

## **A Life Well Travelled: Remembering Denis McQuail**

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When I think of Denis, four qualities immediately spring to mind, his conviviality, his ability to combine intellectual traditions, his cosmopolitan sensibility, and his enduring commitment to defending the role of public communication in democratic societies.

### **Conviviality**

I saw Denis for the last time at the IAMCR conference in Leicester conference and as a gesture of thanks took the opportunity to dedicate my opening plenary speech to him. Like everyone in my generation I owe him an enormous intellectual debt. His pioneering and masterly codification of the emerging field of media and communication studies in Britain, in its early formative, uncertain and contested years, helped persuade often sceptical university administrations of its centrality in understanding the contemporary world and the need to devote institutional resources to its development. But he was always so much more than a scholarly reference point. He was a mentor, sounding board and hugely generous and entertaining companion

He was always welcoming and open to ideas and arguments. He made no distinctions and despite his eminence treated everyone with the same attention and respect. Time spent in his company was unfailingly entertaining as well as instructive with intellectual discussion generously leavened with anecdotes and jokes. As many of the photos in the opening presentation, showing Denis with a glass of wine in his hand, attest, he was wonderfully convivial. One of my most vivid memories of spending time with him is at a conference in Florence where the combination of discussion and alcohol took an unfortunate turn.

Alongside the prizes awarded for programs the Prix Italia used to stage research seminars on key issue in communication to which selected academics were invited. So it was that Denis and I found ourselves in Florence in one of the city's most exclusive hotels with what we imagined was all expenses paid. On our first night there we both discovered that we had mini bars in our rooms – fixtures that were at the time unknown in English hotels, at least the one we were used to staying in. Over the three days of the seminar we lubricated our nightly discussions by making substantial use of the bars in both our rooms. We both had a passion for art and had decided to stay on in Florence after the meeting ended but to move to a much cheaper hotel. We checked out of our opulent surroundings and had just reached the square outside the city's cathedral when we saw a waiter dressed in livery running down

the street with a long ribbon of paper streaming behind him, shouting 'stop them, stop them, they are thieves'. Along with everyone else we looked around to see who the miscreants were, but the thieves turned out to be us and the paper turned out to be our mini bar bill which we had mistakenly assumed our hosts had paid. We were unceremoniously escorted back to the hotel to settle our account, which amounted to more than the room price of the hotel we were moving to.

## **Combinations**

In addition to his love of art, as both a spectator and a painter, Denis had a passion for music and for fiction. Although he taught in the sociology department at Southampton University before moving to Amsterdam he had originally studied history at Oxford and maintained a continuing engagement with work in the humanities. For him to study communication was to study the human condition, how we connect and how we use the mediated spaces between us as arenas for self-expression, collective understanding and argument, and social solidarity. He saw the field not as a self-contained discipline, but as a point of intellectual intersection between work across the humanities and social sciences.

I first encountered Denis's writing in his short book '**Towards a Sociology of Mass Communications**' published in 1969, and was immediately struck by both its even handedness and the perceptiveness of the caveats he raised. But it dealt mostly with work in the US tradition.

Three years later in 1972, while still at Southampton, Denis edited an anthology for Penguin entitled the 'Sociology of Mass Communication'. Alongside foundational figures from the US - George Gerbner, Elihu Katz and Dallas Smythe - it included examples of the work that was starting to emerge in the UK, from Jeremy Tunstall, my colleague at Leicester Philip Elliott, and the pioneering research on political communication Denis had conducted with Jay Blumler at Leeds. But what marked it out, was its inclusion of a generous selection of contributions from European authors offering different perspectives from Anglo-American research. They included Olivier Burgelin from France, Hans Enzensberger from Germany, Zygmunt Bauman from Poland, Franco Alberoni from Italy and V A Piramidin from the Soviet Union. Looking at the small print I discovered that Denis had translated the last two pieces himself. He had studied Russian during his National Service in Intelligence and unusually for the notoriously insular denizens of British academia was fluent in several European languages

## **Cosmopolitanism**

This cosmopolitan outlook allowed Denis to cast a very wide intellectual net combining the empirical, practical orientation characteristic of British research with the more ambitious theorising generated by European traditions securely anchored in a concern with fundamental philosophical issues. This comprehensiveness marks all his mature work together with his non-partisan approach and refusal to sign up to any 'isms'.

His ability to move between intellectual traditions was translated into everyday practice when he moved to Amsterdam in 1977 and threw himself into creating a distinctly European intellectual space that would be hospitable to diverse contributions to both theory and policy. To this end he played a leading role in launching the *European Journal of Communication* and the Euromedia Research Group

These initiatives coincided with major social and political transformations within Europe that posed new challenges for theory and practice.

In 1973 the European Union embarked on a major process of enlargement with the accession of the UK, Denmark and Ireland, followed in 1981 by Greece and in 1986 by Spain and Portugal, three countries that had previously been dictatorships and were in the process of restoring democracy. That same year Gorbachev launched the political project of glasnost and restructuring of perestroika. Taken together these political shifts threw the question of what constituted democracy and the role of communications in sustaining it into sharp relief.

This question was further underlined by the major transformation in the organisation of Anglo-American capitalism initiated by the militant promotion of neo-liberalism by Thatcher in the UK and Reagan in the US. The result was a fundamental rebalancing of relations between capital and the state as public communication resources were privatised and sold off and public service regulation watered down or abandoned. In 1984 the British government sold the first tranche of shares in British Telecom, the country's PTT, setting in motion a process of privatisation that was implemented across the EU

The decline of the public service paradigm (1945-1980) and its replacement by a marketized system was charted in detail in successive volumes produced by the Euromedia Group in which Denis played a pivotal role. The Group was also in the vanguard of raising questions about the disruptive impact of new communication systems, initially cable and satellite distribution and later the internet.

## **Public Media, Public Responsibilities**

This combination of economic and technological transformations invested long standing questions around the tension between the ideal of democracy and the rights of citizenship on the one hand and the exercise of corporate power on the other, with new and urgent relevance. As the central source of the information, analysis and space for debate required for the full and equal exercise of citizenship, journalism was caught in the crossfire.

Denis had a long standing interest in this tension and had proposed a written code of conduct for newspapers at the invitation of Third British Royal Commission on the Press (1974-1977) while still based in the UK and before the neo-liberal economic revolution.

He returned to the issue of the media system's responsibilities in a democracy in his major 1992 book *Media Performance: Mass Communication in the Public Interest*

For Denis the issue was never simply a matter of devising practical measures. It was always also a question of the ethical basis and justifications for interventions. In a 2005 lecture in Portugal he took mainstream policy studies to task for its lack of sustained engagement with the thorny issues raised by moral philosophy arguing that;

“current theorising, is often too closely tied to practical and immediate concerns of policy and the current realities of a single country or media system. There is a need to develop a branch of theorising in which philosophical ethical...aspects of ...public communication can be explored. ...”

This call comes at the end of lecture entitled '*Publication in free society: the problem of accountability*' in which he interrogates the tension between the libertarian promotion of a free market in ideas and the democratic insistence on the need to ensure equality of access and diversity of expression in the provision of communicative resources for citizenship.

After a vigorously defending of the ideal of an open society and pointing out the dangers of state control entailed in statutory interventions he comes down in favour of voluntary agreement.

“In general, according to the principle of openness, we should prefer forms of accountability that are transparent, voluntary and based on active relationships and dialogue and debate. The alternatives of external control, legal compulsion and threats of punishment may be

more effective in the short term and sometimes the only way to achieve some goal, but in the long term they run counter to the spirit of the open society.”

Recent events pose substantial challenges to this conclusion. The serial failures of Facebook to adequately police the dissemination of hate speech and fabricated political sites on its platform point to the limits of voluntary agreements and suggest that “legal compulsion and the threat of punishment” may be “the only way to achieve some goal”.

But in our deliberations on this issue, and on the future of the news media, revisiting Denis’s meticulously argued discussion of the conditions and dilemmas facing us, and the core philosophical principles that should inform our choices, remains an essential resource.

If Denis was here now I know he would identify problems with my argument and raise pertinent questions. Insisting with his characteristic courtesy that I take counter arguments seriously and supporting his own position with evidence drawn from a truly prodigious range of exemplars and references. As always I would be in his intellectual debt.

We have chosen to end this session with the most famous of all the Irish farewells, *The Parting Glass*. Denis came from an Irish family. He loved ideas and argument but he also loved life, and his was a life well lived in every sense. I miss him and I hope you will join me in raising a parting glass to celebrate a truly remarkable man.