

Report on visit to University of Westminster: 'Media and Ethics' Seminar 14.03.08

by Phil Ramsey

The one day seminar 'Media and Ethics', recently took place at the Marylebone Campus of the University of Westminster, in central London. This event followed a long line of seminars run by Westminster - arguably the "home of Media Studies" in the UK - that had also included seminars on Chinese media policy, press freedom and reality TV. With an experienced lineup of speakers, including Professor Jean Seaton, the official BBC historian, the day promised much.

The purpose of the event was to explore the area of 'media and ethics', and to address how the two subjects inter-relate, shape and affect one another. The panel of speakers, many of whose own research interests included inter-related topics, included David Gauntlett (author of *Creative Explorations*) and Joshua Oppenheimer (documentary film maker), and was chaired by Annette Hill (author of *Restyling Factual TV*).

The seminar took a cross disciplinary approach, and explored the topic under the categories of economics, politics, sociology and history, and topics included political journalism, the BBC in Northern Ireland during the troubles, documentary and human rights abuses, and children and new media. This wide range of academic approaches effectively displayed the heterogeneity of areas that are affected by questions of ethics, and of how they relate to the media.

In the first session, and of particular interest to my research, Daya Thussu (author of *News as Entertainment*) argued that the ethical question must be explored in relation to the marketisation of news. He explored how the public sphere had been undermined due to the role of the multinational news organisation as profit seeking entity, and he showed how as a result there has been a fragmentation of the audience. Resultantly, there is a blurring of boundaries between news and information, leading to a proliferation of celebrity stories. "Infotainment", Thussu argued, is a diversion away from serious journalism as well as a dumbing down. This then leads to a problematic lack of debate about the real issues in the world - such as the war in Iraq - and instead leads to promotion of frivolous consumer spending. To illustrate this final point, Thussu noted that to its shame, the USA spends 38 Billion annually on pets and related products; this he argued, is an amount great enough to provide basic sanitation for the entire globe.

Later in the day, Anthony McNicholas and Jean Seaton (official BBC historians), addressed the role of the BBC in relation to ethics. McNicholas, outlining the role that the corporation had played in the reporting of Northern Ireland, argued that the BBC had attempted to be guided by the following seven principles: actions should be beneficial to the public sphere; coverage should be marked by benevolence; no harm should be done, journalism should be honest; it should be noticeable for its lawfulness; justice and rights must be at the centre; freedom of expression should be held in tension with all of the above. He argued that this is an extremely difficult set of principles to uphold, but that the BBC had done an admirable job in the provence. Seaton's paper argued for the role of a strong BBC World Service in global civil society, and noted the multi-polar nature of its audience: who it listens to well, and who it helps shape public opinion amongst. Despite being paid for by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Seaton argued that in most cases the state doesn't "buy the truths" that it puts forward.

Westminster is a thriving academic community, and is marked by a rich tradition of research, and its early promotion of young academics to professorial level; a fact which is extremely apparent when encountering Gauntlett and Hill, who are as youthful as they have been successful. The institution's commitment to Media Studies will surely help see the discipline expand and grow within the UK, with events like this one helping to cement the university at the forefront of new research.

For more information on CAMRI at Westminster (Communication and Media Research Institute) see <http://www.wmin.ac.uk/mad/page-561>

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