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Applied Psychology in Media

# The modern media – Avoiding pitfalls, advancing psychology



**SUE GARDNER** (*Ethics Committee*), **PAM BRIGGS** and **CAMILLA HERBERT** (*Press Committee*) seek your views on new challenges facing psychologists in the media.

**T**HERE can be no doubt that in general the interaction between psychologists and the media has been beneficial to the discipline. But the celebrity article, PR company ‘surveys’, and TV programmes such as *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, *Castaway*, *The Experiment* are all relatively new media phenomena. All have used psychologists as expert commentators, active consultants, writers or simply as voices to add authority.

Ethical or Code of Conduct issues arise with each new media development. Complaints come in to the Society’s office that a psychologist should not have said what they did, or that their comments ‘bring the discipline into disrepute’. Members phone seeking ethical advice from the Society about whether they should be involved in a programme because of worries about, for instance, whether ‘reality-TV’ participants have given or could give fully informed consent.

Formal written guidance for Society members on such matters is either nonspecific (the general statements in the Code of Conduct), or brief (the media guidelines about discussing individuals). A small working group, combining the Ethics Committee and the Press Committee, has been formed to look at these issues with the aim of producing

better guidance for all participants in the media process. A point that must be made at the outset is that we – the Society and psychologists – cannot control the media; they will do whatever they feel will sell newspapers, increase audience share and ultimately pay dividends to shareholders. But the Society can develop guidelines and give advice to make the process a more positive one.

Here we set out some of the issues, problems and questions, and we seek your views. These are important because every interaction, every experience, will be unique. We begin with the views of three psychologists who have been recently involved with the ‘modern media’.

*The Big Brother* experience Geoff Beattie (University of Manchester) is positive about being involved in reality TV, in his case *Big Brother*. As a researcher in social interaction he feels that the video recordings provide him with large amounts of material and an impetus to do more research. Applications to read psychology at his university are up by 16 per cent with *Big Brother* being mentioned by more than a few applicants. As one final endorsement, he was recognised in his local Burger King! Geoff said that he supports the development of guidelines for psychologists but points out that ‘the programmes will go ahead with or without us’.

Working with PR companies Petra Boynton (University College London) has carried out research for a PR company. Although people can be critical of mixing science with PR, Petra feels that this overlooks the fact that any funding body wants its share of PR when work is published. She says: ‘The companies have allowed me total control of the ideas and research methods, and have permitted completely honest representations of the

results. You just have to remember to be assertive and provide methodologically sound research. My only bad experience was that a national paper published a very negative story about me following one such study. I found this very upsetting, but it did make me more aware of media practices.’

‘Sexy secret of *Castaway* shrink’ Cynthia McVey (Glasgow Caledonian University) is no stranger to media contact, but the level of intrusion into her personal life surprised her when she became involved with the BBC *Castaway* series. A photograph from 30 years ago when she had taken part in a disco dancing competition formed part of a headline piece. Her experience is that if you become involved with the press you and those linked with you will potentially be investigated for stories or skeletons in the cupboard. Participants too need to know that their families and friends will also be exposed to the investigative press.

This raises the issue of informed consent both for the psychologist and for participants. Psychologists need to think about the level of involvement they will have and how much this will intrude into their professional and working lives. To be positive, it can be a lot of fun. Cynthia’s advice was: ‘Have a go. Try and maintain your integrity, and keep it in perspective.’

What help is available?

Although the media world is changing and formal guidelines are not yet available, the Society is at hand to help you avoid the pitfalls and still advance psychology. Both the press office and the Ethics Committee advisory staff are happy to talk through the issues and give advice over the phone – from their different perspectives they have a wealth of practical and policy experience. The Society also runs regular media training courses that help equip members to improve their interactions with the

## BE PREPARED

*You are an educational psychologist asked to comment on what we know about smacking. What might the final question be?*

A journalist is quite likely to ask ‘Have you ever smacked your own child?’. Attempting to fudge does not sound good and lying is out. So prepare yourself beforehand, decide in advance what you might say if asked that type of personal question, and don’t be surprised if you are asked.

media (see p.355). There is also *Hitting the Headlines* (BPS Books, 1993), a practical guide to media relations.

Although this article is not meant as an explanation of the Society's media systems, it may be worth saying how journalists locate psychologists. The press office holds a keyword database of roughly 1800 Chartered Psychologists who have agreed to talk to the media about their specialist areas. Journalists who phone Leicester (about 50 a day) are given names from this database – usually two or three. Generally this works well, in that there is a close match between enquiry and expertise; but occasionally journalists will bypass this and simply go to a psychologist they have spoken to before, even if the topic is radically different. This can be frustrating and irritating for both parties, and all we can do is ask that the journalist goes back to the press office to re-access the database.

### Ethical issues

Increasingly the Society receives phone calls from members asking for advice prior to involvement with the media, as well as calls after the event raising questions that may be the precursor to a complaint. The boxes on these pages are vignettes covering some of the common issues and queries. These are not necessarily examples of 'modern media', as we do not wish to pre-empt your own examples of recent situations and solutions. But they do represent solid advice that the press office have been giving for years, that could be applied to most modern media experiences.

Such situations raise questions that could form the basis of developing some practical and helpful guidelines for Society members. Firstly, if you are approached by

## 'THAT'S NOT MY DEPARTMENT'

*You are a clinical psychologist and you are asked to take part in a radio interview with a management consultant and a former chief executive of a major utility. The topic is large-scale redundancies and their effect on workforces. Do you make a comment?*

In the excitement of a challenging and high-profile interview, psychologists can forget the need to restrict comments to their own areas of competence and expertise. To comment on organisational psychology issues without experience in that field may prove embarrassing to the individual if challenged by others. You may also be seen as unprofessional for having commented on matters outside your area of competence.

The key here is to be sure that your professional training and experience allows you to provide a psychological perspective on a specific subject. The same could apply, for example, to an educational psychologist asked to comment on a forensic issue, or a counselling psychologist asked to comment on a specific clinical matter they have not trained in. Once the media have found a psychologist who gives them good quotes, their temptation can be to put them in their contact book and then ring them about anything. If you feel you are in danger of stepping outside your area, refer the journalist back to the Society's press office.

Having said this, as a psychologist you are also a member of the public with opinions and views on any topic. You should not fight shy of giving this personal opinion *but* you must be clear that at this point you are talking as a member of the public, rather than giving a professional opinion based on the evidence available.

a journalist to comment on a news or feature story, or to give a simple interview, you might ask yourself the following questions:

- How competent are you to inform the public via the media on the specific subject?
- What are the sources of your expertise?
- Have you made these sources and their limits clear to the journalist?
- Have you approached the interaction with the media with a genuine concern for the people involved (e.g. those being commented on if it is a news or feature story)?
- Is your judgment being influenced or biased in any way that should be declared?

- Is your aim to bring psychology to society and inform and educate?

These questions could be applied to just about any straightforward media query. But as we have found when discussing reality TV, there can be further complexities if you are asked not simply to comment on something but actually to be part of a process. You may then need to ask:

*Does the psychological justification for being involved outweigh any potential harm to the participants?*

If you feel that it does, and you can be involved, you could then go on to ask yourself:

- Are you using words and concepts that are respectful, constructive and valuing of the people involved?
- Have you obtained consent from those whose confidentiality may be broken, or have you ensured that confidentiality will be maintained?
- Have you considered the impact of the message and its consequences on the general public and people directly or indirectly involved?
- What risks are involved and how have they been prevented, minimised and responded to?
- Have you considered how best to convey the psychological component in an up-to-date and straightforward way?
- Would a group of your informed peers view your behaviour as reasonable? If there was time, did you discuss this

## THE CURSE OF CELEBRITY

*A magazine for teenage girls asks you for a quote about an article it is preparing on a pop star who has admitted having anorexia. What do you say?*

To provide any sort of quote about the pop star concerned could certainly be unprofessional – you do not know the pop star's individual circumstances. However, anorexia is a serious problem and any comment from a respected profession may be seen as helpful in raising the profile of this condition. Your professional duty, in raising a psychological perspective in a responsible manner, is to talk in generic terms about 'anorexia' and the potential 'known' causal factors from a psychological perspective. But to say or imply that these were the causal factors for this particular individual would be unprofessional and may result in a complaint being made about you.

It is important if you ever receive a phone call asking about 'anorexia', or other similar subjects, to check the context with the journalist concerned. Otherwise you might find remarks made in a generic context applied to a specific person. The Society's press office always reminds journalists that psychologists should not speak about specific individuals, but it is wise to remind the journalists yourselves as well.

activity/exercise with an appropriate colleague beforehand?

- Have you consulted the appropriate professional organisations, and reminded yourself of the relevant codes and guidelines?

We would like to thank Andy Burman, M&Q Directorate Manager, Sue Cavill, former BPS Press Officer, and Stephen White, P&C Directorate Manager, for their help, advice and drafting.

#### Over to you

This article is intended to open up a debate about the ethical issues involved in psychologists appearing in the media. The next stage is to receive your comments. Please send us any thoughts, question replies, issues you feel we have missed, or your own experiences of working with the media. Ultimately, we hope to produce clear guidelines, based on these questions and your comments, that will be of use to

all Society members. Please send replies, comments or further questions to The Media Working Group, The British Psychological Society, 48 Princess Road East, Leicester LE1 7DR, or via e-mail to [mediawg@bps.org.uk](mailto:mediawg@bps.org.uk).

Of course the Society also welcomes discussion of the issues in the public forum of *The Psychologist*. Please send your 'letter to the editor' to the Leicester office or to [psychologist@bps.org.uk](mailto:psychologist@bps.org.uk).

# Learning from *The Experiment*

**Steve Reicher and Alex Haslam recently conducted a major study with the BBC. Pam Briggs sought their views on the ethical and practical issues.**

## What ethical lessons did you learn from *The Experiment*?

We felt that it demonstrated that it is possible to do large-scale studies in a way that allows researchers to address big issues without inevitably compromising ethical principles. Notwithstanding the fact that the independent ethics panel described the handling of the study's ethics as 'exemplary', televising the research obviously brought a whole range of new issues into play. And while we think that some of the strategies we employed were successful (such as having pre-broadcast input into the programmes by participants and the ethics panel), it is evident that other lessons will have to be taken on board. Hopefully, we have provided a reasonable framework with which to proceed.

## How did the balance of control work between you and the BBC?

We addressed this while obtaining ethical approval for the study and it was written into our contracts with the BBC. It was agreed that we would design, run and analyse the study, and the BBC would tell our analytic account in a way that made for

accessible television. We never encountered a problem of goodwill on this matter. The BBC were as committed to the science as we were – for them this is what made the project distinctive and worthwhile.

However, we did encounter problems of translation from the science to the television because, at the start of the project, we knew very little about the practicalities of television and the producers, technicians and executives at the BBC knew little about psychological science. By the end, though, we were working as an integrated team and looked upon the programmes as a collective product to which we and the participants all had a significant shared commitment.

## Do you think the presence of the cameras affected the scientific results?

Obviously at various points in the study, particularly at the beginning, the participants were aware of the TV cameras and this affected their behaviour. However, they were sensitive to other forms of surveillance too – from members of their own group, from rival groups and, most keenly, from us, the experimenters.

For us, our goal was to provide theoretical

accounts of behaviour that take into account these factors rather than dismiss them as inconsequential. Indeed, the impact of surveillance should be understood as part of the subject matter of psychological research, not as something that invalidates it. Understanding how surveillance affects behaviour is a key topic for social psychologists. It is very odd to suggest that the 'real' person is the hermit, the isolate. Human beings are social animals and surveillance is part of our social reality.

## At the start of the programme the commentary said that the 'prisoners' arrived with no idea what was going to happen to them. Was this the case? Is truly informed consent possible when making good TV?

The participants were unaware of what was going to happen to them in the same way that someone going to a football match doesn't know in advance what the result will be. However, they were aware that they would be entering a closed system in which there would be two groups, one with more power than the other and that the environment would be challenging, might

involve hunger, hardship and anger, and would resemble a barracks, a prison or a bootcamp. They were also aware that they could leave at any time. Interestingly, after the event, a number of the participants expressed disappointment because the study was far less stressful than they had been led to expect.

Informing participants about the consequences of appearing on television was far harder, because we had even less idea what these might be. However, our consent form did refer to the fact that being recognised and talked about in public could be distressing. In selection interviews the clinical psychologists also alerted potential participants to potential risks and assessed their ability to cope with these.

#### **Did the finished product accurately reflect the science behind it?**

The television programmes were very faithful to what we saw as the key events in the study – that is, those that made important theoretical points and that drove the study on. Having said this, it was always obvious both to us and to the BBC that the programmes could only ever be a window on to the science. We hope people will want to know more and will be led into the discipline that way.

We also hope that the series will encourage people to engage in the debates about what happened and to reflect in a more informed way on the relevance of social psychology to their daily lives. We always saw the programmes as just one part of our output from the study, and we will be writing a book, book chapters and journal articles in which the data and theory are addressed in more depth.

#### **Were you happy with the public reaction?**

If by ‘public’ one means the representation of the study in the media, then we were often disappointed. Much of this came down to worrying misunderstandings of the nature of science and scientific argument. For instance, many journalists failed to understand that we were not purporting to set up a real prison and thereby mirror what happens in prisons, rather we were investigating the psychology of group inequality and it was the reality of that inequality for participants that concerned us. Others argued that the participants’ knowledge that they were being observed must make their behaviour invalid, unreal or irrelevant, while for us this fact made it more interesting. In the end though, the fact that these criticisms were made was less troubling than the fact that many journalists

never sought out our views and assumed we had never thought of them ourselves.

However, if by public one means the reactions of viewers then the reaction we received was very positive indeed. Indeed the webchat after the first programme was the most successful (in terms of number of people logged on) that the BBC has ever done. Two groups of people were particularly interested: those working in

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occupations whose experiences mapped on to those of the participants (e.g. teachers, managers, trade unionists) and who commented on the fact that the study explored issues germane to their daily lives; and students who were studying issues related to the Stanford prison study and appreciated the new dimensions to debate that our study provided.

#### **Were you happy with the reaction from fellow psychologists?**

Before the programme was televised the only information that most of our peers had was based on a number of rather lurid and inaccurate press reports, so quite reasonably they had concerns. But we received a tremendous amount of support from colleagues going into the project (without which we would not have been able to proceed). Moreover, post-broadcast reaction has also been very positive. Clearly we expect that some people will have a different analysis of the study’s outcomes from ours, but one of its unusual features is that some of our core behavioural data is in the public domain. As a result, the prospects for open debate and informed discussion of the important issues raised by the study are much greater than is normally the case.

#### **Is this the way forward for psychology?**

Of course it isn’t *the* way forward; but it may add another option, for three reasons. First, without funding from the BBC, we could never have dreamed of doing a study on this scale. Second, without BBC technology we could never have got such a complete recording of all that was said and done. Third, without BBC broadcasting we could never have got such a large audience to engage with social psychology.

However, we recognise that such projects need to be handled with considerable care and will only be advantageous in very specific circumstances. Indeed, our own objective will be to continue doing ‘standard’ forms of research (e.g. experiments, field studies) to test the ideas that informed and grew out of this project.

#### **If the Society were to set up ethical guidelines specifically pertaining to televised experiments, what would be the most important points to cover?**

This was probably the most difficult issue we encountered in the whole project. Part of the problems stemmed from the difficulty of getting people to be fully aware of the consequences of being on television. For instance, there are many behaviours that are perfectly fair in the context of one relationship but which violate the norms of a different relationship. Where one puts the two together, it can be deeply embarrassing. Would you want your behaviour with your parents or your children to be shown to your students? It will be very useful to discuss with the participants exactly what problems the broadcast created that they hadn’t expected and to use that to better prepare people in the future.

A second issue had to do with media misrepresentations. There were many cases when papers misreported what one participant had said (or what we had said) and such comment had the capacity to cause concern to other participants. This problem could clearly be exacerbated to the extent that the untruth was not immediately corrected. Better briefings about these issues and ‘rapid response’ to press stories is absolutely crucial.

The third, and biggest issue, is what happens when participants do things they genuinely regret – or else learn things about themselves they would rather not know – and these are then broadcast widely? If broadcasting raises ethical problems, then *not* broadcasting could be equally problematic because it could misrepresent why others behaved as they did. There is no easy answer to this question. Our solution was to involve the participants in the analysis such that they could all agree (as indeed they did at the viewing of the final versions) that the resultant account was truthful, fair and had analytic integrity. In this regard, it was also our goal to repeatedly relate behaviour to context rather than to make reductive comments about individuals – all of whom were chosen for their positive psychological characteristics.