

## **PodMag 05 05 2015**

### **Karen Foley:**

Hi and welcome to the PodMag, our monthly news podcast from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Open University. I'm Karen Foley and in this May issue I'm interviewing Simon Budgen, Eddie Wastnidge and Joe Smith.

It's Spring and that only means one thing at the Open University, lawn mowing. You might hear some sounds as we're moving along the programme today but it's a good thing that Spring's finally come.

And let's first catch up with our news for May.

Academics from the faculty are often involved with television programmes. In fact the Open University works with many broadcasters to create innovative and informative contents and this month we see two new programmes that Rajiv Prabhakar and Louise Westmarland respectively have been involved with. The Waste Men is a three part series starting on 28<sup>th</sup> April. I'm told it's an observational series with warm Geordie characters at its heart and it covers issues such as the massive waste generated during the Christmas period and how one person's rubbish can become another's treasure. And how the way we process waste is changing so that we can recycle waste in to electricity and other valuable resources. I'll be talking to Rajiv about his involvement in this next month.

You won't have escaped the build up to the General Elections and many of the faculty's academics have been involved in commenting such as Alan Shipman and Richard Heffernan. Open Democracy are publishing a range of articles such as Steve Garner who has three articles the first of which 'What is this Political Space we Call Immigration'? Olaf Corry on 'Cross-Party Pledges Mask Deep Divisions on Climate Policy ahead of the General Election', Jacqueline Baxter on 'SMART Proposals for Education' and Jef Huysmans and Amandine Scherrer whose article 'Why Bother About Digital Rights? An Absence in the Election Campaigns' analyses how digital rights are too often reduced to questions of security and propose that in their election manifestos none of the major British parties appear to have grasped their wider significance.

Now we have some events on in May and June that may be of interest. On 12<sup>th</sup> May at the Open University here in Milton Keynes there is a CCIG Forum, 'Methodological and Intellectual Challenges for Social Science Research'. Which will be the occasion to introduce one of the new CCIG research programmes 'Digital Citizen'.

The morning session will be dedicated to the methodological challenges encountered in research led by Jenny Meegan, Philip O'Sullivan and John D'Arcy that explores through oral history the educational experiences of politically motivated former prisoners and the Open University staff and prison education staff who worked with them.

The afternoon session organised by the Digital Citizen Research Programme will introduce Engin Isen and Evelyn Ruppert's latest book 'Being Digital Citizens'. Evelyn and Engin will focus on questions of method for investigating digital acts and how digital acts through the Internet cross boundaries and create paradoxical subject of rights.

And on Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> May in the evening at the Open University in London Kesi Mahendran will give a keynote talk as part of the CCIG lecture series on 'Being on the Line, Citizenship, Identities and Governance in Times of Crises'.

And in book news Steve Tombs has co-authored a book with David Whyte, 'The Corporate Criminal: Why Corporations must be Abolished'. The book dissects the myth that the corporation can be a rational, responsible citizen. It shows how in its present form the corporation has permitted licensed and encouraged to systematically kill, maim and steal for profit. Therefore the authors argue the corporation cannot be easily reformed and the only feasible solution to this crime problem is to abolish the legal and political privileges that enable the corporation to act with impunity. An interesting read.

And in some news from the gossip section the TV Times reveals that casualty star Amanda Mealing is halfway through a psychology degree with the OU.

And lastly news from Student Connections. We've been having fun at recent Activate sessions where we've learnt about blogging with Meg John Barker and this month Jonquil Lowe and Non Scantlebury have given us excellent discussions about voting and digital literacy. Keep an eye out for these sessions on your Student Home Page and please do come along. They really are lots of fun.

And that's all the news.

And now in the first of our interviews I'm going to talk to Simon Budgen from the Open Media Unit. Simon thanks for coming along today. So tell us about your role. What do you do?

**Simon Budgen:**

Well as Head of Open Lean Commissioning I look after all the parts of Open Learn that don't come automatically from courses. So that's material that supports the Open University BBC Broadcast relationship, our relationship with other broadcasters. If we do anything around topical events that are happening in the news or diary events I look after that. And also we do a number of standalone interactive pieces a year so it might be a data visualisation or a game or an opportunity to try to be like a social worker for a day, anything like that, that's in my remit.

**Karen Foley:**

Fantastic. And you cover the whole of the Open University don't you? So not just Social Sciences but you work with all the faculties.

**Simon Budgen:**

We work with all of them, yes.

**Karen Foley:**

That must be really challenging having so much content out there. Tell us, what's the most exciting thing you've been doing lately then?

**Simon Budgen:**

We've taken the old epoch tool in psychology and reversioned it for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. KMi produced it ten years ago and it was great state-of-the-art back then but obviously time moves on and back then everyone was using computers to access the Internet. Now it's laptops and pads and touch screens and things like that. We've taken it, re-engineered it completely and taken what was a nice tool with some great learning in and a real pleasure to use.

**Karen Foley:**

And so whilst that's on some of the psychology modules everyone can access it because it's on Open Learn?

**Simon Budgen:**

Yeah. Open Learn is open to the public. Anyone can come along, have a go at things, try it for free. If they like it everything is under Creative Commons as well so they can take it away, publish it on their own website, re-work it and re-use it in other ways.

**Karen Foley:**

And you were telling me that, you know, about 5% of every module is available on Open Learn. I mean that's fantastic for people wanting to try new modules and see what's out there and even have a bit of summertime reading. What sort of things would you say would be really good to pick up on there? Maybe it's study skills or something topical?

**Simon Budgen:**

Well what we've just launched and what we're incredibly excited about are badged open courses. This is where you don't only get tracked as you go through but you answer some proper serious quiz questions and actually get a certificate or a badge at the end that proves what you can do and proves what your knowledge is.

**Karen Foley:**

Brilliant idea, that's fantastic. And also you were telling me that some of the programming that the Open University has been involved with is being re-launched. Can you tell us a bit about the streets?

**Simon Budgen:**

Yes. 'Secret History of Our Streets'. The first one was done in 2012 and that focused on London. It took the Charles Booth Poverty Maps and told the history of the streets that were featured on those maps from the time that he did them all the way up to the present day and so looking at places like Deptford High Street for example.

And then a couple of years later there was another series that went to Scotland and looked at different streets in Scotland in Glasgow. A similar sort of thing. They were really popular at the time. BBC 4 restrung them again on Thursday evening so if you missed them the first time round I really do recommend catching them.

**Karen Foley:**

Lovely Simon. Well thank you so much for coming along today and I hope everyone makes the most of all the material available on Open Learn.

**Simon Budgen:**

Thank you very much.

**Karen Foley:**

And in the next of our interviews I'm going to phone Eddie Wastnidge and talk to him about his recent Friday Thinker that he did on the Faculty Facebook page.

Hi Eddie. So first if you can tell us a little bit about the Friday Thinker. So what was the question you presented and was the response what you expected it to be?

**Eddie Wastnidge:**

OK, well the question was that the current elections in the UK, General Election coming up the focus was mainly on domestic issues, NHS, immigration and economy. And I noted that foreign policy, the UK's foreign policy has taken something of a back seat in debates so far. And does that represent perhaps the UK's declining role in international affairs as well or is it just that it's not really a priority for voters and for the parties. So our pitch is very broad.

**Karen Foley:**

And what was the general consensus then? Because you'd sort of proposed, I guess, that this wasn't foremost in the minds of most people.

**Eddie Wastnidge:**

There was a real spread actually, I think, the students are interested in international relations and foreign policy. They said, "Well of course it's very poor, you know, and they should be paying more attention to it. Whereas a lot of votes, you know, there's more important things to worry about, i.e, you know, our concern should be, the

domestic should be things that are happening at home first". And I think that's probably something that's probably sharpened during times of economic crisis.

So, yeah, it was interesting to see how that played out.

**Karen Foley:**

And what do you enjoy most about the sort of format of debate where it's quite casual, like on Facebook where people can post things and you're responding in fairly real time. What do you get out of it?

**Eddie Wastnidge:**

It's the engaging with the students really because obviously we're a very different kind of institution than a conventional university. So it gives you that kind of interaction which we miss, you know, to be, you know, doing things in real time is really nice. And when it's about a topical subject and certain things, you know, come up which inflame people's passions quite a lot, you know. So it's quite interesting to have the debate with them there.

Then also I think some people will make certain comments to get a reaction either from me or from other students. But I quite like sort of placating them. And say, that's a good point, you know, all opinions there in truth are of value here as long as they're not offensive, you know, 'let's move on...' kind of thing. So, you know, you get a few difficult people contributing but you get some really good ones, you know. I like the mix of that.

**Karen Foley:**

So you're basically starting a large contentious argument and then trying to pacify everyone?

**Eddie Wastnidge:**

Exactly, exactly. Sitting back and watching the fireworks. Yes. No, I mean, I kind of, I quite like that, you know, It's quite strange I mean a lot of my research interests are in to diplomacy and things like that. So perhaps I'm just, you know, a frustrated diplomat. Yeah, it is that, you know, it's easier to be a little bit blinkered or just be completely consumed by your own research or your own teaching or whatever you're doing and therefore to put it out to a wider audience, things that you're interested in it's really interesting. Because, you know you see what's going on.

**Karen Foley:**

Well Eddie thank you so much for talking to me today. That's been a really interesting discussion about the Friday Thinker.

And don't forget that if you'd like to take part you can check out the Faculty Facebook page where the details are posted each week.

And our last interview this month is with Joe Smith who's a senior lecturer in geography. And Joe's been involved in some fascinating projects about climate change such as 'Earth in Vision'.

Joe thanks for coming along today. Tell us about the 'Earth in Vision' project.

**Joe Smith:**

The 'Earth in Vision' project is trying to imagine what the public might do if broadcasters like the BBC started to release massive amounts of their broadcast archives. They're not about to do that any time soon although there are American examples of that happening. But we wanted to help the thinking, perhaps years in advance, to try to work out what people might want to do with this whether they're teachers or learners or citizens. Specifically we're working with environmental programming across 50 years.

So that brings me to the other reason for the Earth in Vision project and that's to try to add broadcasting in to our current accounts of environmental history in politics. So we're taking advantage of the fact that we've got access to 50 hours (years?) of the BBC's footage both TV and radio. And all of it one way or another relates to environmental issues.

**Karen Foley:**

So as part of this you're interviewing some very famous filmmakers, for example, David Attenborough. And you've been talking to them about the way that they've seen film making changes over time. Can you tell us a bit about what they said?

**Joe Smith:**

Well we've talked to about 20 producers, channel controllers, presenters, including David Attenborough who of course has been all of those things. And we have been wanting to get a sense both of the technical changes but also to try to unpick how their storytelling has changed.

One of the things that's very striking is of course that the stories you can tell are constantly changing in line with the technology. So the capacity to go under sea, the capacity to be up in a canopy, time lapse or to be able to really go in close particularly when you're talking about smaller plants and animals.

And that's all good fun. But the more sober topic that we've been working on with them is how we can tell stories that are true to the state of knowledge about global environmental change.

So how do we take programme makers out of the idea that they can only really hold an audience with a nice fluffy story and pan out to tell a picture that includes human impacts? Well I must admit I've been really reassured in the interviews that we've done.

It strikes me that current broadcasting is really looking to try to write in to the script a really honest and sincere account of biodiversity loss and climate change threats.

It isn't easy though. And they are very well tuned as a community to knowing what it takes to get people on a sofa and to stay with your channel. So some of my learning has been about how they try to gently weave in these, as I say, honest accounts of really where we're at with environmental change issues.

**Karen Foley:**

So may be you can tell us then a little bit about what you're hoping to do with some of this material. Because you're midway through this project and you've got some fabulous interviews and things. What are you hoping to actually do with them?

**Joe Smith:**

Well it's a research project funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council. So the first thing they're going to expect is a nice little pile of academic journal papers. And for sure we'll do that. But if you want to know what is really exciting at the moment it's some of the work we've been doing with teachers and students, school students and also Open University students to test some approaches to using broadcast. And when I say using broadcast I mean them using broadcast archive content to write their own accounts of environmental history using television and audio.

We really would like to look ahead to the point where we could get some additional funding to work with other partners to make material for schools and universities that would allow students to be their own broadcasters, if you like. And I think that'll keep us busy for years.

**Karen Foley:**

Absolutely. Well you're doing an awful lot of research then. An awful lot of applied work as well. It sounds really exciting Joe. Thanks for talking to us about it today.

**Joe Smith:**

Pleasure.

**Karen Foley:**

And that's all we've got time for in this addition. Don't forget to check out your qualification websites for more information about Student Connections. And get in touch and let us know your news at [PodMag@open.ac.uk](mailto:PodMag@open.ac.uk) You can also follow the faculty on Twitter @OUSocSci and like the Faculty Facebook page and take part in the Friday Thinker each week. In May we have Gerry Mooney, Jonquil Lowe and Jerome De Henau, Troy Cooper, Peter Redman and Gillian Rose.

And if you like this you may also like the Social Sciences audio drama 'This Student Life'.

And that's all from me, Karen Foley. Bye for now and thanks for listening.