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MeCCSA Three-D newsletter

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Three-D is a publication of MeCCSA, the subject association for media, communication and cultural studies teaching in Higher Education in the United Kingdom. This is a merger of two previously separate subject associations: MeCCSA, the Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association, and AMPE, the Association for Media Practice Educators.

Except where stated, contributions do not necessarily reflect the views of MeCCSA or its Executive Committee.

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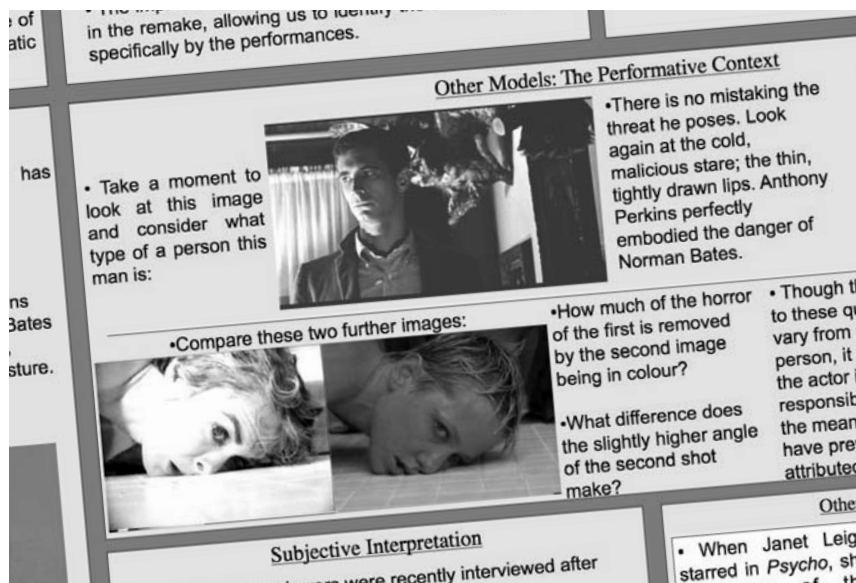
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Full details of MeCCSA including how to join, along with a full list of the Executive Committee for 2008 can be found at:

www.meccsa.org.uk



'Hunting Psychos' by Matthew Jones, conference poster competition winner

The Cardiff conference experience, 9-11 Jan 2008

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This edition is a conference special. A chance to relive the sense of conviviality which marked the spirit of this event for those who were there, and for those who weren't a glimpse of what you missed - the newly instituted quiz for one thing whose success revealed the competitive spirit at the heart of modern academia. Three days of torrential rain and the floods that stranded home-bound rail travellers could have been taken as a metonymic sign linking our experience to the conference's environmental strand. Or does it always rain like that in Wales?

What emerges in the accounts given here of the conference is the strong sense of community and public sphere debate that successful meetings like this engender. It is also significant that two new initiatives have been proposed to enhance the field's ethical and political engagement which you can read about in this newsletter.


But given the costs to the environment,

should we be meeting in Second Life instead? Academic conferencing is open to all kinds of new technological opportunities - what future forms might it take, even if current alternatives frequently disappoint?

Trevor Hearing's challenge to the 'paper' as a standard mode of delivery is just one of the possibilities enabled by digital technology. Meanwhile, the return of an older medium produced a competition winner for best poster by Matthew Jones for *Hunting Psychos: Using Hitchcock's Psycho* (1960) and *Gus Van Sant's Psycho* (1998) to *Reconsider Performance Analysis*.

It is as well to remember that predictions about the new media replacing the old have often been challenged by new media studies. But the damage done to the environment by cycles of technological obsolescence was a key theme of Toby Miller's plenary speech.

In the face of these contradictions, for the time being we can look forward to meeting again in Real Life at the Bradford MeCCSA conference in January 14-16, 2009.

 www.meccsa.org.uk

meccsa conference 2008

The organisers

Gill Branston
Cardiff University



Note: apologies for the lack of photos. The ones we took mostly involved slightly drunken PhD students. Tragically there seems to be no photographic record of Greg Philo's rendition of 'Are you lonesome tonight?' towards the end of the Thursday dinner.

What organisers can't do

The organisers are not the best people to write about a MeCCSA conference: they can't attend many of the sessions. I attended three, one of them the big plenary session with George Monbiot and Toby Miller which put firmly on the agenda the relationship of environmental action to our field, as well as to Higher Education and its practices more directly.

My impression was that generally most people seemed to like the overall mix of papers, and the melding of practice and non-practice elements, though one delegate felt it was a little too skewed towards Journalism Studies. Oddly enough, after the flurry of advertisement of 'Media Studies 2.0' in emails leading up to the conference, there was little debate of that position, though some robust references to it in the first plenary. Others however are better positioned to comment on how sessions went, their balance, and the issues they raised.

What organisers can do

But MeCCSA conference organisers can pass on things they've learnt, which may not be obvious to those planning the next one. Karen Ross helpfully did that, in the last Three-D, from the 2007 conference, and it seems a good idea to jot down some hastier notes from Cardiff 2008, since most delegates seem to have felt it went so well.

After shifting calculations we had 225 delegates at the conference, 13 from overseas: Africa, Europe, India and the USA (we did fliers for the ICA conference).

We spent a lot of the time, from early 2007, imagining what details would add to the fun, and then trying to make those happen. (We made a bid for loan of the Tardis but BBC Wales are extremely protective of the Dr Who and Torchwood brands.) Part of the effort of imagination is putting yourself in the position of the delegate unfamiliar with your familiar building, or with the flow of the events you have now planned for so long. We noted and discussed, through the year, things we had liked about other conferences, and features that we wanted to do differently, or for the first time (such as the double-decker bus taking delegates to the Bay, the poster competition, and the MeCCSA pub quiz).

The spaces available in your institution and your ingenuity with them are key, not only for sessions and plenaries (eg: we went for an overspill lecture theatre with video streaming on the George Monbiot plenary) but for problems such as: where can you put the publishers? We had a record number of these and in the end spread them over two spaces, which seemed to work but involved checks with tape measures, hunts for tables, and trying to imagine the conviviality blind spots where they would not want to be.

Claire noticed at one conference the problems of ending sessions on time and of shifting large numbers of people engaged in conversation at the end of breaks, and suggested we needed some loud sound, like a bell... I for one will miss the fun of the 'gong' which reminded us all to move on to the next session, and was sorry to return it to its owners. We knew too that we needed to keep strictly to time if

we were going to fit all the papers and presentations into the slots and rooms available. The gong helped, as did the yellow and red warning cards kindly sent to me by the Wales FA to show speakers had five, and then one minute to go.



We spent a lot of the time imagining what would add to the fun. We made a bid for loan of the Tardis, but BBC Wales are extremely protective of the Dr Who and Torchwood brands.



Delegates appreciated having somewhere secure to store their belongings on the last day. Someone told me they loved having only vegetarian food at the Brazz restaurant dinner, and that we should have publicised this. (This was in fact the result of frantic negotiations as the numbers rose towards the final tally, larger than our original, March estimate, and Brazz withdrew the fuller menu options we'd planned. But a vegetarian-only option might be a good intentional feature of future events.)

The big numbers are key for the 'buzz' and vigour of such an event. George Monbiot, who said he hopes never to take another flight in his life, asked delegates how many had flown here. He felt that if only video conferencing technology

could be improved there'd be no need for such polluting travel. Certainly many more consultations could be done by remote technologies than universities currently attempt. But it's hard to feel that the conviviality enjoyed by many at this conference could be substituted in quite this way, though the problem needs to be on the agenda of event organisers across HE.

The numbers contributed to some problems for the poster competition, another new feature. On the very rainy day when it was judged there was a university transport delay in delivering the display panels, and the packed lunch room allowed less space than we would have liked for discussion of the work with presenters. We did put clear guidelines on the conference call for papers, but even so some presenters felt they would have liked more guidance on criteria – something for Bradford to consider?

Things to watch out for

- Delegates who will not reply to emails in reasonable time, or send in their registration and payments on time (or even, in the case of two speakers, tell us they would not be turning up on the day). All this added hugely to the demands of organising the event.
- The challenges produced by trying to book and order over the Christmas break, which involves stress for bars and restaurants for weeks before the 25th, and an exhausted dead time until 3 January or so.
- The pressure on decisions about numbers towards the end of the process, when your chosen restaurant, if you go for that, has to switch its capacities and orders – again, at that tricky post-Christmas time.



www.meccsa.org.uk/conference

People involved in 2008

- The Cardiff team: four full-time academic staff and three PhD students, plus
- PhD student Corbett Miteff, who designed brochure covers, signage, and the opening Powerpoint presentation;
- Our Web Officer, James Clemas, who enabled the all-important electronic access to conference information;
- The JOMEC admin. team, who chipped in with all kinds of help before and during.
- Ann Luce, a PhD student, part of the central team, who stepped in

as paid part-time administrative organiser in July, became key to the success of a complex operation. (Her advice to Bradford, after the initial 'Don't do it!' was: try to get three sets of responsibilities clearly covered, preferably by different people: publishers, registration, and catering.)

- We also had a small team of other PhD students, just before and during the conference (the highly visible 'Red T-shirt' helpers) who moved furniture, gave directions, answered queries of all kinds.
- It was a great help having the keen participation of the Head of School, however busy with other matters he often had to be. It made it that much easier to push the university to move on various small actions needed (clearing a corridor, checking equipment, long-ago orders chased, etc).
- And Claire Wardle, a spreadsheet queen among other talents, was invaluable at the stage where the Exec member had to co-ordinate peer review of nearly 150 papers with the Exec. Conference group, as well as

(with Ann) in the collation of the final programme, and the immensely useful colour coded charts of deadlines for jobs to be done each week.

- Many thanks also to the hugely supportive MeCCSA Executive in general, especially Gillian Doyle, Christine Geraghty and Peter Golding, always ready with help and suggestions, and the conference Exec working group, especially Charlotte Crofts, who came over to Cardiff at an early stage to suggest ways the 'practice' elements could be incorporated.

The opening plenary

Chaired and report by
Justin Lewis
Cardiff University



The opening plenary was used by both speakers as a form of overt political engagement:

Annabelle Sreberny spoke about the need to develop a complex understanding of propaganda, while Greg Philo argued for the importance of an empirically informed, critical analysis of media power.

Annabelle Sreberny used George Orwell as her point of departure, moving from the notion of 'newspeak' to an investigation of the origins of various neologisms in contemporary political discourse. What was important, she argued, was to understand the genealogy of new forms of language in order to interrogate it.

She discussed the US government's deliberate construction of Iran as a hostile, dangerous enemy by unearthing a series of neologisms, such as 'fundamentalism', 'Muslim fundamentalism', 'rogue states' and the 'axis of evil'. These notions collapse upon serious interrogation – so for example, the adoption of the term 'fundamentalism' after the Iranian revolution did little to describe its non-fundamentalist specificities – but we need to understand their genealogy to understand the success of neo-

conservative propaganda in the US.

She stressed the centrality of the media in the dispersal of these neologisms. While the origins of neologisms may be political rather than journalistic, the media are critical in the circulation of the new lexicon. In this dispersal, the origin of terms often gets lost: thus the 'war on terror' becomes a notion whose attribution disappears – simply, the war on terror.

The growth of English-language news channels, she suggested, can be seen in this context, as other states and interests attempt to contribute or compete on the same terrain. The development of our language is thereby a site of global and local political struggle.

Greg Philo began with the way in which media research is funded, and stressed the importance of the academy as a 'fifth estate', independent from government and corporate agendas. He argued that the notion of public interest, rather than commercial utility, should be at its core.

Indeed, part of our role as academics, he suggested, is to critique research council agendas. So, for example, he described how a research council theme of 'living with climate change' represented a narrow and privileged perspective on the issue. For many people in the world 'living' with climate change was simply not an option.

To pursue this project, he argued, required a recognition of media

power – not as overarching or monolithic, but as a persistent part of contemporary life. He attacked the postmodernist, active audience strain of media research – which he saw as characterised by Media 2.0 – for its overemphasis on audience agency, which he criticised as both empirically untenable and politically reactionary (in effect if not in intention).

His own research repeatedly confirmed the importance of TV news in informing people's understanding of the world: so, for example, people's failure to understand the politics of the Middle East, he suggested can be directly attributable to media coverage. This is not to say that audiences are uncritical, but this is not the same as a widespread understanding of the social and political role of the media in contemporary life.

Meanwhile the media industries gleefully use the language of active audiences, rearticulating it within a discourse of market democracy.

During a wide-ranging discussion, Lisa Henderson argued against what she described as the either/orism of Greg Philo's analysis, a point developed by Annabelle Sreberny, who suggested they were not necessarily incompatible paradigms, as well as the contested nature of elites discourse. Greg Philo acknowledged these points, agreeing that we need to understand the way people dispute and contest media,

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Greg Philo stressed the importance of the academy as a 'fifth estate', independent from government and corporate agendas

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while stressing the importance of empirical research to establish this. However, he rejected another suggestion that we see Media 2.0 as a political ideal: this, he felt, was a failure to acknowledge the current drift towards market values and the concentration of power.

John Ellis drew from Sreberny's focus on political discourse and Philo's emphasis on media power to suggest that the news media communicates information in a way that suggests that ordinary citizens are not actors in the world – that the newsworld is another planet, removed from everyday experience. Sylvia Harvey developed this point in relation to the way the government had been forced to recognise the interests of citizens in Communications law, while ignoring them in its application.

The delegates

Einar Thorsen
Bournemouth University



Being at this year's conference in Cardiff was to be in a different country for most delegates,

as Justin Lewis was keen to point out in his patriotic and entertaining opening speech. The conference certainly matched his enthusiasm in every respect and provided a great vehicle for showcasing research in media, communications and cultural studies – there were a total of 136 papers spread across 37 panels, special screening sessions running parallel to these, and an incredible poster session with 17 contributors. With both publishers and people from industry also well represented, the MeCCSA conference is becoming a strong annual focal point for our field.

The theme of the conference was about the environment and the contribution we as media, communications and cultural studies scholars make to the ongoing debate about climate change. Having thrown a few books at the audience and delivered what I would best describe as a 'commodity fetishism' critique of climate change, Toby Miller forcefully concluded in the second plenary session that 'media studies' had thus far contributed 'nothing' to this debate. Whilst this latter claim may have been somewhat undermined by the panel he subsequently chaired on 'Environment and the Media', it did raise an important point about a subject that does require serious attention. His remarks followed a presentation by George Monbiot who had spoken equally frankly about the danger of 'journalistic arrogance' in relation to the reporting of environmental issues. Monbiot clearly demonstrated problems with media representation of the science behind climate change – launching some scathing attacks on Channel 4, and Director Martin Durkin in particular, including describing his 'documentary', *The Great Global*

Warming Swindle, as '90 minutes of environmental fraud'.

Both speakers managed to create a lively atmosphere and were provocative enough to spark debate, and perhaps some self-reflexivity, among the delegates. These emotive contributions should, however, not overshadow the attempts by the organisers to ensure the environmental impact of the conference was as low as possible. Several simple, but noticeable initiatives (such as the 'not a conference bag', no bottled water and local produce for all the meals) ensured the delegates were continuously reminded of the environmental message the organisers were trying to purvey. Indeed they should be complemented for trying to make the conference itself a tangible intervention in the academic debate.

Scheduling large conferences is obviously a complicated task, though the Cardiff team managed to create a great thematic combination of panels and speakers. The diversity of topics was impressive, covering all aspects of our field – from the traditional television and print media to online social networks, sound and visual imagery. The presence of practice based research was particularly strong, warranting a special mention at the AGM – fitting for the first conference following MeCCSA's merger with AMPE last year.

It is also encouraging to see the many postgraduate students who are now taking an active role in MeCCSA. Postgraduate research can be a pretty isolating experience and the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network does an important job in breaking down such barriers, whilst enabling young scholars to acquire relevant experience required for a future career in academia. The Postgraduate Network has started a journal, organised a series of their own events and even made up a large contingent of the Cardiff organising committee.

Of the papers that I attended some of the more interesting ones included Richard Tait's

presentation, when he problematised the Live8 television coverage as failing to reach the desired standards of impartiality, arguing that BBC presenters had in that instance become part of the campaign and failed to retain their sense of critical distance. This was challenged by people in the audience who questioned the distinction being placed on NGO versus corporate campaigns, and stressed the importance of regarding corporate advertising as political. Christine Fanthome presented some interesting findings on what young people want from the BBC, with criticisms from interviewees including 'too much human interest', 'too many celebs' and 'too many repeats'. Of course such laudable ideals may differ considerably from their actual viewing habits, even if they were given a choice of the improved service. Keeping with the BBC, Claire Wardle and Andrew Williams looked at the way in which the Corporation handles what it has termed 'user generated content'. They were presenting interim findings of an ongoing AHRC / BBC funded project, though it clearly demonstrated the battle the BBC has with managing the vast amount of contributions received. Whilst a high proportion of this content ends up in what Wardle and Williams dubbed 'a black hole', simply because the task of monitoring content is so labour intensive, they also argued the BBC had an obligation to ensure their authority and trust was not undermined. Andy Price followed a similar theme in relation to local news online, arguing that the rise of 'user generated content' is leading to a re-emergence of hyper-local (citizen) journalism. The diversity of local papers are increasingly under threat from corporate demands for even greater profitability, leading to closures and consolidations of newsrooms. Price, however, demonstrated how *The Herald & Post* in Middlesbrough had successfully used their website

(www.gazettelive.co.uk) to give each postcode in the region a blog-like community section – thus increasing, rather than reducing the local content relevant to the inhabitants of each area covered by the paper.

As a panel, the one entitled 'Citizen's Interest in Media Policy' deserves special mention for the way it demonstrated a tangible application of scholarly research and how academics can work with Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV) to positively influence what they study. Academics ought to be a driving force in influencing media and cultural policy, and such forms of 'knowledge exchange' should be encouraged to facilitate this process. To this end it is a shame that other organisations, Mediawise and the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom to name but two, were not represented in the same way. However, the contribution from Jocelyn Hay, who founded VLV in 1983, marks a step in the right direction.

The organisers were clearly conscious of ensuring they provided forums for debate, with the timing of the panels being tightly controlled by red and yellow cards from the Welsh Football Association, and further helped by the fact that all visual presentations had been emailed to the organisers and set up in advance. The conference also included some roundtable sessions, not to mention an interactive closing plenary session with summaries from Ivor Gabor and Lisa Henderson. All of this contributed to the overall sense of dialogic interaction between academics – an important part of conferences that is so often neglected.

The social and networking aspects of these conferences are also important and the new MeCCSA quiz on the Wednesday night was a surprisingly successful event in this respect – though it did perhaps demonstrate an

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overly competitive streak among academics. The wine reception on Thursday was in the absolutely stunning Welsh Assembly building, and the subsequent conference dinner in the nearby Millennium Centre was exquisite. The 2008 MeCCSA Conference in Cardiff will certainly be a hard act to follow.

Clarissa Smith

University of Sunderland



I slunk into Cardiff with my colleague John Storey, arriving by plane early on the Wednesday

morning, something we agreed to keep to ourselves in case environmental responsibility wasn't just a theme of the conference. Having done our bit for global warming, we settled down to enjoy three days of Welsh hospitality, a wide range of papers and some excellent socializing. The Cardiff conference was great, well planned, well organized and very friendly.

As with every conference of this size there were too many interesting panels to attend and so I was constantly regretting missing something. I attended panels focusing on my own research interests so I was guilty of a rather narrow parochialism but hey, what's an academic to do? I attended panels on Engaging Reality TV Programming, Images of the Body, a Research Ethics Roundtable, and Images of Sexual Violence: Problems of Politics, Policy and Research.

The conference kicked off for me with the discussion of the reality programming, three enthusiastic papers explored the place of participation and communication in programmes as diverse as Big Brother, Say No to the Knife and Queer Eye for the Straight Guy. Each of the presenters argued for a focus on these popular shows that goes beyond the recognition of their 'triviality' or 'frivolity' to rethink some of the platitudes about reality television. In her discussion of the Celebrity Big Brother Goody/Shetti race row of last year, Valentina Cardo (Leeds) explored the possibility that the programme constructs its viewers as 'citizens' encouraging a form

of nascent politization in their response to and judgment of individual characters. Moreover she made the case that the diary room is a self-publicising space, offering opportunities for creating drama and allows for the presentation of the 'real' character of the contestants. Bethany Klein (Birmingham City University) provided a discussion of the differences between US and UK reality programmes such as the Biggest Loser and You Are What you Eat, arguing that each takes a particular focus, in the US sensationalism and in the UK health and education, which derives from earlier production imperatives: the differences between commercial and public service broadcasting. In the final paper of the session, focused on an audience research project which examined viewers' responses to reality programming, Katherine Sender (Pennsylvania) explored some fascinating links between class and understandings of the narratives of self-improvement.

Wednesday evening was spent haranguing various colleagues across the floor of Tiger Tiger. Although the provision of a Pub Quiz, the first ever ventured by MeCCSA, had generated some premature complaints and dissent the event was well-attended with at least six teams competing. Just when it seemed the problems with the microphone and acoustics might justify the earlier complaints, the quiz-masters Bethany Klein and John Storey pulled their act together and got on with the questions. Boos and jeers greeted rounds one and two but by round three a competitive frisson filled the air and by the last question, there wasn't a team that didn't want to win -the prize was £40. My team got nowhere close to the winning score of 56 out of 80 (despite the presence of many celebrity professors, the field wasn't strong) but at least we didn't come last! The competitive streak was still evident the following day and I hear that some participants are still complaining 'we was robbed' more than a month later.

Next morning, in search of some tips on self-improvement I took myself along to the Images

of the Body panel. Here we were treated to some frequently amusing observations on social networking sites Gaydar.com and BigMuscle.com. In separate papers, Sussex colleagues Sharif Mowlabocus and Niall Richardson explored self-made digital imagery and gay visibility on-line. Both made interesting connections between these self-made texts and theories of bodily discipline. Self-improvement also figured large in Sanna Inthorn (UEA) and Tammy Boyce's (Cardiff) presentation on media discourses of health and obesity which they linked to New Labour's political and moral imperatives around active patients and self-care. Caroline Bassett (Sussex) rounded up the session with her presentation on aging bodies and Second Life. Again questions of individual responsibility gave rise to a very lively question and answer session at the end of the panel.



Having done our bit for global warming, we settled down to enjoy three days of Welsh hospitality, a wide range of papers and some excellent socializing.



Although every MeCCSA conference offers a wide range of interests, this was the first year that my particular tastes (research only!) were catered for in three panels (as I presented in one of these I can only comment on two). On Friday morning, Julian Petley (Brunel) kicked off a very lively and timely panel on the history and problems of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill aka the latest government plan to outlaw the imagination. His presentation offered a detailed critique of the evidence and processes embraced by the Ministry of Justice in its proposal to criminalise possession of extreme pornography and made

an excellent case for the necessity of media researchers reaching out beyond academic debate to policy makers. Martin Barker (Aberystwyth) followed Julian with an example of research that had done just that. The focus of the paper was the research recently carried out at the behest of the BBFC to investigate audience responses to sexual violence in five 'difficult' films. Barker traced some of the particular problems of theories of media influence and their borrowings from metaphors of addiction and infection. Barker argued passionately for understanding viewers' engagements with 'sexual violence' as complex pleasure-sets and modality moves around appearance and reality rather than 'just entertainment'.

This research also figured large on another panel – the Research Ethics Roundtable – here Martin Barker was joined by Tammy Boyce (Cardiff), Ruth Furlong (Newport School of Art, Media & Design) and Hugh MacKay (Open University). Short individual presentations outlined some of the problems of conducting research within media and cultural studies and then the floor was opened up to questions and observations from a very engaged audience. As well as difficulties, a number of examples of good practice were debated and after a stimulating debate, members of the panel went on to the AGM to propose the formation of a working party to explore and prepare ethics guidelines for research in our field.

January is a horrible month: full of marking and anticipation of a full teaching load contrasted with memories of excess spending and imbibing over Christmas but Cardiff was a great way to spend the first week of the new year. The hospitality was fantastic – the drinks and conference dinner held in the Welsh Assembly building and the Millennium Centre were striking, even if my memory of them is not terribly distinct. I don't think I disgraced myself (too much) that evening but if I did, I was in good company. Friday morning most delegates were looking rather jaded but there's no doubt this was one of the very best MeCCSA conferences.

Trevor Hearing

Bournemouth University



Practice-based research seemed much more in evidence at this year's conference. I

particularly enjoyed the 'Reflections on Practice' session chaired by John Ellis which I felt showcased three very different models of practice. We are now able to refer to an increasing number of specific examples of practice in a research context when discussing issues of research-ness. While not forming a canon of work yet, they do at least provide markers. Matt Dennis's remembered, reconstructed, remediated football match might be considered a gallery piece but

wouldn't it be powerful shown in realtime on a channel? So many more channels but so much less space for experiment. Nick Cope and Tim Howle's visual music focuses more on the researchness of the praxis: it's an illustration of the value of cross-media collaboration in which the same research outcome can reach out to a diverse range of audiences. Marta Rabikowska's autoethnographic film finds value in a different direction in exploring identity through making a film. The traditional ethnographic film is taking a new direction in a self-reflexivity which points to a new avenue of inquiry for documentary practice. What they all showed me was the sense of liberation from broadcast convention and the possibility of creating new audiences for new

types of work using moving image media, which I found very encouraging and an inspiration for my own work.

In presenting my own film-essay in the 'Country and the City' session, I was glad not to be compartmentalised as "practice" although that is my method of research and presentation. I feel some other sessions might have benefited from a similar mix of presentation styles. Does anyone want to join me in challenging the traditional "paper" as a mode of delivery? I was really encouraged by the response to my work which is the push I need to keep going down an untravelled path.

I came away thinking we need some new words here, a new language of practice which I think will gradually evolve to describe what we are doing. Unlike the

practice, the contextualisation all feels a bit Stone Age at the moment. I felt this was most evident in the Fiction Film Making session which described a very exciting collaborative film production about the myth of Echo. As one of the actors said in that session, "it was a process of articulating our own voices after years of articulating others". An apt metaphor for where we are now as practitioners in the academy. That must be one of the first occasions when an actor has been present at a MeCCSA conference presentation and I for one learned a lot from them.

Editor's Note: a more extended report on the practice elements in this conference will appear in a future edition of the Journal of Media Practice.

The AGM

Christine Geraghty

Chair of MeCCSA



Excellent attendance at the Cardiff Conference prompted a turnout of over 40 people at

the AGM. We were very pleased to see so many people who gave up the time between the end of the afternoon sessions and the sociable conference dinner to support the AGM. Congratulations were offered to the conference organisers for running such an engaging and stimulating event.

Members heard a number of reports on MeCCSA activities including a lively account from Charlotte Crofts, convenor of the Practice Section. She thanked the conference organisers for being sensitive to the Practice issues and actively striving to be inclusive. This was endorsed by those at the AGM who also recognised that the Practice Section was working effectively and planning a number of events. Charlotte also reported on the survey she had done of Skillset activity and it was agreed that this needed careful watching.

Caitlin Mendes, chair of the PG Network also reported on a

successful year with two one-day symposiums plus the annual conference all of which had been well attended. Relations with the HEA ADM were reported to be very positive and further initiatives were planned with them including workshops on teaching for postgraduate students. It was noted that the Women's Network had had a successful year but that the convenor of the Race and Ethnicity Network had stood down, although the Executive Committee will be seeking to continue its work.

John Ellis reported on the discussion with the BFI over the past year. It was noted that after much discussion, some of it with MeCCSA, the BFI would keep possession of the library and the archives would stay in the Stephen Street building until the move to the new accommodation on the Southbank was secured. MeCCSA had facilitated a very successful conference on Screen Heritage that had attracted speakers from the British Library, the BFI and the BBC as well as an audience strongly interested in questions around archival resources.

A resolution to the AGM as moved by Martin Barker and after discussion agreed:

"This AGM instructs the Executive Committee to set in motion a suitable process for the construction of a set of Guidelines for Ethical Research Practice which are apposite to the particular demands and characteristics of our field, and to bring a progress report to the next annual conference."

The Executive Committee will be

seeking to encourage contributions to the debate which can inform development of the Guidelines.

The AGM concluded with sincere thanks to all those who have worked so hard to develop MeCCSA's range of activities and particular thanks to the officers, and an announcement of the election results for the this year's committee.

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new initiatives

Let's get ethical...

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This year's AGM at the MeCCSA Conference saw an unprecedented moment: a motion

'from the floor' asking (no, instructing – at the instructions of MeCCSA's secretary!) the Executive to set in train a process of producing a set of research ethics guidelines for our field. The motion appeared under my name, but followed both a message around the JISCMail circuit, which produced quite a number of responses, and a roundtable discussion of the issues just prior to the AGM. The motion was carried, by the way, nem con.

Why is this important? The idea for it arose from people's experiences of a steady change in the climate in many institutions, which is making it harder for some kinds of research important to our field to obtain ethical clearance. At the roundtable discussion colleagues reported various problems and experiences, which focused around the following issues:

- In many institutions, discussions of research ethics are dominated by natural scientists, and medical researchers, whose perceptions of issues such as 'harm' are inevitably (and for them rightly) governed by simple measurable criteria. But, as we know well from the history of the broader disciplines of which we are part, the concept of 'harm' has long been laden with problematic cultural assumptions, which it has been important for researchers to be able to question.
- If not dominated by these, then increasingly it is lawyers and

administrators who play a key role in examining the ethical propriety of research proposals – and their judgements are often led by ideas of 'protecting institutional reputations' – which can lead to research into 'sensitive or difficult areas' to be seen as too risky, and likely to lead to complaints or threats. (We are of course not alone in this, but the relative marginality of our field in many institutions can make our members particularly vulnerable to such pressures.)

- It is also many people's sense that the Research Councils also have been tightening their requirements on these matters. The ESRC recently approved a new protocol and set of procedures for research ethics. Much, of course, of the old guidelines carries over, and much that is there we should, I believe, be happy to adopt. But there is no question that procedures and protocol have become more stringent, and – perhaps most worryingly – there is hardly a mention of (what I would regard as crucial) the ethical responsibilities to produce valuable knowledge, including on difficult issues, which can inform public debates. This lack of commitment to the ethical importance of knowledge, and to the key role of universities as producers of such knowledge, should surely concern us.
- At its worst, people are being advised that henceforth certain kinds of research may not be permitted at all, under new research ethics regimes...

The potential benefits of having our own research ethics guidelines are several. First, and most obviously, we can have something to show new researchers and postgraduates

– or indeed even undergraduates – which advises them as to the central sorts of concern they need to consider, and how this is best done. Second, there is the simple benefit of enhancing the position of our field, and claiming recognition as a full professional association that can aid and guide its members – although of course there is a concurrent risk that we might be asked to call people to account who broke our guidelines... that will need thought. But, to my mind, perhaps the most important thing about producing our own guidelines is that they could become a resource to which individuals might appeal, when experiencing pressures or barriers within their institutions. In something like the way that the Benchmark Document, which emerged after long discussions and debates within our field, is now something which can be used to defend the breadth of good practices in our field, so a Research Ethics Framework could play a similar role.

Unsurprisingly, when people began to discuss the form that such a Framework might take, there were some divergences of view – and these simply have to be worked through. I think it was accepted by everyone there that there is much to be gained by looking at and drawing on the best within the many existing Frameworks produced by other professional bodies. But are there any distinctive issues which our field (broadly conceived – and of course that is itself an issue) would throw up? I argued that there were – ethical questions arising from the strong recognition that knowledge and power are closely interwoven, for instance, or from our field's considerable concerns with forms of cultural authority (often embedded and expressed



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discursively), or from feminist concerns with subjectivity and the necessary mutual engagement of researchers with the situations of those they research. Others felt that to claim these as distinctive to our field would be to overstate the mark (although whether their acceptance within fields of the social sciences for instance, is carried through into existing Research Ethics Frameworks is a further question). There was also some disagreement whether we would do best to go for a highly detailed and articulated Framework, or to do (as the British Psychological Society has recently done in its revised statement on 'duties of care' towards research participants) and go for a quite short and simplified overarching statement of concerns and responsibilities.

All these make clear that this isn't going to be an easy process, but we think it is both possible, and worthwhile – and of real value to the field, if we do this in an open and discussive way. We didn't try to put a time limit on this, but we hope by the time of the next MeCCSA conference there will be substantial progress to report.

Engaging with civil society: proposals for a new MeCCSA policy network

Máire Messenger Davies
University of Ulster



A number of panel sessions at the Cardiff conference in January 2008 focused on media

policy, including one sponsored by the Voice of the Listener and Viewer, 'Ensuring the Citizens' Interest in Media Policy', in which Sylvia Harvey, Sonia Livingstone, Steven Barnett and Des Freedman, with VLV chair Jocelyn Hay as discussant, explored pressing issues in British media policy. In particular, the panel examined the potentially controversial question: how might public policy in the public, or citizens', interest be established in the media and communications field? The relationship of academics with civil society – as evidenced in this lively session – has led a number of us who research policy to propose an addition to the MeCCSA networks – one focused on media policy and regulation. At the February 7th meeting of the MeCCSA Executive, it was agreed that this network should be set up – initially communicating through the main list, and then having its own list, like the other MeCCSA networks.

The aim of the network is partly to exchange ideas and research findings, but also to join with civil society – NGOs, media workers' organisations, press freedom campaigns, consumer groups and so on – in their debates with the regulators, the broadcasters and the Government. A particular goal, where appropriate, would be to support such groups by providing them with expert evidence, based on academic research. A brief meeting at the end of the conference, before some of us had to dash away, only to be marooned at Cardiff Central by floods on the Swansea-Paddington line, led to

the decision to propose this new network to the Executive

How would it work?

A number of ideas about how the network would operate have been circulated via email so far by those of us who managed to meet in Cardiff, including having a web page on the MeCCSA site, and a specific policy discussion list. It was also proposed to have a 'directory of expertise' of areas in which people felt their research was relevant to policy and regulation: a provisional list of those who've expressed interest so far is set out below. Further contributions to these discussions are welcome, as are practical suggestions for how academics can be usefully involved in policy. It would be particularly useful to have a directory of information about any examples from MeCCSA colleagues where this has already happened.

One practical example of involvement with 'civil society' proposed by Ivor Gaber is to urge media departments with an interest in policy research to take out institutional membership of the Voice of the Listener and Viewer. Another example cited by Steve Barnett is the recent Competition Commission call for submissions on ITV/BSkyB. According to Steve 'there wasn't a single non-interested voice, which I'm sure assisted them in finding that there was no plurality issue.' A further example was the group of academics who got together to produce a joint response to the recent Ofcom review of Children's Public Service Broadcasting – see www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/kidstv/responses/. Julian Petley is editor of the *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, which contains a section entitled 'Current Debates', and would be 'happy' to give space there (as well as in the rest of the *Journal*) to the topics in which the

network is interested. An obvious form of intervention is letters to the media, for example Greg Philo's letter to *The Guardian* on the subject of the relationship between banks and mortgage lenders and programmes such as *Location, Location, Location* (6 February 2008, www.guardian.co.uk/letters/story/0,,2252950,00.html). See also the website (referred by Julian Petley) <http://primetime.unrealitytv.co.uk/repossession-repossession-repossession-coming-to-itv/>

Key issues so far

A lively email debate on a number of policy issues has already ensued as a result of these discussions, which we hope that others will join. Issues include:

The future of the BBC

The future of the BBC and its funding is a major concern for several participants. Steve Barnett is 'depressed and distressed at the antipathy apparently being expressed towards the BBC'. He sees the argument for top-slicing of the licence fee as 'exactly what the enemies of both the BBC and PSB wish to see and which will spell the inevitable downsizing of public investment in our public culture.' Similar sentiments were expressed by Ivor Gaber who also discussed some of the counter arguments, eg: that 'the BBC wasn't the only way to use public money to 'do' public service broadcasting (Ofcom has already floated the idea of a new Public Service Platform)'. As he further pointed out:

"In a genuinely universally available multi-channel environment, defending the principle of the licence fee becomes ever more problematic. On the one hand, even the BBC's staunchest friends are, on occasion, discomforted by some of its Corporation's perspectives and pronouncements and on the

other, it is becoming increasingly difficult to convince people who neither watch, nor listen to, BBC programmes, that they should continue to pay to enable others to do."

The license fee, the prospect of 'top slicing' and the threats to the BBC have also been the subject of a series of exchanges within the Voice of the Listener and Viewer email list: Sonia Livingstone, (LSE), Ivor Gaber (Bedfordshire) and Máire Messenger Davies (Ulster) are academic members of the VLV Board and members of this list. The perception that both the VLV and similar consumer groups, are not 'representative' of the country as a whole and too like 'the Radio 4 constituency', is also problematic. As several emails have pointed out, the idea that there is low public satisfaction with the BBC and public service broadcasting is 'a myth'. Steve Barnett cites the data from the BBC charter review process, available on the DCMS website and analysed in a recent book chapter*. The recent Ofcom review of children's broadcasting also found a high degree of satisfaction with the BBC among parents of under-12s, and especially under-5s – less so for parents of older children. (See www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/kidstv/). Julian Petley argued that 'one of our functions should be to try to puncture those myths with hard facts at every opportunity.'

Media Literacy

Sonia Livingstone went to the Ofcom draft annual plan meeting in January and prepared a response on media literacy. She raises a number of pertinent questions, especially the necessity of applying research to practical policy measures, not just carrying it out. In her response she comments:

"Ofcom has, since acquiring the duty to promote media literacy,

* Barnett, S. "Can the Public Service Broadcaster Survive? Renewal and Compromise in the New BBC Charter" in *From Public Service Broadcasting to Public Service Media*, eds Gregory Ferrell Lowe and Jo Bardoel, Nordicom, 2008, pp87-104.

conducted an admirable volume of research – defining, scoping and measuring media literacy in useful ways, and developing productive links with other stakeholders committed to media literacy... However, four years devoted to definitions, research and ad hoc initiatives is, we suggest, insufficient for a regulator of the size and importance of Ofcom.

"Specifically, despite raising media literacy to the status of 'top priority', the draft plan identifies no concrete plan of action regarding the promotion of media literacy in the coming year. But, with the first media literacy audit completed and the second due soon, it is timely to ask what level of media literacy Ofcom expects, hopes even, that its efforts will result in? What level would be satisfactory?"

What measures does Ofcom have in place to evaluate the specific success of its policies to promote media literacy, over and above the rise to be expected without Ofcom's interventions?

Input welcome on other issues raised in the plan which can be accessed at (www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/draftannplan0809/annplan0809.pdf)

Regulatory monitoring

A further proposal from Steve Barnett is to monitor the decision-making processes and outcomes of Ofcom and its statutory duty to promote the interests of citizens, in which he suggests it is failing. Barnett argues that the academy can assist civil society groups (and possibly Parliament) in holding it properly to account. On this point, Sonia Livingstone has an ESRC grant to monitor Ofcom's delivery on its citizen and consumer interests. She argues that academic monitoring and critical review of the regulatory processes of research, decision-making and stakeholder/civil society relations in the media and communications sector are all appropriate activities for media researchers.

Links with other groups

Des Freedman pointed out the existence of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom and proposes institutional membership of the CPBF as well as VLV. CPBF publications recommended by



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VLV member Hugh Peltor include: "Keeping Broadcasting Public", CPBF, (designed and produced by UNISON in September 2005). A more critical account of public service may be found in Barry Cox's "Free For All" published by Demos in 2004, based on the four lectures he gave in Oxford in early 2003 as that year's News International Visiting Professor of Broadcast Media at the University.

Channel 4 and spectrum auction

Comments are invited on Ofcom's spectrum auction, on the public service broadcasting review, on the Competition Commission enquiry into Sky/ITV, on the Ofcom enquiry into Sky's alleged monopoly on pay TV, and into Sky's bid for pay channels on Freeview, on the current consultation on the remit of Channel 4, on the subsequent consultation on Channel 4, the role of the BBC Trust and the licence fee.

Ways of operating

Suggestions include: an informal email list of academics to swap consultation or inquiry alerts, draft submissions, arguments; some kind of password protected list so that the list moderator knows who has joined. On this, Sylvia Harvey argued: 'It is possible that

we could get some industry and or regulatory body involvement and it could be both impossible and undesirable to stop this – but would also mean that some would wish to be circumspect about expressing their views or intentions through the list! This list would not be people 'writing corporately as a MeCCSA group' but would be a network list – perhaps working towards a specialist policy section (analogous to the postgrad and practice sections) within MeCCSA. Then, having joined the list and/or section, people could volunteer when they have time or approve of the cause to help civil society organisations.'

All of the above is speculative and email discussion so far certainly provides evidence of ways in which policy issues can arouse debate and possible contention and disagreement. Hence, there is no desire to produce any kind of MeCCSA 'party line'; it is not intended to seek consensus within the academy on matters of media policy where consensus does not exist. Nor would the network claim to speak officially for the academy in general or MeCCSA in particular in responses to formal consultations, although it could certainly support the MeCCSA Executive in the various responses required of it to governmental and other consultations. Rather, the intention so far emerging is to share ideas and research, to advise each other when invited to do so, and to enable colleagues to stay abreast of policy developments. This would facilitate responding to consultations as and when it's appropriate to do so, bearing in mind the overall aim of building and sustaining 'relationships with civil society'.

Summary

The main goals as suggested so far are to:

- Provide a forum for discussion, through both the main MeCCSA list and through a dedicated Policy Network list.
- Include a web page or other presence on the MeCCSA website.
- Form a group/section of policy researchers within MeCCSA.
- Compile a directory of expertise of people doing policy research.

- Collect information from people who have already done policy research and/or have engagement with civil society groups.
- Compile a directory of other relevant organisations, eg: CPBF

Current group and its interests

The list below represents those who were able to participate in the brief discussions after the MeCCSA conference and their subsequent email exchanges, and is obviously very far from a definitive list of all MeCCSA members doing research on policy and regulation. Naturally it's hoped that the list will grow, as this is the point of setting up the network. If you wish to add yourself to this list, please contact Máire Messenger Davies (email below) with details about your interests.

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Websites

- **Campaign for Press & Broadcasting Freedom**
www.cpbef.org.uk
- **Ofcom**
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- **SaveKidsTV**
www.savekidstv.org.uk
- **Voice of the Listener & Viewer**
www.vlv.org.uk