

Mediating the Media

LSE has one of the highest media profiles of any university in the UK, with its academics frequently commenting on and steering the major policy debates of the day. It is also supremely positioned to comment on the media itself. As the Media and Communications Department celebrates its first five years, **Warwick Smith** provides a brief guide to LSE and the media and interviews two alumni who now bestride the media stage.

As students and academics prepared for the 2008 Michaelmas term earlier this year, nearly 300 academics and media practitioners gathered at LSE for a conference entitled 'Media, Communication and Humanity'. For the Media and Communications department, founded by the late Professor Roger Silverstone and now headed by Professor Robin Mansell, it was a chance to offer interdisciplinary and critical perspectives on the many ways in which the media shapes our perceptions.



At the media conference, left to right: Visiting fellow Dr Zhang Yanqui, with speakers Professors Daniel Dayan, Carolyn Marvin and Sonia Livingstone



Professor Mansell said: 'Today's media and communication environment – the press, broadcasting and the internet – mediates our understanding of global events. The conference reflected the fundamental questions asked by the department, such as how does the media influence our values, our actions and our social relations?'

In keeping with the department's close links with the media, the conference kicked off with a session profiling the BBC World Service Trust's humanitarian projects, showing how the BBC works in partnership with audiences and NGOs. David Eades, the BBC World News journalist,

introduced the session by showing how access to media and information helps people to make informed decisions about their lives, helping to reduce poverty and promote human rights.

'Media practitioners and academics need a place in which they can exchange ideas and the department is ideally positioned to do that,' said Professor Mansell. 'It is also producing postgraduates with an in-depth, critical and interdisciplinary understanding of the media.'

In its first academic year, 2003/04, the department recruited 116 students onto its PhD programme and its four master's programmes. Today that number has doubled to 237 with a variety of MSc programmes and former students making their mark.

Grace Khoza, for example, a student in the first MSc cohort, is now working for the South African government as director for marketing and strategic coordination in the department of foreign affairs. She is also working with the UN Security Council to develop a communications strategy for non-permanent members of the Council. 'My work has certainly been a challenge,' she comments 'and I have had many occasions to draw from and reflect on my academic studies.'

Equally Jonathan Daly, who joined TBWA, a leading global advertising agency, after graduating, and now works for the World Bank Group as an associate in the external affairs vice-presidency, talks of the value of his time at LSE. 'In this new role, I rely on my LSE media training more than ever. The critical thinking skills developed during my MSc are proving invaluable, and the understanding I gained of theories of communication comes into play everyday, in helping to advise others on what to say, how to say it,

Jana Bennett
(MSc International Relations
1978) Director of BBC Vision

and whether what we're talking about should even be the subject.'

The engagement of LSE with the media is also boosted by LSE's media think tank, POLIS, which works alongside the department. Headed by Charlie Beckett, a journalist who worked at BBC and ITN, POLIS has established itself as the place for journalists to come for informed and speedy comment on high profile media events. 'POLIS is a unique forum to discuss all aspects of British and international news media,' explains Beckett. 'We bring together the public, journalists and academics to examine the revolution in our media. It's a place where LSE can communicate with the media world and spark ideas. As a journalist I have been able to share LSE's critical insights with the industry and give the media perspective on our teaching and research.'

Further informing the links between LSE and the media is the LSE Media Group, a special interest group set up for and run by LSE alumni who work or have an interest in the media industry. The group is unusual in its embracing definition of the media to include advertising, journalism, public relations, new media, entertainment, publishing, marketing and other creative interests. Active in the UK and US, it meets several times a year to network and debate issues such as trust in television, internet censorship, the state of the British film industry, spin-doctoring in political news reporting and the challenges in the publishing industry.

Jana Bennett

As an LSE student, admits Jana Bennett, she would occasionally nip across the road from Houghton Street for a drink in the subsidised bar at the BBC's Bush House.

Fast forward three decades and she's still to be found at the BBC – as director of Vision. But as one of the corporation's most senior executives, carrying overall responsibility for all of its television and online content and with a budget of £1 billion, it's a fair bet you won't often find her in the bar.

Not that her days studying for an MSc in International Relations (graduating in 1978) are entirely forgotten. Jana, an Anglo-American, says the windows on the world that LSE helped her open have framed her outlook ever since: 'It was the international, outward looking perspective of LSE which particularly attracted me, as well as the course. The fact that I would therefore be mixing with students of many different countries, as well as my fellow Brits and Americans – that international student make-up was part of the appeal. It was a great time to be an international relations student because there were a lot of debates about arms control, the nature of the Soviet bloc, and what was going to happen next.'

'I'd like to think LSE has helped me to scan the further horizons. Certainly I was able to bring that to the first part of my career – as a news and current affairs journalist – and then in shaping documentaries since, for example the BBC's recent multi-channel Africa season, and our coverage of climate change as a global issue.' Her career has also included a stint as executive vice president of the Discovery channel in the USA.

Having joined the BBC as a news trainee, Jana's rise through the corporation was as a hands-on programme maker on shows that included *Panorama* and *Horizon*. Unlike some sceptics in her industry however, she can see advantages in studying media theory (such as in the courses taught by LSE's Media and Communications department) for those who want to work in the media: 'I think an understanding of the ethics that go into producing, researching and conceiving content of all sorts is incredibly important – standards are a huge issue in this industry. A media course which can add to that

understanding and help you analyse the purpose of a programme, and addresses much more than just "How do I get a job?" or "What are the skills I need?", can be very valuable in a more fragmented industry.'

But is an increasingly international media – driven by the speed of the internet and global cloning of television formats – also increasingly homogenous? Jana thinks not, arguing that the very best television has always had an impact around the world. She cites the BBC's pioneering of natural history documentary – creating new techniques and a narrative style which have defined the genre and which have been adopted by broadcasters from New York to Tokyo. Local documentaries, she says, are also one of the things that television does especially well.

In any event, she says, a good television programme is something to be celebrated: 'As we've discovered more and more in the last decade, a good format that works here – like *Strictly Come Dancing*, a wonderful format that is life affirming – works in almost every territory. There aren't many formats which have that quality but the ones that do (it's also true of *X Factor* and *Pop Idol* or *American Idol*) take root and are embraced by those populations. Yes, with the speed of transmission the globe is shrinking, but my view is that programmes with near-universal appeal don't come along often and there are probably others fading at the same time, so I don't believe we'll end up with too homogenised a global entertainment.'

For those at the beginning of a media career, Jana knows better than most what qualities the BBC looks for in graduate applicants. They should include, she suggests, a generous team spirit ('there aren't as many solo people as the myth of creativity might suggest'), a curiosity combined with the ability to break open new ideas, and an intellectual passion for something specialised. 'Because I studied arms control at LSE, I ended up being in a pole position when the Chernobyl meltdown happened. That led me to work on science programmes and to a whole second education in science, and eventually I became head of Science at the BBC. Harnessing something that you're particularly educated in – whether that's a passion for playing the guitar or an academic subject you have studied – can be absolutely invaluable.'

Daniel Finkelstein

Anyone looking for evidence of how the media, political and academic worlds overlap should meet Daniel Finkelstein.

Now chief leader writer of *The Times*, Danny has found that ideas provide a basic currency which is equally welcome in all three markets. While his role at *The Times* has meant writing, commissioning and editing the opinion pieces he hopes will stimulate debate from the pages of the newspaper, his fascination for social and political thinking also led him to work first at the Social Market Foundation think tank and then as political adviser to Conservative leaders John Major and William Hague.

'My role at *The Times*, you couldn't predict it,' he says. 'I did none of the things that you would tell somebody they should do – I didn't go to journalism school, I was mainly political at LSE, and I ended up working here because the editor was interested in some of the ideas I had rather than my journalistic skills.'

'I really wanted to spend my life thinking, writing, taking part in good politics, and I've set out to do that very single-mindedly. Work takes up so much of your life that you can't afford to fritter it on something you don't like. It's in your control – that's the first thing I would say to any student who reads this.'

Danny's time at LSE (graduating in Economics in 1983) was one of political upheaval in the UK, including the founding of a new party by disaffected Labour members: 'Actually LSE was the first place in the whole country where the SDP [Social Democratic Party] won an election. It was 1981, but before the party was formally established, and the SDP won the sabbatical election. The SDP group at LSE was formed out of a dispute in the Labour Club, and the disagreements, particularly over free speech issues, led me as one of the moderates out of the Labour club and into the SDP.'

'One of the people who influenced me was Robert McKenzie, the inventor of the swingometer. I approached him about becoming president of the LSE debating society, which I had set up. I hoped he would help us encourage speakers to debates, but he said he couldn't encourage his friends to speak while the Students' Union had a policy of No Platform – where anyone who was deemed racist or sexist wasn't allowed to come and speak. The policy had been used to ban Hot Gossip, the Kenny Everett dance band, to boycott Timothy Raison, the Home Office minister, and to discourage the Israeli ambassador. It was working to overturn that policy – successfully – that politicised me.'

Danny remembers a 'fantastically high standard of staff' who taught him at LSE, including Andrew Dilnot, Julian Le Grand, Sir Roy Allen, Kenneth Minogue and Richard (now Lord) Layard. 'It was a very exciting place to be intellectually and politically.'

His advocacy of the power of the social sciences has grown stronger over the years: he argues that advances in evolutionary psychology and behavioural economics mean we are on the verge of a revolution in understanding why humans behave as they do. 'When I was studying economics I wondered what would happen if you relaxed the assumption that human beings behaved as economic models suggested they would behave. In the last 25 years a lot of the most cutting-edge economics has been precisely about relaxing that assumption, and economics, with social psychology and sociology, has become richer and better able to explain the world.'

'It seems to me unlikely that we are the only species whose behaviour isn't primarily evolutionary. But let's say that we conclude from this that some people are more capable of intellectual understanding and achievement than others. Does thinking that make you right wing or left wing? Neither, because you're still left with the fundamental decision of what you



Daniel Finkelstein
(BSc Economics 1983)
Chief leader writer, *The Times*

do with that. Ironically, I think a belief that there are variations in the lottery of ability and that equality of opportunity will inevitably produce quite a wide disparity of result, leads you to become somewhat more paternalistic and compassionate rather than more right wing, because you realise that people's lot in life is not their own fault entirely.'

This mix of passionate argument and intellectual curiosity won't surprise anyone who met Danny at university. He said: 'When I was working at the Social Market Foundation with my friend Andrew Cooper who had been a fellow student at LSE, another friend of ours from 15 years before rang up and said "Great to speak to you, what are you doing?" and Andrew said: "Do you remember what Danny and I used to do – having funny political ideas, trying to implement them, and joking about politics? Well, we're still doing that, only now someone's paying us." That's essentially the story of my life.' ■



Warwick Smith

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