
**An Interview with Professor Paddy Scannell,
Oxford, July 2006¹**

Interview conducted by

Tarik Sabry

Communication and Media Research Institute

University of Westminster

***Tarik Sabry:* What led you to the Regent Street Polytechnic in 1967? You were 24 years old. Media Studies did not yet exist, so what did you teach?**

Paddy Scannell: I had done a degree in English literature at Oxford for three years and after that, because I hadn't a clue what I wanted to do next, I thought I might as well stay on a bit longer. So I applied to do postgraduate research in English literature. That turned out to be total waste of time and I packed it up at the end of the first year. I moved on to a postgraduate certificate in education at the University of Hull - the only place I could get into just before the start of the academic year. I did my teaching practice in an inner city comprehensive school and found it emotionally exhausting. So I was applying for jobs in advertising when I saw a little ad in the *Sunday Times*. It said: 'The Polytechnic/Lecturer in Communication' and then went on to say: 'must be interested in film, television, radio and theatre'. Well who isn't? So I applied though I'd no idea what a polytechnic was, nor what a lecturer in communication might do. To my great surprise I got the job. I accepted it and I suppose I have spent the rest of my life, the last forty years, trying to discover how to be a lecturer in communication.

What was the job then?

The Poly had a course that trained journalists which was recognized by the National Union of Journalists as a qualification. But in the mid 60s the NUJ withdrew recognition and so the course closed down. In its place someone had the idea of developing a broader based course that provided practical skills in radio, television and print journalism. Polytechnics were (as I discovered) more about applied rather than pure knowledge and put a lot of emphasis on teaching students practical, career oriented skills. Regent Street already had an old and well respected

Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture © 2007 (University of Westminster, London), Vol. 4(2): 3-23. ISSN 1744-6708 (Print); 1744-6716 (Online)

Department of Photography which had recently begun to teach Film as well. So the idea of a practice based Diploma in Communication Studies made a lot of sense. I was the second person appointed to develop and teach on the course which began in 1970, I think, and remains the basis of the undergraduate degree course we offer today. Students were taught radio and television broadcasting and print journalism by professional people from Fleet Street and the BBC while a small number of people like myself provided the obligatory 'liberal studies' bit of added value. We offered courses in History, Modern Languages and Literature from the start and then added on a bit of Sociology and Psychology. I taught Literature for five years or so. I could teach whatever I liked and I did courses on Romanticism, the Russian Novel and other stuff on time and space, oral poetry, popular fiction etc. I was very much under the influence of Marshall McLuhan at this time. He was the only person I'd read that seemed to have anything interesting, relevant and new to say about 'the media' as we were learning to call them, thanks to him.

Tell me about the intellectual formation of the field of media studies. You were one of the founders along with people like Nicholas Garnham, Colin Sparks and others. How did it begin?

One of the other influential figures in this development was James Curran who has written a very fascinating account of the formation of what he calls 'The Westminster School'. James is very good on the social background and the political and academic interests of the key figures so I won't go over that again. But it's worth saying something about how we started up an undergraduate degree course in Media Studies in the mid 1970s - I still think of this as our most enduring achievement, for all of us involved in getting it going. In the early 1970s Polytechnics were allowed to become degree awarding bodies, like the universities, subject to their courses being monitored and validated by a national body, the CNA (Council for National Academic Awards), so we decided then to go for an honours degree in Media Studies. It was essentially the same as the Diploma which it replaced. We taught practical, industry-oriented options in broadcasting and newspaper journalism. The new thing was on the Theory side, as we came to call it. We now began to develop courses in media history, politics, sociology and so on. In this we were led by Nick Garnham who had recently joined the Photography Department to teach film theory and practice, but was appointed head of a newly formed Media Studies Department with the specific task of setting up the new undergraduate degree. In preparation for all this some of us needed re-training and in 1974 I attended Stuart Hall's famous Monday theory seminar which he taught the graduate students at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham. It was this experience that got me away from teaching Eng Lit and into thinking seriously about media and communication.

Sabry, 'An Interview with Professor Paddy Scannell...'

Something related to that was your involvement with *Media Culture and Society*. How and when did the journal project start and what was the intellectual *raison d'être* behind it?

Media, Culture and Society again was Nick Garnham's idea. He pushed it through, found a publisher and invited some of us (Richard Collins, Colin Sparks and James Curran were founding editors along with myself) to be on the editorial board. It was Nick who defined the position the journal would take and that was, most simply, that whatever it was, it was not going to be Althusserian Marxism. The title of the journal wasn't even something we thought about or debated - it just seemed the most obvious title. Take Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society*, stick *Media* in front and you've got it - Nick had made a documentary about Williams when he worked at the BBC before joining us, and he was a big influence for a number of us. In taking a stance against Althusserian Marxism we were not so much defining ourselves against Birmingham as against *Screen*. Nick had been on the editorial board of *Screen* in the early 1970s and I don't know what really happened, but there was a great big row and when the dust settled, a number of people had resigned including Nick and Richard Collins. They both wanted a journal for the emerging field of Media Studies with a broader scope and less theoretically dogmatic than *Screen*.

So, there was no *raison d'être* from the beginning?

There wasn't an ideological or political position we were seeking to advance. We wanted the journal to be ecumenical and we wanted it to be international in its scope. We would have contributions not just from Britain but from everywhere. We saw it as a way of beginning to establish the field and identify maybe some key issues. Through the 1980s the journal was theme based, with invited contributors on topics we had picked. That meant that we spent a lot of time asking ourselves what we should be focusing our attention on. Nick was very good at trend-spotting. He picked up on Bourdieu very early on and did an issue on him with Raymond Williams (it was 90% Nick and 10% Williams as I recall). We did early issues on the post-Frankfurt School in Germany. And we were talking about the public sphere long before we'd actually read Habermas's book because it was not translated into English until the end of the 1980s. We were good at identifying trends.

I would like you to say something about your three main books: *A Social History of Broadcasting*, *Broadcast Talk* and then *Radio, Television and Modern Life*, but if you may, I would like you to speak about them as moments, as key moments in your understanding of the media.

The foundational book was the study of broadcasting which I did with David Cardiff. It's the basis of all my subsequent work and the inspiration behind it. We got into it by accident. David and I had volunteered to teach a course on documentary (we liked teaching together) and when we went to look for the literature we couldn't find it. In particular we went to Briggs's history of the BBC to find out about the beginnings of broadcast documentary but it wasn't there. So more out of curiosity than anything else we went and looked in the BBC archives, which had only very recently been opened to the public as a result of Brigg's work, and we were hooked. We couldn't believe what a huge amount of stuff there was that had been quite untouched by Briggs. I can still remember the tingle of excitement from discovering another nugget of gold in as I worked my way through the files. The book was immensely important in every conceivable way for my own intellectual development. Gradually David and I came to see that we could write a history of the hidden work of production in all the major areas of broadcast output. We could show how in each case the broadcasters found out how to make programs that worked for audiences, and under what internal and external constraints. We called it a social history and it is that, so that when you read it you learn a lot for instance about the social, political and cultural impact of radio in interwar Britain - about unemployment, about politics and broadcasting, entertainment, contemporary musical tastes and so on. But as I worked on it the nub of the book for me came to be the study of production and the nature of the communicative relationship between program makers and listeners. And that remains the thing I am still working on. The book I'm working on at present, *Television and the Meaning of Live* is an attempt finally to come to terms with what I began to understand about the production side of broadcasting well over thirty years ago.

Then you edited *Broadcast Talk*

I'd begun to see by the early 1980s that one of the key things our historical research was showing us was that people working in radio didn't know who they were broadcasting to or what their absent audiences thought of their efforts. David's brilliant study of the Talks Department showed how its producers gradually came to understand that there was a trick to talk on radio and the trick was to understand the circumstances and situations of the people who were listening to you. They weren't a captive audience, so you couldn't lecture them as if they were in a lecture room, you couldn't preach at them because they weren't in Church and you couldn't harangue them because they were weren't at a political rally or something. We saw that in the course of the 1930s BBC broadcasters learnt that the way you had to talk to people on radio was the way people talked to

Sabry, 'An Interview with Professor Paddy Scannell...'

each other in ordinary daily life, in their homes, at work and so on. You had to talk to them in this way because that was where they were listening to you.

I decided to put together a special issue of *Media Culture & Society* on broadcast talk. Nobody in Media Studies was doing anything on this at the time. I was quite on my own, and it took me a year or so to find suitable contributors. Probably the first was Martin Montgomery, a friend of mine and a socio-linguist, who did a seminal paper for the issue on DJ Talk. Then I got in touch with John Heritage in the Sociology Department at Warwick. John was into ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis (CA) and he had a PhD student, David Greatbatch, who was applying CA to the broadcast political interview. I was fascinated by this, because it could clearly show that the communicative design of the interview - the way it was structured, the ways in which questions were put and responses given - was for an absent audience. It's not enough to say that talk is the communicative medium of radio and television. You have to show how it is different from other kinds of talk, how *its* talk is in fine detail appropriate for and specific to radio and television.

I was thrilled by the discovery of CA because I felt I was beginning to see how talk-as-communication really worked, the actual mechanics of communication if you like. The *MCS* issue on talk put the topic on the table but barely scratched its surface. So I immediately went on to assemble a larger collection of essays on the subject, with an introduction by me on the relevance of talk for the study of broadcast communication. *Broadcast Talk* was published in 1991, the same year as the social history of the BBC.

Then you wrote *Radio, Television and Modern Life*. Were there connections between it and the first two books?

Yes. It brought together and explored further the historical work on the BBC and my growing interest in the analysis of talk. One of the frustrations in writing the history was that I kept coming across fascinating programs that I really wanted to write about in more detail than a half-page mention but couldn't, because it would clog up the flow of the narrative. As I said the big thing I got from doing the BBC history was how programs were made and how they worked (or not) as communicative interactions with the audiences for whom they were made, and that's what my next book was about.

I wanted to try and capture the communicative ethos of radio and television which I now thought of as expressed in the sociable character of ordinary talk, or conversation. A little program produced in Manchester in the mid-30s, the *Harry Hopeful* series, was the first instance, in the BBC, of broadcast talk as

entertainment, as fun, as pure sociability. How it came about is described in our BBC history. How it worked *as* fun, *as* entertainment was what I went on to consider in my next book. I wanted to explore the communicative character of talk on radio and television in actual instances, and to begin to apply what I was learning from the sociology of interaction, conversational analysis and pragmatics. The sociable character of talk is a many sided, complex thing and it raises questions of sincerity, authenticity, spontaneity and performance all of which I tried to open up and examine in *Radio, Television and Modern Life*.

I remember as a student in your class (*Fact and Fiction*) back in 1999, how extremely difficult it was to come to terms with the question: how is it that we understand something as being that thing? For example, how is it that authentic is authentic, how is *being* authentic done? And that I think was central to your book.

That's absolutely right, Tarik. The eye-opening text for me was by Harvey Sacks - 'Doing being ordinary' - which I discuss in *Radio, Television and Modern Life*. I think Sacks was a genius and this was one of his most stunning insights into the performed self. It builds of course on Erving Goffman who supervised his PhD and Harold Garfinkel, and all the work of Goffman, Garfinkel and Sacks became foundational for how I thought of, and tried to understand communication as interaction, an action *between* people in specific institutional and non-institutional social settings in the various situations and circumstances of mundane daily life. You know in most studies of radio and television the question of their informative and entertainment roles is always taken as given. Entertainment programs are accepted as entertaining, without pausing to consider how, in fact, they are produced *as* entertaining; and likewise for informative programs. But how, for instance can we (as viewers) distinguish between being informed and being entertained - the answer, in large part, is that they both depend on very different kinds of performance, different ways of staging the program-event, different styles of talk etc etc. And on the basis of this communicative labour we, viewers, make our assessments and find the performers and their performances to be authentic, sincere, funny, serious, boring... or not as the case may be. And this is the fundamental interpretative work of human social interaction.

How did Heidegger's *Being and Time* influence your thinking about the world and the media, especially? You knew this was coming.

Yes, yes, all right. We had to get round to Heidegger sooner or later. I think it was Colin Sparks who put me on to him at the start of the 1990s. He said 'you're interested in everyday life - you should look at Heidegger'. This was news to me.

Sabry, 'An Interview with Professor Paddy Scannell...'

All I knew about Heidegger was that he'd been a Nazi and was somehow responsible for existentialism which I associated with Sartre and I knew I didn't like it or him. But I was certainly interested in the analysis of everyday life so I started looking into Heidegger (thank you Colin!) and it was a revelation - *Being and Time* remains the single most important, life-changing thing I have ever read. It took a lot of work and a lot of preparation before I got down to reading it, but I was riveted by it from the start and throughout. It somehow clarified for me all sorts of things that I had long felt and thought but in a confused and incoherent way. *BT*, more than anything, gave me a sense of intellectual clarity and purpose and a confidence in what I wanted to say.

I got two things from it immediately that have remained with me: a quite new understanding of what it means to speak of 'the world', and that its fundamental structure is care: the world as a care-structure. Care as the truth of our human condition, our being in the world, and the world's care for us and all living things. Now what it means to speak of this - the meaning and significance of care - is something you have to earn. Heidegger earns his insights through the extraordinary intellectual quest that he undertakes in *BT*. It is a winding journey round the huge hill, cragged and steep, of Truth. That is what he is seeking, and if you, as his reader, are willing to accompany him you will get to and share something of his hard-won understanding of the truth of what it is to be human and to be confronted, as human beings uniquely are, with the question of existence, with what it is to be alive and living in the world. It was an awesome achievement and I am profoundly grateful and thankful for Heidegger's great effort on our behalf.

Did Heidegger's book help with your thinking about the media?

It helped my thinking about everything. And it certainly helped my thinking about radio and television. Long before I read Heidegger I had a sense of the *worldliness* of broadcasting. I wanted to say that what radio and television do is they reproduce the world as ordinary. I got that from the study of production; these were real programs made by real people working in real institutions under real constraints for real audiences - people who actually did watch and listen. It was an everyday worldly thing; television and radio were part of ordinary people's real lives. It gave them a sense of what was going on the wider world in which they lived and at the same time was part of their world and their life. That's what I learnt, that's what I knew from the historical work I began with and I carried this over into all the subsequent work we've talked about so far. Now to say that broadcasting is a worldly thing is to say that whatever this means it is not an academic matter. More exactly it's not a theoretical matter. And I felt very strongly that the direction Media Studies was taking was too theoretical and academic. And

this wasn't just a problem in Media Studies, but a much wider thing. I was beginning to read quite a lot of philosophy in order to get to grips with the Theory of the Subject, which was a big issue back in the 70s and 80s, and this takes you into the problem of knowledge and the philosophy of consciousness.

Isn't Descartes to blame for this?

When you read *Being and Time*, who has Heidegger got in his sights? It is of course Descartes. Descartes exemplifies the problem of modern epistemology whose default position is scepticism. What can I be certain of? The only thing I know for sure, when I come to think of it, is that I exist. I exist in my head. I can't be sure that anything exists outside my own self consciousness. Kant said that the scandal of philosophy was that it could not furnish conclusive proof, starting from subjective self-consciousness, of an external world. And Heidegger's response in *BT* is that the real scandal is that academics go on trying to come up with a proof, *over and over again*. His own starting point is with the facticity (the actual matter-of-factness) of the actually existing living world and not the contents of his own mind, which is where an awful lot of modern philosophers and others start. So Heidegger's insistence on the world as the object of thinking - not the self, not subjectivity, not consciousness - was immensely reassuring for me. It clarified my rather vague ideas about the worldliness of radio and television and gave me the confidence to push on with what I was doing.

Since we're having a discussion about Heidegger and his influence on your work and intellectual formation, it makes a lot of sense to say something about phenomenology as a method. How useful is it in helping us understand the media in ways which other methods cannot?

Let me offer a very minimal and inclusive definition of phenomenology as an effort at thinking about the world uncluttered by the usual academic baggage. That's how I've put it in the introduction to *Media and Communication* [published in July 2007]. Ten years ago I'd have said in answer to your question that phenomenology was a code-word for Heidegger. Now I see him as one (very significant) instance of academics who try to think outside the academic box they find themselves stuck in - other examples in philosophy would be Wittgenstein and Austin, and in sociology there's Sacks, Goffman and Garfinkel. Garfinkel is especially important for me. He wanted sociology to be less about the interpretation of social phenomena by sociologists, and more about the interpretations of social actors themselves - their ethno-methods, their ways of dealing with the situations in which they find themselves. Phenomenology tries to put on the back-burner what academics think and to treat seriously and

Sabry, *'An Interview with Professor Paddy Scannell...'*

respectfully what ordinary people (including broadcasters) think and do. This position, the phenomenological position, aspires to take everyday life at face value initially: in *its* terms in the first place rather than those of the academic with his or her theories and hypotheses about everyday life and the behaviours of social actors.

How is all of this related to the hermeneutics of trust because I do remember you distinguishing between the hermeneutics of trust and suspicion on more than one occasion?

Very good question. I don't remember where I picked up this distinction - it's in Paul Ricoeur I think - but I certainly find it very helpful. The default academic position on the whole is one of scepticism, which you can call a hermeneutics of suspicion. It has a very ancient pedigree that goes back to Plato's parable of the cave dwellers. And it's certainly the dominant attitude in Cultural and Media Studies as they have developed in the last thirty years or so. It rests on the assumption that you can't or shouldn't take ordinary life and experience at face value because they are deceptive and misleading. And this default position of mistrust is extended to television. That is not my way of thinking. I do take the ordinary world at face value and that is the default position, as I've suggested, of any approach that calls itself phenomenology. Phenomenology is a hermeneutics of trust, a way of thinking that accepts the actually existing matter-of-fact world in good faith. As I do.

What you have just said now is, it seems to me, at the heart of your disagreement with Cultural Studies as a field or paradigm, if you like. Is it not slightly ironic that you went on to edit, then publish Stuart Hall's seminal piece: "Cultural Studies, two paradigms"?

I'm proud of the fact that Stuart Hall's famous essay on the two paradigms appeared in the first issue of *MCS* that I myself edited in 1980. The two paradigms are the 'culturalist' and 'structuralist' moments in the development of Cultural Studies. The culturalist moment came first in the 1950s and 60s and was articulated in the work of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams in those decades - the defining texts are *The Uses of Literacy* and *Culture and Society*. The structuralist moment comes in the 60s and 70s. It's a French import, introduced by the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss which then it takes off in all sorts of directions in the writings of Lacan (psychoanalysis), Derrida (philosophy), Barthes (literary theory) and above all Althusser, the Pope of structuralist Marxism. The second generation of Cultural studies in Britain, under the tutelage of Stuart Hall, was deeply influenced in the 1970s by French structuralism. Now I don't have a

disagreement with Cultural Studies *tout court*, but with a particular version of it. The crucial difference between Cultural Studies A (Hoggart and Williams in the 50s) and Cultural Studies B (Hall and CCCS in the 1970s) concerns the status of 'lived experience' - a grounding, validating concept for Raymond Williams that is rejected by Hall as the locus of ideology. Lived experience cannot be taken as the ground of anything because it is unconscious in a double sense: it is unreflective (unselfconscious if you like) and therefore gives no account for itself. And it is also unconscious in psychoanalytical terms, and therefore *cannot* account for itself. Stuart, in his article, valiantly tries to have his cake and eat it: he gives good accounts of each and then tries to salvage the best of both paradigms as if they could be reconciled with each other. But actually the paradigms as he sets them out are irreconcilable, and it's clear (to me) that Hall in fact prefers, naturally, the structuralist over the culturalist paradigm. He has to prefer it, because his core concept of ideology (heavily influenced by Althusser) favours the structuralist critique of the 'lived experience' paradigm. Now I disagree with Hall, at least in his Althusserian mode which is, for all the built-in nuances and qualifications, his final position on the media - as I read him. And I flatly reject the whole structuralist project and all its post-structuralist offspring. I'm with Hoggart and Williams, especially Williams. I much prefer their so-called culturalist paradigm. For me, as for them, the category of lived experience is absolutely fundamental as my next book, *Television and the Meaning of 'Live'* will try to show.

I think it's fair to say that your work has been generally well received, but it was also criticised by some for emphasising or privileging the 'care-structures' of the media and downplaying their ideological functions. Would you like to respond to this criticism?

OK. I haven't yet given any thought-out account of how I understand the care-structure and how I apply it to the media. I'm working on this now. It has a big place in the study of live broadcasting that I'm preparing for publication. And I will say more about it in the follow-on book, *Love and Communication*, in which I hope to set out my own stall and work out my own way of thinking in engaged discussion with other alternative ways of thinking, including ideology critique. I think it's fairly well-known that I'm not fond of ideology critique though I've never tried to engage with it head-on. I was never impressed by it as the default position for thinking about the media. That is the big claim made by Hall and the Media Studies group at Birmingham in the 1970s and it became the default position for the emerging field of Media Studies in the 1980s. The question of the media was the question of their ideological effect. Now I was never going to write off the immense work of broadcasting that I had studied in some historical detail, the hidden labour of production, the care-structures of program-making as I've come to think of it - I was never going to dismiss this as ideology. But I found it

Sabry, 'An Interview with Professor Paddy Scannell...'

extremely difficult throughout the 70s and 80s to say with any degree of clarity why I objected to ideology critique, and I did not then have any clearly thought out alternative way of thinking to offer. Reading Heidegger in the early 1990s gave me, as I've said, a new clarity about my own perceptions of the world and how to think about the world of experience. That and my developing work on talk and the communicative process as it works on radio and television gave me increasing confidence that I could develop an approach to the study of media that was radically different from ideology critique. And incidentally, there's more than one version of it. Hall's version takes as its starting point the dominant ideology thesis which is filleted from *The German Ideology*, an early joint effort by Marx and Engels. But the Critical Theory approach takes commodity fetishism (as discussed in *Capital*) as its start point and is more properly Marxist than Hall's eventual understanding of ideology which, in its Althusserian formulation, morphs into a theory of the subject that is really dependent on psychoanalytic theory. I on the whole prefer Critical Theory's take on ideology - when understood in its historical specificity - to the later Cultural Studies take. I give detailed historical accounts of both versions of ideology in *Media and Communication*.

Nowhere in your work do you actually deny the fact that the media have ideological functions, it's just that you are interested in media's other functions. You don't deny that the media do have an ideological function, do you?

No, I don't, of course I don't. David and I have written about the ideological functions of the BBC. It's perfectly obvious that it produces an ideology of the nation, say, of the meaning of Britishness of the British way of life, etc., etc. though I think that was more evident and more politically significant thirty years ago than it is today. But you can't claim that nationalism is something unique to broadcasting, anymore than you can claim racism or sexism as particular to the media. Of course if you look for any of these in the media you will find it. But you could look anywhere in a country like Britain or in the USA and find these things - in the family, in education, religion, politics. Ideology critique doesn't actually tell you anything particular about the media. In fact it deflects attention from what is specific to the media, which I take to be to do with communication. It is not a good place to start in terms of thinking about the communicative character and the communicative power of the media and these are the things I find absorbingly interesting.

This leads us to audience studies. Except for a chapter in 'A Social History' which deals with radio audiences your work hardly deals with audiences,

which I find surprising since your work is about structures of everyday life and everyday life comes with audiences.

Well I certainly agree with you that audience studies are important, and always have been. It's what the American sociology of mass communication was about in its heyday from the mid 30s to the mid 50s and it's been probably the most enduring aspect of British Media Studies as it got going at the start of the 1980s. You can't presume to know what the impact of media are on real people... and that was what the ideology critique of Horkheimer and Adorno tended to presume in the 30s, that it explained the stupefaction of the masses - their deception by the culture industries. In the 70s Hall broke with Film Theory because it too saw the filmic viewing subject as always already positioned in and by the regime of cinema... as they used to say in *Screenspeak!* Hall salvaged a view of ideology that was, it's important to note, for television as distinct from film that allowed for resistance by some television viewers to the preferred (dominant) ideological reading of the world that was inflected through the discourses of television (as they used to say in *Centrespeak*). And this of course opened up the field of audience studies as an attempt to discover who did buy television's preferred readings of reality and who didn't and why. That moment, in the late 70s, is now long ago and far away as David Morley has remarked looking back on his own pioneering effort in the study of the *Nationwide* audience. Audience Studies have quietly abandoned the question of ideology and concentrated on what new audiences think of new developments in television - Reality Television has stimulated a lot of interesting and important current work on what people make of it.

But that said, Audience Studies remains one sided. There's much less continuous, cumulative work on the other side of the fence, which is production studies. And that's where I started out remember - a historical sociology of the hidden labour process in the making of broadcast programs. Where is the sustained work on production? In the seventies there was Philip Elliotts' study of television documentary and Philip Schlesinger's groundbreaking thesis on television news - but I can't think of anything much since then until we get to Georgie Born's important study, last year, of the BBC production culture in the John Birt era. And it's not much different in the USA where the study by Julie D'Acci of *Cagney and Lacey* remains a lonely landmark. Now why this is so is a complicated question and I won't go into it here. But the key thing is that production and reception studies both need each other. The original project for the study of television at Birmingham under Hall's direction was to look at the social relations of cultural production - producers, products and consumers; all three parts. That was what Brunson and Morley originally planned to do: some kind of ethnography of the production culture at the BBC that delivered the nightly magazine programme *Nationwide* and then a study of the programme itself and finally a study of its

Sabry, 'An Interview with Professor Paddy Scannell...'

audiences. Only the last two bits got done - the study of the programme's discourse, or ideology, and of whether the audiences 'bought' the producers' preferred reading of the meaning of 'nation'. Ideally that's how something as complicated as television should be studied - from both sides with the program output as the focal concern.

I was wondering if you wanted to say something about public service broadcasting [PSB]. Can we still carry on talking about a 'publicness' or a public in a complex and intricate world of migration and technological advance?

I think that is a fascinating question Tarik, and a big one. Bigger than the question of the BBC which doesn't have a monopoly on public service broadcasting - there's Channel 4 still and there was commercial television as well until recently. I think PSB matters enormously but not just by itself. I think it matters as part of the public sector as a whole. A democratic society is one that recognises common obligations, common responsibilities, and common duties on the part of all citizens. Michael Ignatief once said that we tend to talk about public services as if they were a dole for the poor when in fact they should be thought of as a public good for all classes. That I think is absolutely right and it's true not just of broadcasting but education and health as well. I passionately believe in social democracy as it has developed in Europe since the Second World War in the Northern European countries including France, but not the Southern European countries and certainly not the United States, which has a libertarian understanding of democracy. So the issues about broadcasting are wider questions about your understanding of democracy and the importance you attach to ideas of the public good.

In the case of broadcasting, what has certainly come along in the last twenty years or so in an astonishing way are a host of technological innovations which provide audio-visual material by means other than free-to-air terrestrial signals, the traditional system of delivery for the BBC and the other major British television channels. In Britain the BBC's really big competitor today isn't commercial television and radio - it's Rupert Murdoch's BSkyB. In the past discussion used to be about commercial television based on advertising versus the BBC which wasn't. But that's not the issue today. The issue is whether the original classic delivery system of *broadcasting* has any relevance with so many different television services and new delivery systems - cable and satellite and cell-phones and blackberries as well as all the other stuff on the Internet.

Who needs broadcasting with all these alternative ways of narrowcasting that target individuals and let them make the choices? Well I think broadcasting does

still matter, because my most basic perception about what it is you are studying in looking at broadcasting is that it is about time. And that is why I called my recent PhD *Broadcasting and Time* because time is the essence of radio and television (and it's also in homage to Heidegger of course!). I've always thought that broadcasting created for the first time, and has maintained in good repair ever since, a common, public, worldly time (the time of radio and television) that helps to sustain the structures of our days and the movement of meaningful time in our lives. The times of radio and television in the now classic era of broadcasting were defined in their daily programme schedules. And all the new technologies implicitly or explicitly undermine the fixed daily schedules of broadcast radio and television. On-demand television says, 'Say goodbye to the schedules'. That's what BSkyB aggressively pushes. Its delivery system allows individuals to interact with the broadcast schedules and to make their own schedules as well - to record stuff off air and to play it back whenever they like. TIVO in the USA does the same and its catching on in a big way there.

Allowing people the privilege of managing their own time is a very important thing, part of the democratic process, of democratising experience so people can make their choices and organise their own culture in their own time and have it available as and when they want it. For most of the 20th century culture was determined by the culture industries which controlled the supply side. The new technologies are all oriented to individual consumers allowing them to manage their own time and what they do with it more effectively; allowing them to choose what to watch and when and also to create their own culture. I have no quarrel with any of this but if it is at the expense of destroying public time then I'm worried. If public time begins to collapse, the common public world begins to collapse because it exists, it is visible and shared, in the medium of live-to-air real time broadcasting. Broadcasting can't be thought of as a national thing any more. Of course naturally and inevitably broadcast services are and will be provided within each nation state by licensed national broadcasters. But they are all now part of a globally connected thing that is 'television', *live* television whose core value and continuing relevance for all of us was disclosed by the enormity of the attack on the World Trade Center.

In the introduction to your PhD thesis, you make the point that enquiry into media; culture and society was and still is a reaction to 'pathologies of modernity'. You also talk about how transition from economy of scarcity to economy of abundance led to a shift in our understanding of politics. How has the meaning of politics changed?

Perhaps I should explain my recent PhD! When the possibility of a job at Michigan came up I sent in my CV and they wrote back 'Great stuff, but you've

Sabry, 'An Interview with Professor Paddy Scannell...'

forgotten to mention your PhD'... well I didn't have one of course, but it was made plain to me that I couldn't get an academic job in an American university without one. So I did a PhD by published works at Westminster and the University was very helpful since I needed to do it rather quickly, to fit in with Michigan's timetable for new appointments. I wouldn't want anyone to think I got some mail-order quicky, Tarik. Although I did it as fast as I could the PhD was a very useful work of self clarification. I had to select stuff I'd published in the previous five years and organise this material into a presentable sequence and then write a critical review of the work explaining its core theoretical and methodological concerns.

Doing this forced me to reflect on what I'd been up to since my last book in 1996. Everything I'd written since then was interconnected and I had come gradually to see that I had the makings of three books, the first two of which grew out of courses that I taught - one on theories of communication, and the other on media events. The third book would be an attempt to clarify my understanding of phenomenological analysis. By the time I did the PhD I had written most of the first book, *Media and Communication*, but I was still unclear about its underlying theme; and writing the introduction to my thesis - it's quite long, more than 17000 words - helped me work out what the book was about and the other two.

Media and Communication is a text book for advanced students that sets out the historical development of academic approaches to the study of media in the last century - its two defining moments were the sociology of mass communication in the USA from the mid thirties to the mid fifties and the development of British cultural studies from the fifties onwards. Now of course I tell the stories of these two moments in terms of the leading figures in each case and the institutions where they developed, the canonical texts that established the field, the disagreements and rows... the familiar internal narrative of the formation of an academic field. But I also wanted to account for why these moments took the form that they did - why was it posed as a *social* question at Columbia in the 30s and as a *cultural* question at Birmingham in the 1970s? I came to think of each of these moments as one, academic response to what was going in the world at the time. The academic engagements with new media, first in social terms and then in cultural terms, were both symptomatic of wider current anxieties about the state of the world, the pathologies of modernity as I called it.

In the PhD I worked out a big historical thesis to account for these anxieties that I then expanded into the final, key chapter of the book. It goes like this. In the course of the 20th century the world economy shifted decisively from scarcity to abundance, from the production of big industrial infrastructure and military technologies of mass destruction to the production of small domestic appliances and technologies of communication. This shift shows up most clearly in the

transition from a politics of poverty which defined the 1930s in North America and Europe to a post-war politics of plenty which was decisively established in the 1950s. It's a shift, I argue, from the time of the masses to the time of everyday life and from the mass politics of mass societies to a new 'life' politics, grounded in everyday life and experience that first shows up in the 1950s in the USA in the civil rights, the women's and the student movements - all of which are interconnected. This is a very different kind of politics to the older mass politics that it begins to displace. And I begin to account for the transition from one to other and the nature of the changes and the academic responses to them in the final chapter of the book.

You have talked about *Media and Communication*, what about the other projects?

About ten years ago I began to teach an undergraduate course on Media Events. It was inspired of course by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz's great book of that title, published in 1992. I wanted to take up their question - the meaning of media events - and to work it through and explore it in the classroom. For me the key to their book was its subtitle, *The Live Broadcasting of History*, which raises three issues about mediated events: the question of history in relation to 'events', the role therein of radio and television as *broadcasters*, and finally the significance of *live* broadcasting - the meaning of *live*. So that's what my second book is about which I'm finishing off now. And it introduces two core concepts which are new to my thinking: the first I have already mentioned which is the care structure. The second is about the meaning of politics, the question of the political. And here my key idea is 'the politics of the present' which I got from a book that I'd read recently and admired very much - Luc Boltanski's *Distant Suffering*. It's not a concept that he develops at all; in fact he introduces it only at the very end, on the last page but one I think. But it jumped off the page at me when I read it and it and I'm mildly obsessed with figuring out what it might mean.

I used it in relation to a study of the live to air transmission by CNN on the morning of September 11th, 2001 that I wrote for Daniel Dayan. That's where I began to think about the meaning of the politics of the present. And now I think it is an idea which has quite a lot of power to it. It opens up questions about how we live our lives, under what conditions, and under what constraints. The crucial thing which is at stake in the politics of the present is the necessity of action without guarantees. You have to act in the present and no amount of thinking about it in advance is going to guarantee the outcome of the action. All actions, if they are to be good actions, have to be in good faith - an act of faith and an act of hope. Faith and hope along with love are the three theological virtues in Christian thought and, never mind the theology, I think that these are the essential

Sabry, 'An Interview with Professor Paddy Scannell...'

underpinnings of human action if they are to be good actions. I have found that in thinking both about the care-structure and the politics of the present in the last year or so what's come back to me are some long forgotten ideas that had their roots in my own upbringing in the Catholic religion which I'd let go of over forty years ago when I went to University in the early 1960s.

Although I have not been a practising Catholic for many years I have never rejected it and I've always believed that religious thought and experience are fundamental to any proper understanding of human life. We are impoverished without it. In ways that I don't at this moment quite know how I'd like to explore the politics of the present in relation to the politics of forgiveness which reappeared again not so long ago in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up by President Mandela and chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in order to confront and hopefully free South Africa from its past.

The sins of history are everywhere apparent today - they're always what the living must deal with as part of the heritage of the past. It confounds the problems of the Middle East, it confounds the whole question of Africa and of the imperialist domination of the Western powers, and of America itself, which is based on a radical injustice, perpetrated on the one hand against the indigenous native peoples of the continent and against the plundered kidnapped blacks who were stolen from Africa and brought over as a slave workforce. Sin is not the same as crime. It goes with forgiveness: sin and forgiveness, crime and punishment. The Nuremburg trials were about punishment. The South African post-apartheid commission was about the possibility of forgiveness. Each couplet represents an ideal of justice, human justice on the one hand, divine justice on the other hand. It seems to me that in world politics today we bump up against the limits of our human notions of justice based upon crime and punishment and the demand (the very reasonable, human demand) for retribution. Forgiveness is something that we have to reserve for the divine, because it is clearly something that we can't do, that's beyond us. This point is made by Jacques Derrida in a rather wonderful essay that he wrote late in his life on the politics of forgiveness and which prompted my thoughts on this matter. It starts with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and his point is that the question of forgiveness only arises when you confront the unforgivable. And that is what Tutu and the members of the commission confronted - the family of Stephen Biko for instance refused to take part in the process because they would not, could not forgive his killers - and indeed why should they? I absolutely accept their position. For in confronting the unforgivable we confront not simply our human limits of compassionate understanding (there really are some things that we have no right to forgive), but something even more fundamental about ourselves, which is that all of us individually and collectively stand in need of forgiveness. That is what Christ saw and understood, and that is why I think the politics of forgiveness which is at the

heart of his teaching, is an essential salvational contribution to our own personal human difficulties, as well as the big political and historical difficulties which we confront today.

It is in fact at the heart of all Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is fundamental.

I believe you Tarik. It's fundamental because it forces us to acknowledge the limits of human experience and thought and action which we always come up against when we act, as we must, in the present. Is God an idea? The Idea of all ideas? The Theory of all theories? Did we invent Him? At the least I think this word 'God' is a useful heuristic device for us as human beings in all our mortal fallibility. It holds in place an essential truth that we know about ourselves: it is a limit concept that allows us to transcend our own limitations, to think beyond ourselves. It enables us to imagine, to invoke a transcendent category that can do what we cannot do, that has a power we do not possess. It is in a pragmatic sense, minimally you might say, a handy idea to have something that we call God in whom we acknowledge the power of forgiveness and whose forgiveness we might be willing to accept, for human history depends on this if you believe - as I do - in providential history, history as providence.

Would you like to say something about your childhood?

Well I've talked about the politics of forgiveness and I feel able to do so because I now feel reconnected with my Catholic childhood. Now there's certainly more than one kind of Catholicism so I need to say something about the Catholicism into which I was born and in which I grew up and which was, until I went to Oxford, my whole world. I lived in the world of what Mary Douglas has called, affectionately, 'bog-Irish' Catholicism - a folk, peasant Catholicism. Not an intellectual thing. It was not a religion of the Book and in fact I've never read the Gospels or even studied one of them in any detail, still less the Old Testament. Irish Catholicism was a devotional religion based on doing things, on actions, on performance - like observant Jews or Muslims, like any serious religion. Religion is not about beliefs (ideas, theories, ideologies), but about devout practices, about doing things, about the piety of everyday practices and what they mean. It is good to pray, for instance, to give thanks before sitting down to a meal.

The everyday pieties of my childhood were rich and wonderful. We had statues in almost every room of the house for a whole range of practical purposes. The Sacred Heart, Mary Immaculate, St Joseph - we'd a statue of the Infant of Prague at the top of the stairs given to my mother by her mother with a silver threepenny

Sabry, 'An Interview with Professor Paddy Scannell...'

bit to place under it because that meant we'd never be without money - a Catholic home insurance policy! There was St Jude for hopeless causes, and St Anthony of Padua if you lost something and St Christopher for journeys, and someone else for headaches - in fact there was a saint you could call upon to intercede on your behalf for most everyday inconveniences and ailments. Now, since I believe we need all the help we can get in this world I found it richly rewarding as a child that there were all these resources you could turn to. My father was a doctor, and as a child I suffered terribly from asthma and after medical treatment had been tried and didn't always work my mother would try religious cures. So for instance, she would press Holy Water from Lourdes to my lips.

Did it work?

The skeptic's question! In one sense no! My dad was the medical officer for the Diocese of Leeds and every year he went to France to care for the sick who were taking part in the annual diocesan pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes. I went with him one year - I was nine or ten - as one of the sick, in the hope that being dipped in the holy waters of the shrine might cure my asthma. I was laid low by it for three months after I got back... so there was no miracle in my particular case. But that's not really the point. It was a pious thing to do. It was good for my soul. And I felt my parents' care and concern and I still vividly remember the great processions that took place late in the evening and, in the darkness, the flickering candles of thousands of pilgrims from all over the world and the sound of the hymns they sang at the shrine of Our Lady. I felt reassured by that sort of thing and all the other things of which it was a part. It was a whole way of life, a complete world.

I suppose what I want say is that Catholicism is essentially a public, worldly, social, collective thing. It is focused around the Mass, the performance of the Mass, in which you all come together as a body of people and take part in it as a public, collective event. Every time you do this you bring Christ to life again. He is reincarnate, resurrected, brought to presence. The meaning of his teaching, his life and death, is renewed every time the Mass is performed as a pious action through which He enters yet again into the present and the lives of the living. For Catholics the Mass is *the* central event in their daily lives. Now why do I like media events? Or politics as theatre? Because I still love the Mass as an event. I love the miraculous human experience of the live and living event. In the live and living event I encounter something essential about what it is to be alive, to be me, living in the world with others. This, I think, is the real significance of what Daniel Dayan calls 'sharedness'.

And you have been praised for your performances as a lecturer, maybe this comes from it?

Well I don't know about that, Tarik. But I certainly do think of the lecture as an event and the lecturer as a performer. Yes, I like events, and I like a good performance, and I think if you are going to be a lecturer you should put yourself into it and try and bring it to life - don't be boring, try not to talk nonsense, be entertaining. Make the students *want* to read and think about the things you're talking to them about.

One final thought about lecturing that I got from John Durham Peters and then I'll shut up. I've talked a bit about some of the books that have been important for my thinking in the last ten years or so - but John's book, *Speaking into the Air*, is very special for me. I reviewed it for *MCS* a couple of years ago in an essay called 'Love and Communication', which I'm taking as the title for the last book in the trilogy I'm working on. John begins by distinguishing between two paradigms of communication as love - communication as dialogue on the one hand, and as dissemination on the other. Their two greatest exponents were Socrates and Jesus - Socratic dialogue and Christian broadcasting. Christ's parable of The Sower is about broadcasting and when I read John's great interpretation of it I at last understood the real meaning of what I'd been studying all those years. The usual view of broadcasting (one-to-many communication) is that it is inferior to one-to-one communication, because it's non-reciprocal. We normally think of love as a reciprocal, mutual, intimate relationship between two people - the politics of *eros*. But what I saw from reading John was that non-reciprocal communication is greater than this, for it gives without demanding anything in return. Whether you're a teacher or lecturer, a radio or TV producer - you scatter your seed abroad - you broad-cast it - and you have no idea, you cannot know where it will fall. You do what you do in good faith, in the hope that your words may resonate in other hearts and minds - but there's no telling. Broadcasting as non-reciprocal communication is like the love of God, or the love of a parent or, as I now begin to think, the love of the world. The relationship between giver and receiver in this paradigm cannot be reciprocal because it is unequal and one-sided. It is strictly incommensurate. This is the politics of *agape*, of divine love. *Eros* and *agape* - two paradigms of communication as love, one non-transcendent and conditional the other unconditional and transcendent. I hope to say more about them both in my third book.

Many thanks.

Notes

¹ The interview was conducted on the understanding that I would revise the transcript of it for publication. When Tarik sent me his transcription I was rather taken aback by my rambling and unfocused answers at many points in the interview. So I have extensively revised what I said, without deleting or changing the substance of the questions Tarik put to me or their order and without changing the substance or intent of my replies. They have been pruned and improved (I hope) and some later thoughts have been added here and there. There's a gap of a year between the original recording and the revised transcription, in the course of which I began a new job at the University of Michigan and saw the publication, in June 2007, of *Media and Communication*, discussed below. I'm very grateful to Tarik and Anthony for their invitation to reflect a little on my working life at this point and for their heroic efforts in producing the transcript of our talk. *Paddy Scannell*.