‘step into the breach’ this year and to pick up the organisation of the Conference with the considerable work this entails behind the scenes, the delegates rightly acknowledged and applauded Tessa Perkins and her able assistant Ann Butler.

The MeCCSA Conference 2003–4 will be hosted by the University of Sussex. Consult the MeCCSA website (<http://www.meccsa.org.uk>) for details of this event and for full details of the papers presented at Reading.

Tim O’Sullivan is Head of the School of Media and Cultural Production at De Montfort University, Leicester.

Birmingham and Leicester – unfinished business

Peter Golding

Many colleagues will be aware that last summer the management at the University of Birmingham dismembered the Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology. All members of staff were either relocated or persuaded to take a voluntary severance package. The ostensible trigger was the department's score of 3a in the 2001 RAE, and a view that the university had excess capacity and expertise in this field. Not only does 3a signify a department whose research is at a standard of predominantly national excellence, but their submission had been significantly modified by a member of senior management against the explicit objections of the head of department and other staff. On the teaching side, the department scored 24 in Subject Review and gets equally good results when rated by students.

The Executive Committee considered a request from Birmingham for assistance in the development of cultural studies at the university. In the light of members' expressed views, and the opinion of the Committee that it regarded the actions of the University as giving no confidence in its management of teaching and research in this area, the Committee communicated to Birmingham that MeCCSA:

1. Would not be willing to nominate advisers for the cultural studies area;

2. Would not be willing to nominate external examiners for the subject;

3. Would be willing, if requests from students are received, to offer advice to any postgraduate research students seeking to move from Birmingham.

We have continued to exchange letters with senior management and Council at Birmingham, together with the British Sociological Association.

A report on the future of cultural studies at Birmingham has been produced by Professor Nicholas Dent who was appointed by the university to undertake a review of the subject's future there. That report has been sent to MeCCSA and will be considered at the next Committee meeting.

As members may also be aware the University of Leicester has decided to close its Centre for Mass Communication Research. This will take effect from July 2003. We wrote to the Vice Chancellor there expressing our concerns and opposition to the action decided by the university Senate.

Peter Golding is Honorary Secretary of MeCCSA and Professor of Sociology at Loughborough University.

Review of research assessment

Peter Golding

In November the Association submitted its response to the review of the Research Assessment Exercise being carried out for HEFCE. We now know that the government (in the HE White paper) expects the next RAE to be no sooner than 2008. However it is plainly keen to foster further concentration of research activities, and also to create a new tier of '6*' departments selected from among the present 5* group. Our response to the review was governed by a number of principles, set out below.

1. Any such exercise must be designed to secure improvement in the quality of research in universities. The costs, both human and material, of undertaking the Assessment, for both units of assessment and for those acting as assessors, must be less than the demonstrable benefits. If the primary purpose of the RAE is for resource allocation, then it has already gone further in concentrating resources than we believe to be healthy or productive, and in our judgement, further assessment leading to further concentration could only damage rather than enhance overall research quality.

2. The purpose of the exercise is brought into disrepute when it does not fulfil the declared purpose of supporting excellence in research. The 2001 exercise clearly demonstrated improvements in the quality of research, with more work being judged to be at national and international level. In many instances, financial restrictions have meant that this improvement was not rewarded, and this must call into question the ability of staff to maintain and improve current levels.

3. Many fields, ours included, do not always, or even predominantly, require concentrations of either facilities or of people to enable high quality research. Lone scholars, or small groups of researchers, frequently make significant contributions to research. Any Assessment Exercise must recognise this, while the funding consequences of assessment must ensure such activities are protected.

4. Our field is a relatively new and certainly dynamic one. Assessment must offer maximum opportunity for the demonstration of research excellence in newer departments or groups, and must also reflect the frequent changes in the location and dispersion of research activity across the sector.

5. We regard good teaching and opportunities for research to be inextricable. The QAA assessment of our field made extremely clear the benefits of teaching programmes delivered by staff with active research programmes. We would oppose any consequences of research assessment which led to damaging and unnecessary concentration of research, or of a drift to a division between research active and inactive centres.

6. Our field, like several others, incorporates a wide range of approaches to "original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding". We accept and endorse that definition of research. However we feel further discussion, across a number of subject areas, is required to move to a more widely accepted and understood interpretation of this definition as it applies to a diversity of work, including professional

practice and non-traditional forms of output. The relationship between practice and research remains a problem to which different panels seemed to take different approaches. Further work needs to be done if a better understanding is to be reached about how departments and institutions which encourage a diversity of work are to be appropriately assessed either in the RAE or outside it.

In our response we discussed the different models of research assessment being canvassed, and broadly dismissed any not rooted in peer review. Our full response may be found on the MeCCSA web site (<http://www.meccsa.org.uk>).

Women's Media Studies Network

Rosalind Brunt

Now in its second year, the MeCCSA Women's Studies Network held two well-attended events in 2002 and continued to expand its mailing list and contacts with other forums and networks. Last June we held a one-day event at the University of North London, hosted by Milly Williamson, which examined feminist theory in media studies. And in September, Karen Ross organised an event at Coventry University which considered media studies post-September 11 and held a roundtable session on issues of power and pedagogy.

The Network exists for all women researching and teaching in media studies, film and media practice and production. Besides publishing a regular bulletin, we have used our mailing list to publicise research collaborations, relevant conferences and academic openings for examinerships and the like. And through the Network sub-committee, women have been encouraged to set up seminars in their own institutions.

At the recent MeCCSA conference, the Network ran its second Showcasing Women stall organised by Margaret

Montgomerie. Besides giving information about the Network, it offered an opportunity for women to display information about their current research and publishing, as well as audio-visual material. We also held a meeting, chaired by Milly Williamson and attended by about twenty women, to discuss future possibilities for the Network. At this, Karen Ross volunteered for the task of developing the mailbase and coordinating information about women's research activities and other opportunities. And there were two bids for one-day events to be held in 2003 from Roehampton and Cardiff. These proposals will be put to the new MeCCSA executive at its first meeting at the end of February.

Rosalind Brunt works at Sheffield Hallam University. Any woman member of MeCCSA who would like to be on the Network list should contact Ann Butler on A.Butler@shu.ac.uk

British Academy review of arts and social science

The British Academy is currently undertaking a review of the contribution of the arts and social sciences to ‘economic prosperity and the health of society’. To those already jaundiced by the dreary utilitarian tone of recent HE policy this may sound like one more prod to get us to show just how useful we are in ways that may have only accidental contact with the aspirations of scholarship and research. Nonetheless, with the formal approval of an Arts and Humanities Research Council now confirmed, the BA sees this as an opportune time to promote the profile of these areas.

The review is in two stages. The first closed in December, and MeCCSA responded by stressing the success and importance of our subject areas in major areas of employment and economic activity, as well as in the need for a population educated in media literacy and cultural analysis. The final report will be published in the autumn, and a second stage of consultation is about to be entered. We would therefore be very keen to receive from members any examples of student activity or employment, research, consultancy, or any other aspect of work, which can provide concrete instances of how our disciplines make a “vigorous input to civil society”. Illustrations, examples, and evidence are what is needed. Please send any such to Peter Golding (P.Golding@lboro.ac.uk).

You what Guv?

Highlighting examples of bad, obvious or plain dreary writing from the field of media, communication and cultural studies... Contributions welcome.

Conducting oneself in a façade of sterile objectivity (professional stance), at the rough end of the research project, outside the protection of the research manual where advice and protocol seem paramount, forces the researcher to query the volume of objectivity itself. (*qualitative research methods book*)

Above all else entertainment programming is entertaining. It makes people feel good, happy, sad, excited, nervous, thrilled (...). It gets or keeps people in the mood they seek. And, it may be doing all this everyday. (*from a summary of the findings of uses and gratifications work on entertainment programming*).

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A full list of the Executive Committee of the Association for 2003 can be found on the MeCCSA web-site at: www.meccsa.org.uk