



# “Minding the Gap”: Reflections on Media Practice & Theory

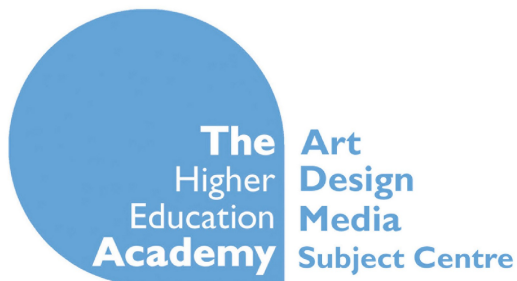
*Postgraduate & Early Career Researchers Training Day  
Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford  
Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> May 2007*

**Convenors: Paddy Coulter (Reuters Institute) & Cathy Baldwin (ISCA)**

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## Perspectives from the West

Chairs: Lizzie Jackson, University of Westminster / BBC & Line Thomsen, University of Aarhus (Denmark).

**Introduction** by Line Thomsen, [cjult@hum.au.dk](mailto:cjult@hum.au.dk)

What is journalism? How does it exist and why? How does journalism define itself and in what ways can we make use of looking theoretically at the practice of it?

These were the central themes of our workshop; *Theoretical Models as Mass Media Practice* held at the ‘Minding the Gap’ conference at Reuters Institute in May 2007, from which this collection of papers has been selected. As with the other workshops during the conference, the majority of our panellists were themselves once media practitioners. It is my opinion that this background and inside knowledge of the field in itself can provide an exceptional framework for understanding the workings of mass media while helping the press reflect over these workings too. In a time of change for the journalistic profession, when media convergence is growing; the media is marked by deregulation and fewer journalists are being asked to do more, there is an increased need for the profession to get involved in debating the core values of its existence.

It is a rarity for members of the press to step outside it and take time to rethink all those concepts, rituals and habits we journalists take for granted. Rather, James W. Carey’s words from 1974 appears still to hold true:

The press is attacked and often vilified, but it is not subject to sustained critical analysis – not in public, and rarely within universities or the press itself.  
(Carey, 1974: 227)

In a time when this thirty year old critique still has a striking validity, I believe there is a crucial need for practitioners themselves to reflect over their own practice. But as practitioners in an academic field it is important that we resist the urge to leave theory and history behind and instead help create a bridge and a mutual understanding of the gap between the two: practice and theory. This ‘Minding the Gap’ workshop introduced current approaches from America, Spain and Britain among others doing just that.

Gavin Rees from The Media School at Bournemouth University, discusses the emotional dynamics of one of the most fundamental components to the machinery that is the news industry; the interview. Using examples, Rees suggests that journalists working with trauma develop a particular approach to listening, contrasting general professional orientation towards information extraction viewing emotion as the same as other forms of data. Rees suggests a rethinking of the interview, which he argues; ‘can help counter any sense that journalism is written by machines’ (Rees, this issue).

Jo Henderson of the Institute of Education, University of London, focuses on the BBC’s Video Nation project considering it as a video-diary produced outside of the reach of the institution which thus challenges the flow of representations for, by and of ourselves. ‘Could this be a threat or an opportunity for a Public Broadcaster such as the BBC?’ asks Henderson.

Continuing on from the diary theme, Cristina Perales García and Mon Rodríguez Amat, Department of Digital Communication, Barcelona’s University of Vic, call for a non-traditional theoretical rethinking of the mass media format, through considering the different approaches of seeing journalism as a ‘daily’ or a ‘diary’. Referring to the media in its constantly evolving forms of communication they write that ‘This new figure doesn’t accept any more being grouped in a mass, a class or in a party; he doesn’t accept being isolated, atomized and humiliated in his individual disabled and Pavlovian form.’ (Perales Garcia and Rodrigues Amat, this issue).

In the final paper, Patrice Holderbach, currently at the University of Oxford and formerly a beat reporter at the Kansas City Star, considers the defence of a ‘People’s Press’ that defies notions of exclusivity. Her paper challenges the American journalism industry in ‘its assumptions that a federal shield law is best for protecting First Amendment interests’ (Holderbach, this issue). Her focus is the controversial bill considered in 2006 by the US Senate to create a federal shield law protecting media practitioners from disclosure and the wider implications for journalists and the general public, particularly bloggers.

Holderbach's passionate reconsidering of the conditions for journalism was brought about during her time as a reporter when she received an email from a senior editor encouraging her to contribute to a legal defence fund dedicated toward the creation of a federal shield law. In the light of this law, her article questions not only the nature of journalism but also the nature of those who do not call themselves journalists but provide content, on the internet for instance, and questions the usefulness of one set of standards for this multitude of communication that is the marketplace of ideas.

**Bibliography:**

Carey, J.W (1974): 'Journalism and Criticism: The Case of an Undeveloped Profession' in *The Review of Politics*; Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 227-249. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press