

Central broadcasting regulation *versus* political devolution: media communications in a 'new' Wales

'Communications in Wales after the Communications Act'. Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies -- The University of Wales, Aberystwyth. 29th and 30th of March 2004

A report by Jiska Engelbert, University of Wales, Aberystwyth

The focus of the 2003 Communications Act on creating a singular and integrated regulatory framework for the UK communications industries lead to the establishment of the Office of Communications (Ofcom) in December of the same year. Ofcom's task, as a light touch regulator, is twofold. It has to ensure that the UK communications system operates in a manner that provides choice and competition *without* overlooking what is in the interests of the public: communications' promotion of plurality, informed citizenship and cultural diversity.

Ofcom's integrated definition of the public as 'citizen-consumers', however, proves to be problematic in the context of a shift from a public citizens-orientated communications industry towards the development of an increasingly consumer-orientated digital and commercial industry. In the new ages of these changes and further global convergence, the public service broadcasters in Wales -- BBC Wales, ITV Wales, and the Welsh-language channel S4C -- face even more pressure in terms of upholding their crucial role in fostering an important sense of Wales's cultural, social and political life and identity.

In the context of budget cuts, increased competition, pressure to keep up with the digital switch-on, a devolved political system in a non-devolved policy environment and Ofcom's upcoming reviews of the BBC, PSB and S4C, the central question is what role politics, public and producers should and can play in enabling Wales to retain its own distinct voice. The 'Communications in Wales after the Communications Act' conference provided a unique opportunity for directly involved parties and members from Ofcom, politics, the media and academia to come together and discuss these issues that are essential for the future of mass communications in Wales.

Broadcasting issues in the political context of Wales as a separate and now officially devolved nation within a central and non-devolved British regulatory framework were addressed in the first panel "What Future for Broadcasting in Wales?" Leighton Andrews, Assembly Member, argued for broadcasting as the focus point for devolution in his paper, "Finding its voice": The National Assembly for Wales and broadcasting policy, 1999-2003'. Assessing the Assembly's current and future involvement in broadcasting policy making, Andrews directly related its current inability to decentralise broadcasting responsibilities to a general lack of follow-through of agreements -- especially of the Concordat agreement -- between assembly and parliament. In a more political speech, Kevin Williams -- Professor of

Media and Culture at the University of Wales, Swansea -- placed the threats that PSB in Wales faces in the light of the central government's broadcasting policies. The latter would be too tightly focused on approaching broadcasting as an industrial sector as opposed to an approach that should regard broadcasting as a vital part of cultural life. Williams, problematising the commercial reality as a central function of an undermining of public service commitments, outlined the mis- and under representation on Ofcom's Welsh Advisory Committee and the Assembly's current lack of supporting knowledge structures as two structural problems in developing a devolved responsibility in fully representing life in Welsh regions and fostering Welsh identity through broadcasting.

The second panel, "Quality, Employment and Standards", addressed the ongoing debate on quality. The new competitive broadcasting landscape challenges the position of values in broadcasting policy. The two speakers in this panel, representing unions for media, arts and entertainment, assessed both the problems and opportunities in upholding the production of quality in Welsh public broadcasting by focusing on the importance of local Welsh media productions. Chris Ryde, *Equity's* national organiser for Wales, argued for a plan to re-establish quality in Wales's PSB by educating politicians on broadcasting issues, by stimulating the cross-exchange of ideas, by creating partnerships between unions and broadcasters, and by providing sustainable collective rights for workers in the Welsh media industry. David Donovan, *Bectu's* national official for Wales, emphasised that high quality literally comes at a high price, which is problematic in a competitive environment that seems to kill creativity. Regarding quality as the ultimate key to survival and success, Donovan argued for a different broadcasting agenda that prefers quality over quantity and public service remits over corporations; an agenda that will finally support the development of Welsh courage to have a broadcasting vision.

The continuous tension between culture and industry, citizen and consumer and between a devolved Wales and a non-devolved policy framework recurred in the third panel on "Nations, Regions and Content" on Day Two. Sue Balsom, the Welsh member of Ofcom's Content Board, stressed, in a detailed update on and aims of Ofcom's review of PSB, the regulator's support for public service programming in general and for regional programming in particular by directly linking the two with their positive relations to the audience's sophistication. However, in the light of the current re-centralisation of ITV plc, Robert Beveridge -- the Scottish representative for *Voice of the Listener and Viewer* -- criticised Ofcom's approach to Scottish regional programming. According to Beveridge, Ofcom cannot support Scotland in having diversity of representation since the regulator is not involved in scheduling and prioritises business interests over citizen's interests. Sylvia Harvey, Professor of Broadcasting Policy at Lincoln University, sees Ofcom's main task as stimulating the reconnection of language and culture and the development of cultural expression -- rather than connecting cultures and nation-states. These, she believes, both enable a shift away from a traditional UK framework towards a more local and international one. Achieving this goal would imply Ofcom abandoning its current interpretation of cultural production as the sum of unconnected parts.

In Panel Four -- "The S4C Review" -- Huw Jones, S4C chief executive, outlined the aims and objectives of S4C's internal review that precedes Ofcom's external review. Being a single channel that serves a non-homogeneous group of Welsh speakers in a competitive industry is problematic for S4C in terms of upholding its responsibilities. Not only do these responsibilities relate to S4C's general role in Welsh culture and identity, but moreover, the challenge of living up to the principle aims of a Welsh language channel that should

continuously focus on stimulating Welsh originality and nurturing local talent. S4C's internal review, therefore, aims at (re)defining its future benchmarks by not only focusing on how effective S4C has been, but also on how it can engage with local communities in new ways in order to improve quality resources and to meet quality expectations.

Welsh broadcasters' accountability and its future structure -- as to be reflected in one central body that regulates with a light touch but complies simultaneously -- were central issues in Panel Five on "Accountability: the place of the public in Welsh broadcasting". Meic Birtwistle, representing the National Union of Journalists, remarked that the opening of Ofcom offices coincides with the closing down of local television stations. This could be construed as a negative development, not only since Birtwistle argued for 'communities' as the new watch word, but especially since Wales's undeveloped national press will lose an outlet that can play an important role in the accountability of politicians. Barry White, the national organiser for *Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom*, addressed the notions of diversity and plurality in mass media, in the context of a higher concentration of production in less regional centres. In addition, Ofcom's accountability with regards to this development is complex since it is not clear whether the interests of the citizen or the consumer will prevail in its policies. Dr. David Barlow, University of Glamorgan, presented his research on independent local radio, an issue that has been invisible in the discussion in post-devolution Wales. Barlow argued for a role for the Assembly in local radio -- as an important tool in stimulation of an 'active citizenship' -- rather than its current tokenistic consultative role in Ofcom's regulatory framework.

Rhodri Williams, director of Ofcom's Advisory Committee for Wales, gave an update on Ofcom's review of Welsh public service broadcasting and articulated strong support for its range and quality of programming. These findings seem to contradict the current recentralisation of ITV plc, increasing commercial pressures and subsequent budget cuts on ITV Wales. This complex relationship was central in Panel Seven on "Regulating communications in Wales: Ofcom and HTV". Elis Owen, head of ITV Wales, exemplified the specific financial difficulties for ITV Wales, as a local franchise that is part of a larger commercially funded public service channel, in upholding its aim and intent to produce and broadcast local programmes.

Even though Euryng Ogwen Williams's speech was the penultimate paper, S4C's first and former head of programmes' *Vision for Wales* was a symbolic closing of a two-day conference whilst simultaneously initiating a continuation of the unique forum where practitioners, academics and politicians come together. Rather than providing us with the key to all concerns raised, Williams's talk captured all of them by concluding with the most essential question for the debate on the future of media communications in Wales: who in the "new Wales" decides who or what is good or bad?

Mutation and Mutability: Encounters with Change

Second Annual University College Postgraduate Conference, Institute of English Studies, University of London, 4 March 2004

A report by Catherine Anne Davies, University College London

This year's conference focused its discussion around the idea of mutation and mutability in the arts, taking in a wide range of subjects from Shakespeare's *Sonnets* to transgendered narratives. The conference was divided into four sessions, bookended by two keynote speakers -- Danny Karlin and Katherine Duncan-Jones. Whilst change might be seen to constitute an essential force in culture (and in the formation of traditions and literary genealogies), as well as identifying the motivations and catalysts for those changes, the conference aimed to interrogate their reception, as well as look at the relation between generic or formal mutations and their coincidence with cultural instability.

The opening address by Danny Karlin (UCL) 'Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan: At Kerouac's Grave and Beyond', took a metaphoric approach to the conference's themes. This excellent address discussed the mutations of the representation of Kerouac and Dylan as they came to stand (in turn) for Ginsberg as inaugural figures of divinity and creativity. Comparing the visual and written accounts of Ginsberg and Dylan's visit to Kerouac's grave (which gave rise to a lively presentation of film and audio clips), Prof. Karlin's paper traced the metamorphosis of Ginsberg's representation of Kerouac as both a guardian spirit of poetry and, subsequently (after his rejection of Ginsberg), as a figure of failure and exhaustion who was displaced by Dylan in the poet's genealogy of American poetry.

Poetic Mutations

The first panel of the day continued the focus upon poetry, beginning with a discussion by Myrna Nader (University of Brunel) of the shifting representations of woman and power in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and the art of Leonor Fini. Nader traced the shift in Plath's work from the passive domestic woman of the 1950s to the Promethean siren that emerged from her harnessing the polemical potential of surrealism. Sally Connolly's paper (UCL), "Modified in the guts of the living": Elegy, mutation and mutability', was similarly engaged with the idea of what 'mutations' might be seen to arise from dialogue between individual artists. Looking at the processes of poetic inheritance at work in elegies by Yeats, Auden, and Heaney (all in dialogue with one another), Connolly explored the ways in which the elegy can speak more broadly about the mutability of poetic identity and the poetic academy. Looking at the modification of the dead poet's words by the 'inheritor', her paper highlighted the ways in which change is vital to the generic endurance of the elegiac tradition -- thus identifying the cultural necessity for mutation, more broadly speaking. The final paper in the session returned to the subject of Ginsberg's poetics; this time to his dialogue with William Blake's 'Songs'. Shamsad Mortuza (Birkbeck) considered the 'Mutation of Romanticism' in Ginsberg's literary dialogue with Blake, which he used (Mortuza argued) as a means to

mediate his own prophetic poetic identity, where Blake undergoes what Mortuza called a 'trans-mutation' in the hands of Ginsberg.

Mutable Genders and Sexualities

The third session of the conference moved away from the processes of change inherent in literary influence, considering instead the site of gender in relation to mutability. Jennifer Higginbotham (Pennsylvania) presented the opening paper, 'Shifting Shifts: Detachable Clothing, Attachable Identities and Shifting Genders in *The Roaring Girl*'. Arguing for Middleton and Dekker's play as a site for the expression of contemporary anxieties relating to fashion, sexual desire, and social and economic relations, Higginbotham explored the relationship between the body and clothing, tracing the employment of the word 'shift' in the text. Higginbotham argued that the play dramatises the tension between the potential to ground identity in clothing, and the disturbing detachability of clothing which threatened to dissolve those class and gender distinctions that were so desperately hung on to amidst the change and social instability that characterised much of Jacobean London. The third paper in this session also took on the question of visual signifiers and their correlation to identity or gender. Alison Kelley's paper (Reading) took on the idea of 'morphing' and the transsexual. Kelley looked at Amy Bloom's short story, "A Blind Man Can See How Much I Love You" to propose a reading of Bloom's work as deploying tropes of vision and perception to explore the contingency and negotiability of gender and identity (pace Judith Butler). If the idea of visual perception was at the heart of Kelley's reading of Bloom, Susan Robert's (Roehampton) paper (appearing second) also considered the importance of looking to the idea of gender and its mutability -- this time to its potential to disturb or threaten. Exploring the representation of the "new woman" in the novels of Hardy and Zola, Robert's paper sought to trace the mutation of the realist movement as it morphed into the naturalist project of the late 19th century, looking at Hardy and Zola's duplicitous visions of the sexual female body.

Mutation of Forms

The closing session departed from the general trend of the conference, which had mostly attended to the idea of mutation and mutability at work in the literary text. Although Chris Leary's paper (Sheffield) on Peter Reading focused on his poem 'C', the focus of her discussion was on the ways in which Reading's text, in metamorphosing from genre to genre within its own confines, might be seen to mimic the biological processes of cancer itself. In figuring generic mutation as metonymic of its subject (in this instance), Leary's paper addressed the formal incarnations of mutation that are possible within literary texts. Leary moved away from the general trend of the conference to consider the ideas of mutation and mutability as metaphors for talking about literary influence and inheritance. Leary's paper was followed by a consideration of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, which also concentrated on the formal inferences of the conference's themes. Thomas Mansell from the London Consortium considered the idea of repetition inherent in the musical form of the variation. His paper addressed where mutation and variation might be seen to meet and differ in offering up both the familiar and the strange, thus recalling Connolly earlier paper which considered the paradoxical and assimilative processes of poetic inheritance.

The final paper of the conference was presented by Ricarda Vidal (also of the London Consortium). Vidal's paper offered a comparative study of the paintings of Francis Bacon and Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Interpreting the day's themes in terms of the changes manifest in violence to the body, Vidal contended that Bacon and Ondaatje's work shares a fascination and pleasure in the explosion of the body and the revelation of the flux of life, employing the theoretical constructs of Bataille and Nietzsche.

In looking beneath the skin, Vidal argued, both writer and artist situate their artistic creations within the Dionysiac realm of the festival. It is here that both figures can be seen to confront the mutability of existence, “making us profoundly aware of what we prefer to forget”.

The closing address (given by Prof. Katherine Duncan-Jones) also concerned itself with the mutability of existence, as expressed by Shakespeare in the *Sonnets* sequence. Taking on the idea of ‘Mutability in Lyric Poetry’, Prof. Duncan-Jones’ address confined itself to a discussion of a few Medieval and Renaissance poems to illustrate the trend in such poems to paradoxically take pleasure in that which it professes to deplore -- the mutable pleasures of the material world. By analysing the thematic patterning of repetition and inversion within Edmund Bolton’s ‘A Palinode’ (1600), Prof. Duncan-Jones echoed Mansell’s earlier discussion of the cognitive potential of formal variations. She finished with a reading of Sonnet 63 as similarly structured to Bolton’s poem -- undoing what it set out to say in revealing the limitations of its ‘black lines’ as a fit habitat for the ‘beauty’ of the poet’s love object. Whilst in this sonnet Shakespeare professes to ‘fortify’ against mutability, “against confounding age’s cruel knife”, we might think of him as also falling foul of a fascination (shared by many of the day’s panelists) with the essential role change has to play in the continuing lineage of literature.

Negotiating Fictions: Contemporary Cultures, an interdisciplinary postgraduate conference

The University of Edinburgh, 6 March 2004

A report by Emily Munro, The University of Glasgow, UK

This one-day postgraduate conference, hosted by the School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures at the University of Edinburgh promised to offer a diverse representation of the brief 'Contemporary Cultures.' The programme was skilfully arranged into eight panels consisting of papers covering a variety of 'disciplines' including film, history, ethnography, literature, language, theatre, law and visual art. These were grouped thematically under the following headlines: 'Storytelling and Disrupted Narratives', 'Globalisation, Translation, and the Politics of Cultural Exchange'* , 'Historicising Identity'* , 'Placement and Displacement: the Politics of Belonging', 'The Body Politic', 'Problems of Translation'* , 'Performance and Authenticity', and 'Identity and the Political Aesthetics of Modernism'* .

While the panels I attended (marked * above) reflected my personal interest in film studies and language translation, they also covered a wide-range of complimentary concerns that interlinked with papers given at other panels. These included themes of identity and marginalisation, cross-cultural encounter and exchange, migrancy and diaspora, and relationships between performativity and (national) narratives.

That old self/other problem

Fiona Barclay (The University of Glasgow. 'Looking for Lines of Flight: marginalisation and becoming in Nina Bouraoui's *Garçon Manque*') started the day with an elegant textual analysis of a French-Algerian novel by Nina Bouraoui (2000). She presented a number of textual devices that work in the novel to deconstruct to some extent the interminable binaries of self/other and masculine/feminine, in the theoretical vein of Cixous, Derrida and Deleuze and Guattari. She lucidly argued how the 'violence of marginalisation' threatens to annihilate the subject of the novel, pushing her toward a liminal position enhanced by her adolescent body and its nomadic refusal to settle. The extracts prepared by Barclay from the novel were a fairly complete (so, not entirely in the deconstructionist spirit!) testament to her interpretation -- for example the line, "Every morning I check my identity. I have four issues. French? Algerian? Girl? Boy?" (Bouraoui 2000:163). Barclay's easy acceptance of the term 'postcolonial' --as a 'genre' no less -- was appropriately called into question by another speaker on the panel (Nauman Khalid, Manchester Metropolitan University). This paper on 'The Problematics of Positionality' examined the validity of labels such as 'Third World' and 'Postcolonial' in relationship to literature by stressing the importance of the migrant intellectual and the institutionalisation of literature in constructing a canon of work for these categories.

Generating a different, but related, vocabulary of contestable terms, Angelo Bottone's (University College Dublin) paper, 'Paul Ricoeur on Translation and Ethics as a Paradigm of the Encounter Between Cultures', offered some interesting parallels to the problems of subjecthood in the area of translation and language philosophy. Bottone offered a portrait of Paul Ricoeur's discourse on translation that seemed not dissimilar from Lawrence Venuti's work, which encourages translations and translators to embrace the source text's foreignness on ethical grounds. The paper's (or Ricoeur's -- it wasn't entirely clear) foray into psychoanalytic conceptions of mourning lacked qualification and led to a rather unsettling conclusion on the importance of memory sharing as a 'cultural act of recognition' in a 'diverse' yet integrated Europe. Given the paper's context, it was unsurprising that some participants took issue with the idea of 'universalism' as a 'new language' that accepts difference unproblematically. For my part, I would have indicated the way in which the European Union suppresses memories of colonial intervention. The memory-sharing guilt of European antagonism displaces the guilt of colonialism and it is notable that the dominant languages of the E.U. institution -- French and English -- gained their global significance through colonial ventures.

National identifications

It required some mental reorganisation to move from the transcontinental addresses above to the panel on 'Historicising Identity', which included two papers on the theme of national identities. Kate Woodward (The University of Wales, Aberystwyth. 'Small nation -- Big Screen') looked at ways in which the representation of Wales in film might contribute to the construction of a 'national imaginary'. She described depictions of Wales on screen as having undergone a transition in the 1990s from 'Old Wales' (choirs and coal miners) to 'New Wales' ('Cool Cymru') and from representation through English inventions to Welsh self-reflection. Woodward's paper was enlightening to a degree, but would have benefited from a discussion of the ideologies surrounding so-called 'national' cinemas and from a more cautious use of terms such as 'orientalised' (with respect to England's view of Wales), which might be incongruous and less relevant than they are evocative.

Woodward's paper was preceded by a rather different use of the screen for interpreting nationality. Kristinn Schram's presentation on his research into the identity/ies of urban Scots was a welcome addition to the programme. Though perhaps less polished than some others (not necessarily an indicator of poor preparation), his paper was discursive and exploratory, offering some insight into the methodologies afforded to ethnographers in the age of digital camcordery. Of course, ethnographers have always used still and cine-cameras in their research, often to dubious and somewhat imperialist ends, but Schram's interviews with Edinburgh taxi drivers suggested an interactive mode of documentation. This took account of the (Icelandic 'tourist') researcher's powers of construction as well as the subjects' capabilities for playful disruption.

Translating disciplines

My own research biases made me particularly interested to see what the conference's two papers on subtitles would offer. Both Eftyhia Landrou (The University of Edinburgh. 'Dialect and informal register in the subtitling of modern British and Greek films: the significance of a descriptive analysis') and Svenja Wurm (also Edinburgh. 'Film Characters in Subtitles') promised some translation studies input into what is a chronically neglected area of screen studies. The papers were rather disappointing from my perspective, in that they focussed strongly on the apparently negative aspects of subtitling. Both described the marked deficit subtitles are seen to have with respect to 'accurately' translating the language

spoken on screen. Landrou's paper rightly stressed the imbalanced power relations between source (the 'original' text) and target (the translation) languages and suggested that subtitlers conform to the target audience's expectations (what she calls 'standards') of subtitled translation. But her conclusion that the subtitler's neglect of sociolects is at the expense of authentic characterisation is dependent on the construction of a rather inexperienced and passive spectator. This was a problem also evident in Wurm's analysis of intralingual subtitles (for deaf audiences) which assumed that the hard of hearing spectator would find it impossible to appreciate the humour and irony in a subtitled Woody Allen film. Wurm's analysis suffers from a rather narrow conception of film texts as self-contained and homogeneous, despite the admission that subtitles interrupt any notion of an 'original' version. Both her and Landrou's papers are problematic in a screen studies context because they ignore the metatexts and discourses surrounding films and their audiences. Having said this, we were able to have a very useful and constructive 'cultural exchange' on our divergent positions in the discussion that followed, somewhat of a luxury in a formal conference situation.

'We deal with fictions'

Professor John Frow of the School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures at the University of Edinburgh made the 'keynote speech' (which, strangely enough, concluded the conference) on the future of the humanities. This was followed by a comment from the floor, that could well have spoken on behalf of all discourse-bloated attendees, by now well sated by the exhaustive intellectual p(1)atter set before them: was it not true that 'we deal with fictions and the social and public sphere is a fiction'? At each panel I attended, papers were presented which made note of the seeping of fictional constructions into the discourses of the everyday. But while the variety of approaches taken by participants to this slippage was remarkable enough, it was also remarkably well-contained. At the risk of advocating the need for an apologist approach to the humanities (something which John Frow took measures to assess) I would suggest that the conference ultimately lacked the reflexive honesty which can make postgraduate study both frustrating and so vital. In our reluctance to evaluate the methodologies employed in our research and the frictions that can arise along the fault lines created by the emergent organising principle of 'interdiscipline', can 'interdisciplinarity' ever really become more than a label? Yes, we do deal with fictions. But if we want to insist on showing our poststructuralist aptitude for re/interpreting these, perhaps we should release ourselves from the pressures of being presentational and become more discursive.

Quality American TV: An International Conference

Trinity College, Dublin, 1-3 April 2004

A report by Geoff Lealand, University of Waikato, New Zealand

I should begin my report on this conference by dealing with all the cheap shots the announcement of this event attracted; most particularly the sarcastic comments from colleagues when I said I was going to an international conference on 'Quality American TV' in Dublin. Quality *American* television? At *Trinity* College? Perhaps their scepticism was fuelled by the news that the event started on April's Fool Day but it was completely unjustified as the conference turned out to be one of the most stimulating and enjoyable academic gatherings of recent years. Nevertheless, it was sometimes daunting to sit through keynote addresses in the Samuel Beckett Centre, where the large portraits of SB on the walls frowned down on larger projected images of Lucille, Cary and Buffy on the centre screen. I wondered what he might make of it all!

Nevertheless, there is also no need to be defensive about the focus nor the quality of the conference. Academic television are becoming commonplace, even though some are rather ill-focussed, cobbled-together gatherings of papers and presentations. Television Studies is now at a stage of mature development where it needs -- and deserves -- a really sharp focus when scholars gather to share their insights and enthusiasms. One such event, which really set the standard for television-focussed conferences, was the December 2000 'Television: Past, Present and Futures' conference organised by the Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies at the University of Queensland. In addition to featuring the final public performance by John Fiske, it successfully blended a range of valuable insights into the production/policy/audience nexus of television.

The Dublin conference was as good, even though there was much less on the economic and audience aspects of television, and much more on programme content and analysis. The emphasis was on a certain kind of television from a certain location but, in the sessions I attended, 'quality American TV' was often code for 'HBO-produced drama series such as *Sex in the City*, *Six Feet Under* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'. In her keynote address on Saturday morning, Jane Feuer (University of Pittsburgh) challenged this rather narrow range of programming choice in her historical (and provocative) scan of shifting notions of 'quality' in American television across the decades. She argued that if academics uncritically bought HBO's self-regarding promotion of its 'quality' status ('HBO. Not TV'), "...then it completely eliminates the need for this conference!"

Instead, she argued for more attention on the neglected areas of programming (reality TV in particular) and such as this one, which provide opportunities to re-think platitudes about film and television, art cinema and genre conventions. In responses to a question about academic

attitudes to television, she took no prisoners in her declaration, “Academics have the most retrograde views on television, than any other sector of the population!”

The keynote address by David Lavery (Middle Tennessee State University) also enthusiastically championed Television Studies and ended up ‘rooting for television’ using this Americanism to promote it as a vital academic activity (not to be confused with other activities!) and traced his coming to ‘enlightenment’ through *Twin Peaks*.

Although *Sex in the City* and *Buffy* had a dominant presence in this conference -- as they have in other recent-- there were offerings for other tastes, or those who didn’t care about vampires or shoe collections. Kim Akass (London Metropolitan) and Janet McCabe (Trinity College) examined mother-daughter relationships in *Six Feet Under*, making interesting connections between feminist theory and television texts. Kim and Janet were also the enthusiastic co-organisers of this conference and their co-edited collection *Reading Sex and the City* (I.B. Tauris, 2003) was launched (in a flurry of pink and red balloons) on the opening night.

Erin McLeod (Vanier College) provided a close analysis of the Brenda character in *Six Feet Under* and Ashley Nelson (an American freelance writer) traced the genesis of such characters in early TV portrayals such as *I Love Lucy* and *Cagney and Lacey*. Making my usual mistake of following the crowd and ending up in the wrong session, I was pleasantly surprised by a shared session on genre hybridity in *Angel* by Stacey Abbott (Roehampton) and gender issues in *24* by Joke Hermes (Amsterdam) and ‘quality humour’ in *The Simpsons* by Eric Wietz (Trinity College). This last paper was particularly enjoyable, as Wietz traced the borrowings from theatrical traditions in the humour of Homer and Bart. It is some time since I have been to an academic meeting where there has been so much laughter and I yearn for an entire conference devoted to *The Simpsons* -- a programme, in Wietz’s opinion, which truly ‘rewards you for paying attention’.

The Friday afternoon programme featured papers featured perspectives on the British reception of *Sex in the City* by Deborah Jermyn (Roehampton); the role of fandom and websites in understanding *The Sopranos* by Jeanette Monaco (Bristol); and a quite daring proposition for measuring and defining ‘quality audiences’, employing intercultural management theory, from Nicola Simpson (Annenburg School, Pennsylvania). Even though it drew some comments about the wisdom of providing new ways for commercial TV interests to value and sell audiences, Nicola did provide a compelling, and quite workable, strategy for ‘encouraging television networks to develop and produce *more* quality programming’.

The post-afternoon tea session featured Ian Goode (Glasgow University) investigating recent attempts by Channel 5 to re-position itself in the UK television market, through acquisitions like *CSI*. Maire Messenger Davies and Roberta Pearson (Cardiff University) then went on to provide a lively introduction to their much-anticipated study of *Star Trek*. Maire commented, “It is great that questions of value are back on the academic agenda and this conference is a sign that this is so.” Completing this session, Robin Nelson (Manchester Metropolitan) provided another interesting perspective on *The Sopranos*, locating it within “the current spate of quality American television series.”

The Friday sessions were to be wrapped up by a keynote address by Rhonda Wilcox (Gordon College) but because Rhonda had been in a car accident in Georgia, her paper (a close analysis of ‘Death, Dust and Spirit in *Buffy*’s ‘The Body’’) was delivered by her colleague

Mary Alice Money -- followed by a rather cumbersome Q&A session with Rhonda via telephone link.

An early flight across the Irish Sea meant that I only got to Jane Feuer's opening keynote address on Saturday morning (as well as probably missing some very good papers the previous day). Jane's final declaration, that studying television 'is not a job; it is a pleasure', still rings in my ears. The Saturday session featured papers on *Sex in the City*, *Six Feet Under*, *24* and *Oz*; an international perspective from Dermot Horan (Director of Broadcasting and Acquisitions, RTE); and (by all accounts) closing panel discussion on 'Debating Quality'.

This Dublin conference attracted participants from Irish, European and UK educational institutions, with a sprinkling of North American scholars. I was there because I am currently on sabbatical at Cardiff University; a short air trip away, rather than the customary twenty-four hours of long-haul travel to the Northern Hemisphere.

The established talent was there, but also a good representation of emerging post-graduate work. It seemed, to me, that it was further evidence that the interesting, cutting-edge commentaries on contemporary culture are being produced in newer UK universities -- and often by younger scholars. My only complaint with the papers presented at this conference was that current examples of TV programming (*Buffy* et al) dominated discussions, with a neglect of quality programming from earlier decades (*Homicide*, *Hill Street Blues*, *Malcolm in the Middle* etc).

The issues raised at this conference (What is quality? Who defines quality? How does American TV produce so much quality drama? Why HBO?) will continue to be debated, as they ought to be. It was an interesting coincidence, for example, that *Film Ireland* featured an article on HBO 'Television Redefined' in its March/April 2004 issue.