



MEDIA

'Media' is the page of the Society's Press Committee. This section of *The Psychologist* aims to promote and discuss psychology in the media. If you would like to comment on a recent newspaper article, TV programme or radio broadcast involving psychology, if you have tips for others based on recent experiences, or if you know of a forthcoming programme or broadcast, please contact the 'Media' page coordinating editor, Harriet Gross (Chair, Press Committee), on H.Gross@lboro.ac.uk.

Demonstrating our worth

YOU can often scare an otherwise unflappable academic by suggesting that they might like to have their work discussed in the media. On several occasions I have suggested to a colleague who has given a great talk that they should consider press-releasing their work. They always ask me why.

So why disseminate your work through the media? Involvement with the media does not necessarily open doors for you. Baroness Greenfield, for instance, recently received adverse publicity about her potential fellowship of the Royal Society. Some senior scientists were complaining that she did not meet the rigorous criteria, and that her work had appeared in unscientific publications such as *Hello!* magazine. One theme in much of the coverage was that of professional jealousy.

Most media work will not leave your colleagues jealous, and it is certainly not well paid. Not many of us will, on the strength of the odd decent finding from a genuinely interesting small-scale study, end up presenting a multiple-episode series on prime-time television.

I asked two people involved in recent

Radio 4 broadcasts, both with a clear focus on contemporary psychology research, to say why they had taken part. Martin Conway (Durham University), took part in an edition of *In Our Time* about dreams.



Unscientific publication

He feels that it is important for the psychologist to communicate to the public. He says that there is a temptation for psychologists to feel that their findings are not unusual, but often they are. 'People's insight into their own minds is minor. They will often register interest and surprise in things that we think more obvious. Surely psychologists should address widespread misconceptions about the mind.'

Rebecca Thompson, research fellow at the Research Institute for the Care of the Elderly (RICE), has more pragmatic, but no less important, reasons to get involved.

She took part in *Life in Old Age* in March: 'The programme helped to raise the profile of both my research and of RICE. The hits on our website increased from the average 1500 per month to nearly 6000. We have also had lots of requests for information on the research and on memory problems in general from the general public and health professionals alike.'

The challenge for those who get involved with the media is to make work accessible without dumbing it down. Many of us worry about being misrepresented, but it is rare for psychologists to be misrepresented by the press. Journalists wish to cultivate a friendly, open relationship in order to achieve the most accurate and accessible report of your work. Rebecca Thompson, who was new to media involvement, said: 'My experience was very positive. The producer and interviewer were fully prepared for the interview and had requested information from me prior to my interview. Therefore, during the interview they asked really relevant questions which I could answer with ease. They gave the impression that they were genuinely interested in my research and the centre where I work.'

Finally, this question of media involvement is currently set against the backdrop of industrial action in the universities, much of which I feel is due to a general public misunderstanding and failure to appreciate the research work undertaken by academics and healthcare professionals. As a research psychologist and a public sector employee, I feel that it is important to demonstrate our worth to the wider public. One way to achieve this is through involvement with the media.

Chris Moulin

THOU shalt not covet thy neighbour's house', God commanded Moses on Mount Sinai. Easier to set in stone than to follow: as simple human beings, we struggle with the urge to compare ourselves with others. The philosopher Alain De Botton tried to give a few answers to this antediluvian concern by adapting his last publication – *Status Anxiety* – for Channel 4's audience.

De Botton tells us that today's world encourages social comparison. In the Middle Ages the hierarchical feudal system did not permit social climbing. There was no need to compete because it was virtually impossible to exceed one's social class. By contrast, our meritocracy has created a paradox – we have the highest

level of social equality ever, but we are tormented by an insatiable envy for our neighbours' possessions.

In the face of such a psychosocial plague, De Botton is proposing a range of different solutions, including religious practice to rebalance our priorities, or naturist and bohemian lifestyles to get back in touch with Rousseau's state of nature. Art and literature can also give us comfort. Naturally, philosophy and the use of reason to objectify others' judgements also play a part. Finally, contemplating death and realising our insignificance constitutes perhaps the most efficient remedy for status anxiety.

Religion, naturist communes, philosophy, the American dream, death... As with the Barnum

effect, there was a little something for everybody in this programme. We have all at some point in our lives felt envy towards the wealth of others. However, it is quite rare to come across thinkers who genuinely attempt to find solutions to this problem.

There is certainly a case to be made for of more TV shows of this kind. Many critics have vilified Alain De Botton on personal grounds, especially regarding his vaunted wealth. Yet most reviews and critiques seem imbued with an undertone of jealousy. Are these journalists coveting De Botton's success in accessing the pinnacle of media recognition – prime-time telly? As an old proverb says, 'Criticism is easy; art is difficult'.

Cedric Ginestet

TIP OF THE MONTH

If you are invited to be interviewed for radio or television, ask about payment. You are perhaps less likely to be paid for a short news item than for other types of programme, but there's nothing to lose by asking.

■ Next media training day – Monday 24 May 2004. Contact Dawn Schubert for details on dawsch@bps.org.uk or tel: 0116 252 9581.