

Remembering Roger: Diasporic Dialogues

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Sadness and pleasure combine as I recall the life and work of Roger Silverstone. Roger was my Ph.D. supervisor, mentor and a trusted colleague. His work on television, and his explorations of the myriad interconnections between social and textual experience, have long been a major source of inspiration to me. The juxtaposition of sociological and anthropological perspectives that he brought to bear on our understanding of media rituals and routines, myths and narratives, and the complex and indeterminate nature of media uses and interpretations, have provided a solid theoretical foundation, as well as new empirical pathways, for media scholars around the world.

I remember how our dialogue on diaspora media began in Roger's office at Brunel University in 1989 as we tried to make sense of the implications of the advent of the videocassette recorder (VCR) in British Asian homes in nearby Southall – a London suburb where South Asian, alongside Irish and Caribbean, migrants had settled in the post-World War II period. At that time, videocassettes of popular Hindi films, serial dramas and the 'sacred' Hindu epics were delivered to the doorstep by the milkman, as well as becoming more widely available in local shops. One immediate effect of the arrival of the VCR was that the local cinema halls, which had previously screened the films, and had provided a locus and nexus of South Asian public culture in the west London region, closed down. British Asian households were early adopters of this new communication technology. Their media uses allowed us to examine the privatisation of leisure, the domestication of the VCR, and new kinds of diasporic cultural practices from a unique and distinctive vantage-point. Roger gathered colleagues around him at Brunel and created an institutional home where dialogue across disciplinary fields generated fruitful crosscurrents in thinking and research.¹

For Roger, understanding and researching global media and cultural technologies necessarily involved the study of diasporic communication and minority media practices, engaging in dialogue with multiple and diverse others, reaching across established cultural boundaries, and developing an acute sensitivity to difference. His concern with dialogue reflected the value he accorded to voice, music and the semiotics of sound. This was somewhat against the tide of the times where a preoccupation with the visual dominated, indeed still dominate, many studies of media. Having a voice, but perhaps more importantly 'finding a voice,' was a theme which came to preoccupy him more and more. And in a media environment marked by structured inequalities in access to the means of representation, it was of course, not enough simply to find a voice. Being listened to is an essential part of any dialogue.

¹ Roger was Director of the Centre for Research into Innovation Culture and Technology at Brunel University (1986-91).

Dialogue, finding a voice and being listened to, are central to Roger's conception of 'contrapuntal culture' (2006a: 80-105). Drawing on Edward Said's use of the term, Roger develops it as a metaphor to explore the webs of interconnection between social and textual experiences of exile and displacement (Said 1994; 2001). This led him to a concern with multi-vocal media practices that engage with plurality and difference, consonance and dissonance, absence and presence:

Minority media are increasingly central to that [national and European mediated] environment [...] an increasingly fundamental part of public culture. ... The contrapuntal invites us to listen, and to listen differently, attentively, sympathetically, but also critically to the play of voices, to the mediated soundscape that expresses, in its simultaneity, a constant and unresolved play of discourse, narrative and expression. There is harmony in this soundscape but there is also discord: we need both even if we long only for the former: the 'sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.' (2006a: 100)

Caliban's description of the effect that Ariel's music produces in him, as a good and pleasurable thing in and of itself, reflects Roger's hope that global media might just open up spaces where recognition, reciprocity and respect, and a sense of responsibility and commitment to justice might flourish. In his later, more philosophically and politically-oriented writing, he sought, with passion, a dialogical media ethic. But this ethic required that we – producers and consumers, politicians, policymakers and regulators - take responsibility. He urged that we use media wisely and that we develop plural literacies to understand and make reasoned judgments about the world to intervene in it and change it for the better. To some, this may have seemed like a rather utopian vision but without such visions, academic life would be a lesser place.

Roger instigated many important dialogues, in the academy and beyond. He became increasingly interested in the growing political, economic and cultural significance of transnational communities, and alert to the role that media and communications might play in forging cosmopolitan sensibilities and citizenship. As a result, twin notions of dialogues and diasporics came to occupy a more central role in his thinking and writing. I use the term diasporics (rather than diasporas) to avoid stylizing diasporas into cohesive social groups. 'Diasporics' suggests 'dynamics' or 'physics' (the latter, in the shape of 'social physics' being the oldest name for the social sciences, coined by Comte in 1845). 'Diasporics' designates real people who claim and implement a diasporic identity. Diaspora is, in this sense, a stance and a category of practice, not a bounded entity. This is how Roger understood and discussed, lived and researched diasporas – dynamically.

Roger's vital vision of the extreme importance of human communication, connection and communion was always tempered by an acute sense of the difficulties of dialogue and the inevitable failures of communication, and a deep uncertainty and ambivalence about the consequences of communication technologies for 'our shareable but not necessarily or inevitably shared, world' (Silverstone 2006b: 91). His intellectual stance is poised between an almost equal optimism and pessimism, and he was intensely aware that the battle between the forces of creation and of destruction that lie within each of us as individuals, and in the societies that we make, is always uncertain in its outcomes. This stance, I

believe, expresses an important aspect of a certain diasporic consciousness that Roger may have nurtured from his childhood but which only emerges in his later works.

Roger was the child of Russian Jewish parents and grew up in Birkenhead, Liverpool, watching the ships come and go and imagining the lives, memories and objects that people left behind, brought with them and recreated anew. His father, Maurice Silverstone, was the first Jewish general surgeon appointed to a UK teaching hospital. But Roger wore his diasporic Jewish identity lightly, until recently. Over lunch, in early 2001, as his eyes twinkled and that characteristic mischievous grin lit up his face, he claimed "I'm coming out!" "Coming out Roger?" I enquired. "Yes, I'm coming out as Jewish", he replied. Of course, this was not a declaration about the start of something new but more an expression of his intense eagerness to reflect on the migrations, geographic, social and intellectual, that had marked his and others' lives. He was signaling, in his usual playful but purposeful way, where his personal, political and intellectual passions had been driving him, and where they were heading. And we see this intellectual and personal journey reflected most clearly in his latest and last work, *Media and Morality: on the Rise of the Mediapolis*.

In this book he initiates a dialogue with, among others, key thinkers and writers of the Jewish intellectual diaspora. It is an expansive, dynamic dialogue driven by the exigencies of history, memory, experience – not an intra-diasporic dialogue but an opening up of a new moral and critical agenda for media studies. Roger picks up, adapts and reshapes the ideas of intellectuals like Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin and Emmanuel Levinas for a new century. Indeed one of his greatest talents was his ability to bring into dialogue ideas and thinkers and to create something quite new and unique. He was, in other words, a contrapuntal intellectual. In this book, he promises and delivers vital critical and moral insights into global media, political and cultural dynamics.

Drawing on Hannah Arendt, he transforms the notion of polis into the mediapolis. This he sees as a unified moral space – a space where responsibilities and hospitalities must come to the fore if we are to tackle the polarisations and fundamentalisms that threaten human understanding, diminish respect and civility, and disrupt pathways towards global social justice. He picks up on Arendt's and Levinas' notion of proximity (physical as well as affective, cultural and ideological) as a crucial determinant of politics and morality. What is 'proper distance'? He answers that it must involve a rapprochement – an intense proximity - to those who suffer and who have no voice. A deeply diasporic and moral consciousness appear to drive his later work.

Through a Fractured Lens: The Light and Shade of Diasporas

A secular or cultural Jew, Roger believed that electronic media could be a force for good, unifying, liberating, popular and challenging at the same time. The dialogues he initiated beyond the walls of academia extended to a wide variety of policy domains including, for example, the Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

Roger believed that it was time for British diasporic Jews to engage with their distinctiveness and their differences, to recover their heritage and redefine their identities, and make their presence felt in the wider public sphere:

In a world of increasing cultural fragmentation and at the same time increasing visibility of minority groups, British Jews have tended to remain in the shadows, visible, mostly, only to themselves and then through a fractured lens. Yet there appears among many Jews, across the generations, a desire to stop the rot, to reclaim a Jewish identity, to reinvent Jewishness for the contemporary world (Silverstone 1998).

Through the development of Jewish television, the distinct character and quality of British Jewry could find a presence and make a deep, lasting and continuous impression on the lives of hundreds of thousands of Jews and others both in Britain and elsewhere. This was not an insular conception of an intra-diasporic dialogue. Rather it was intended to open up new possibilities and new dialogues both within and across cultural, religious and ethnic boundaries. But again, his sharp awareness of the paradoxes of emergent diasporic media cultures – possibilities and pitfalls, essentialising tendencies and transformative potential - was ever present.

Diasporic experience, Roger knew, was marked by a series of paradoxical sentiments and positionings: a sense of history, of nostalgia, of longing, loss and the impossibility of return, combines with a sense of future hopes and possibilities, of recreation, renewal and resettlement. In an essay on minorities and media, where he elaborates his understanding of diasporic experience, he plays with the idea of im/possible return: "As some of us say on a regular basis, with or without, now, any expectation of its realization, 'Next year in Jerusalem!' (2001: 17). Roger understood how diasporic media and imagination could just as easily generate idealized reifications of ancestral ties as provide a comforting displacement of present day troubles. But then all of his work delved deep into how the media, through narrative, myth and ritual, shape and are shaped by human consciousness, desires and dilemmas.

Roger's work helps us to understand how media orders social life, reassures us and may provide ontological security. At the same time, he demonstrates that the media have the equal and opposite potential to threaten our security. His later work explores the paradoxes of diasporic experience of being at one and the same time: insider and outsider, here and there, home and away, placed and displaced, connected and disconnected. These paradoxes, for Roger, also connect diasporic and media experiences:

Much that is personal, where biographical and autobiographical narratives criss-cross the grander demographic histories and in doing so provide the light and shade of the diasporas, illuminating the processes of individual loss, redemption and identification. Much [...] [of this has] to do with communication, and the capacity of the displaced to construct communities, to create traditions and to sustain the links that make life meaningful both in relation to the local, the daily pattern of living in a new and distant world; and in relation to the global, the ties to be constructed with the home left behind or the one that is still longed for (2001:19).

The increasing significance of joint processes of modern media and migration reflect the new and different scale of social relations that are possible in a global world in which relations between the local and global, national and transnational have been profoundly altered. Challenges to the authority and autonomy of the nation-state provide new opportunities and possibilities. Diasporic media and cultural forms have the potential to create alternative public spheres, providing resources to assist people to participate more fully in transnational spaces of communication and to make judgements, to engage and to intervene in political processes. They may contribute to creating transnational forms of solidarity and attachment, belonging and identity. But they may not.

All diasporic peoples, Roger argues, have to struggle with the ambivalence of diasporic and national time and space, and with the notion of home: "How to place it, find it, secure it, connect with it, recover it" (2001: 19). And what really came to fascinate Roger was that, amidst all the intra- and inter- and cross-diasporic differences, histories and biographies, is, now, the Internet, providing a means of multiple connection between those left at home and those who have moved away. Displaced populations everywhere - Londoners in Spain, Punjabis in Southall, Moroccan Jews in Bordeaux, Kurds in Sweden, Turks in Germany, Irish in Boston - can maintain links with other migrant groups around the world, and with their country of origin. Media now enable the growth of global networks: "the capacity of minorities anywhere to be minorities everywhere" (2001:19). Roger sets out a substantial research agenda at the heart of which lies media: "the major cosmopolitanism of capital has its shadow in the minor cosmopolitanism of migration, exile and diaspora."

Voice and Visibility: Media and Minorities in Europe

Roger developed this research agenda, setting up dialogues across Europe, by creating EMTEL (European Media Technology and Everyday Life Network). This was a three-year research training network (2000-03) funded by the European Union's Framework Programme – the EU's main funding initiative for research and development². The research was centrally concerned with issues of inclusion and exclusion, unity and diversity, difference and representation in the 'European Information Society'. Social inclusion policies tend to focus on economic relations and the role of information and communication technologies in employment, housing, education). But they often overlook the significance of representation and self-representation which for minority ethnic groups is a crucial factor of social and cultural inclusion. Roger recognised the need to broaden the perspective of social inclusion policies to take account of cultural (including language) rights and increase access to the means of representation. This was an issue that Roger and Dr Myria Georgiou (another of Roger's postgraduate students with whom he worked closely in recent years) brought to the European Community agenda.

This was an ambitious project which involved early career researchers working alongside more experienced scholars. Roger's work on mapping diasporic media across Europe was assisted and supported by 17 researchers in 13 different countries. With Dr Myria Georgiou, Roger produced an impressive synthesis of the research in report form, and later as a book (Silverstone 2005).

² The first EMTEL 1 network was a small network of European experts which then developed EMTEL 2.

The project brought together and developed key themes in Roger's earlier work: the domestication of communication and information technologies and the mutual constitution of private and public, local and global worlds through mediated communication. However, the social and cultural fields of research, here, are extended beyond these dualisms to articulate the local, national and transnational dimensions of media and migrant life. Everyday local and located media cultures are contextualised and framed within national polities, where rights and obligations are formally and informally enacted and where transnational communications and diasporic communities challenge and contest national frames of understanding and participation. The perspective that such a study of minority media generates offers a provocative challenge to conventional frames of understanding media cultures.

The study is primarily concerned with the various ways in which processes of inclusion and exclusion operate - politically, socially and culturally. It draws a large-scale picture of patterns of mobility and media flows across Europe. It highlights the huge diversity of media cultures among diasporic groups and how these are shaped by the very different stages and trajectories of migration, and by relationships between country of birth, countries of settlement and wider diasporas. The study enables meaningful cross-national comparative analyses between different forms of media production, consumption and appropriation – and crucially their relationships. So for example, at the time of study, Sweden and the Netherlands had the richest variety of minority media and also the most developed multicultural policy frameworks. But many of the recent refugee and communities in Europe had no media of their own, nor any visibility, reflecting their marginalisation and reinforcing their exclusion.

The study charted the multi-lingual media map, the new cartography of languages that is transforming European media space: more than 30 Arabic and Turkish satellite TV channels stations; dozens of channels in South Asian languages, Hindi, Urdu and Bengali, and so on. It noted the very particular uses of internet among diasporic communities especially with regards to news consumption. The study's policy recommendations include: more economic support for minority media in Europe; more possibilities for representation and self representation across a variety of media for minority and diasporic groups; a more integrated European approach to tackling obstacles to inclusion and participation while at the same time recognising differences.

This is a pioneering study that draws attention to the urgent need to enable minority and diasporic groups to find a voice, a space and a place in the 'global commons', and to challenge existing power relations and concentrations. Electronic media, he argues, enable excluded groups to find a voice, a space of expression and possible empowerment. Roger's use of the term 'global commons' is typical of the way metaphors permeate his writing. The notion of the 'global commons' is an adaptation of the idea of the medieval European common field system which existed alongside the system of enclosed farms (2001: 14). This metaphor, drawing on the work of E.P. Thompson, and other writers who have adopted the term more recently, such as Naomi Klein, Susan Buck, Michael Goldman and Alan Lipietz, allows us to imagine a shared space, but also a space of struggle. It promotes the cultivation of 'minor' cosmopolitan sensibilities. All groups have grazing entitlements on the common electronic pasture – rights to sow and to reap benefits but also onerous responsibilities. The 'global commons' metaphor, as used by Roger, was the embryonic idea that inspired his later ideal of the mediapolis as a mediated cosmopolitan public sphere, a vision which signals his legacy and his hope.

Roger's European research dovetailed with collaborative research that I was coordinating at that time on multilingual news cultures after September 11, 2001. The research papers based on these collaborative projects were published in two special issues of *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.³ And so our dialogue about diasporic media developed over almost 20 years. Our complementary research showed how minority and diasporic media acquire their significance in relation to, and in dialogue with or against, mainstream national media. Diaspora media, Roger argued, can only be understood in relation to multiple cultural, social and political contexts, absent and present. His notion of mediation as a deeply political process that, of necessity, must connect and articulate research on production, texts and audiences, institutions, power and policy was very influential in the way I designed and carried out a subsequent research project on multilingual news cultures in the aftermath of the Iraq War 2003.⁴ Sadly, we did not have time to discuss this research in detail but he would have recognised in it himself as the *eminence grise*.

Fortunately for me, I had an animated conversation the last time we met, at the International Communications Association Conference in Dresden in July 2006, just weeks before he died. He was having lunch with Jurgen Habermas and they were surrounded by an admiring crowd. But he spotted me at the far end of the table, as I sat down to eat my lunch, unaware of the company surrounding me, and surprised me with a warm "Hello Marie" in his distinctive voice. It was so typical of Roger that he should break from his lunch at the high table to say hello to a former student of his - a true measure of the man. I was so delighted to see him. He was fizzing with life and buzzing with ideas. We talked about his travels, his illness, his latest book and his plans. We discussed a plan to develop work on multilingual news cultures. I am thankful for those moments. His dancing eyes and warm smile on that day will remain etched in my memory. Of course the spirit of his work, and his major contribution to our understanding of media, endure.

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³ Compare the special issue 'Diasporic Media Across Europe', guest editors Roger Silverstone and Myria Georgiou, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31(3), May 2005 with the later special issue 'After September 11 2001: Television News and Transnational Audiences', guest editor Marie Gillespie, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32(6), August 2006.

⁴ For project design and details see <http://www.mediatingsecurity.com>. See also the special issue 'Representing Security', guest editor Stuart Croft, *International Relations* 20(4), December 2006 and 'Media, Security and Multicultural Citizenship', special issue, guest editor Marie Gillespie, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10(3), August, 2007.

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