

## Honoring Roger Silverstone (1945-2006): A Brief Introduction

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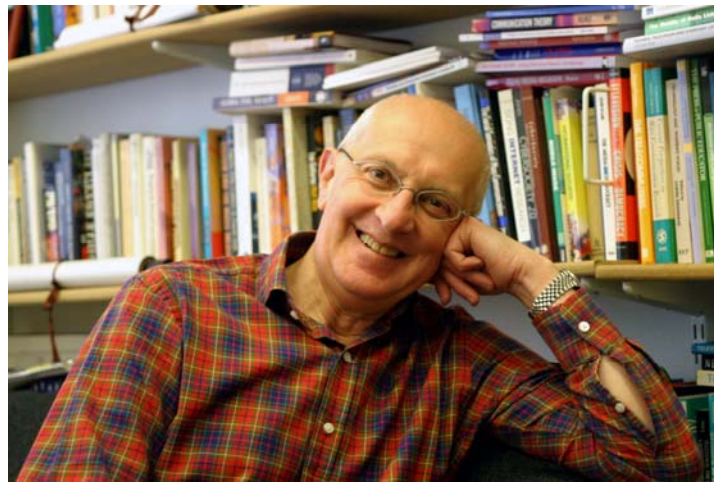


Photo: Roger Silverstone

A new field of knowledge, such as media, requires many things: institutions where knowledge can be disseminated on an everyday basis, a culture of debate and dispute through which new ideas can emerge, and some remarkable individuals whose energy and insight seem to embody the values and ambitions of the field. Roger Silverstone who died in July 2006, was without question one of those remarkable individuals who embodied the best of what media research could be - not least because of his commitment, going far beyond personal ambition, to build the institutions and culture that the field needed.

Roger Silverstone, through the link between LSE and USC which he did so much to forge, was involved in the discussions that led to the formation of the *International Journal of Communication*. When he died, Larry Gross and Manuel Castells approached me to commission essays in his honor for the journal's launch. The tribute essays published now, together with those which will follow over the next few months, will in their range of subjects and styles, bring home the remarkable breadth and depth of Roger Silverstone's contribution to media research over the past three decades.

After studying Geography at Oxford University, Roger entered publishing and television production, working at the BBC. He then decided in his late 20s to join the emerging field of media research, and started a doctorate at the London School of Economics under Donald Macrae, obtaining his PhD in 1980. His first book *The Message of Television* (1981) analysed the broader narrative patterns

underlying television's storytelling power. His teaching career had meanwhile begun at Bedford College, University of London and then from 1976 at Brunel University where he stayed until 1991, becoming Reader in Sociology. His study of the making of a BBC documentary, *Framing Science* (1985), is still unsurpassed as a study of factual television. In the late 1980s and early 1990s he founded and directed at Brunel the Centre for Research into Innovation, Culture and Technology, where his interest in how not just television, but a range of information and communication technologies, become 'domesticated' in everyday life resulted in important publications (*Television and Everyday Life* (1994) and *Consuming Technologies* (edited with Eric Hirsch, 1992)) which remain standard reference-points.

In 1991, Roger Silverstone moved to Sussex University as its first Professor of Media Studies and Chair of the Media Studies Subject Group where he built up its media teaching at all levels and worked on his path-breaking text, *Why Study the Media?* (1999), since translated into ten languages. In 1998, he was appointed as the London School of Economics' first Professor of Media and Communications where he took on the challenge of consolidating and expanding its media teaching and research, first developed there by his former Brunel colleague Sonia Livingstone in the early 1990s and championed by LSE's then Director, Anthony Giddens. His return to LSE was marked by a major personal triumph when under his leadership the Department of Media and Communications became LSE's first new department for more than 20 years.

He continued to work on new challenges and in the year before he died, in spite of a period of serious illness, he completed the manuscript of his last book *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis* (published in October 2006 by Polity Press). This remarkable book opens up a philosophically informed debate on media's role in the contested moral fabric of the contemporary world. He also formed the POLIS centre in collaboration with University of the Arts/ London College of Communications, as a forum for researching such issues in terms directly relevant to journalism's fast-changing practices (<http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/polis/> ). He was greatly looking forward to what POLIS might achieve in shifting debates in this difficult area.

When in August I was asked to commission these essays in Roger Silverstone's honor, I decided that they must cover the full breadth of his work, and represent through their styles and authors the full range of his ambitions for what media research could be. Because of the short period available before the journal's launch at the end of 2006, some of those essays cannot be published now (in December 2006), and will become available over the next few months: essays by Daniel Dayan, Marie Gillespie and Paddy Scannell, and a co-authored essay by Marita Sturken and Dana Polan. For now, however, I am delighted that we can begin this series of tributes with the personal and passionate reflections of Stephen Coleman, Matt Hills, Kate Lacey, Bill Melody and John Durham Peters.

As guest editor of these essays, I will keep my own personal comments brief: I have already had my say elsewhere, if in more formal style.<sup>i</sup>

One of the most remarkable things about Roger was the breadth of his engagement with media, whether as technology, social form, or narrative, and whether in relation to identity, poetics, ethics or politics. One of his key themes, as discussed in a number of these tribute essays, was media's role within

the texture of everyday life itself. The salience of this theme for him was closely linked to his refusal to hide behind the barriers – between public and private, between ‘academic life’ and the rest of life – on which most of us rely.

Another remarkable thing about Roger was his refusal to see media as anything other than a central part of the humanities and social sciences’ broader debates about the human condition. He effortlessly transcended the false boundaries which those hostile to the field place around ‘media studies’. While, as a new field, media research has inevitably been eclectic, few could match the range of references and intellectual frameworks that Roger introduced: from Isaiah Berlin, Levi-Strauss and Greimas, to Donald Winnicott, Michel de Certeau, and Emanuel Levinas. While he was always modest about his vast reading, this was one way in which he enriched the materials with which all of us could think.

Still another remarkable thing about Roger was his commitment to finding a writing style that would enlarge the readership for media research and convince new readers of its intellectual and moral salience. While, for most of us, writing style is the side-effect of our thought processes – a hasty covering that our thoughts wear, when under pressure we manage to get them down onto paper – Roger worked at and revised his writing style during the course of his career. That style moved from the elegance of *The Message of Television* (1981) – with its striking aphorisms and cool mastery of a host of complex theoretical frameworks – to the densely allusive writing of *Television and Everyday Life* (1994), before changing quite radically in his last two books, *Why Study the Media?* (1999) and *Media and Morality* (2006). In these later books, Roger aimed at a much wider, and as yet still unknown, audience which had, he assumed no doubt rightly, little tolerance for the endlessly qualified sentences and the reference-and-footnote-encrusted surface of conventional academic prose. Instead, he wanted to write directly, urgently: to speak to his readers in a distinctive voice.<sup>ii</sup> In this stylistic seriousness, Roger, alone I believe in his generation of media researchers, took up the stylistic challenge of Raymond Williams.

I knew Roger’s writings in detail long before I met him, when he examined my Ph.D. thesis. Naturally, his rich and complex writings inspired in me some nervousness before that meeting, but when we met, he was gentle and self-effacing. Although our emphases were inevitably different in many respects, I felt closer to Roger’s writings on media, and to their intellectual debts and concerns, than to any others, and I joined the London School of Economics in 2001 because I wanted to work closely with him. I had the good fortune to witness at close hand how, with great energy and charisma, Roger led the way to the Department of Media and Communications’ formation, LSE’s first new department for more than two decades.

Our friendship survived the stresses of day-to-day work in a busy department, and was still vivid when we last had lunch, three weeks before he died. None could match Roger’s ability to swerve between enjoyable gossip, abstract debate and disarming self-reflection. I felt his generosity that day, and it was a generosity of intellect and feeling, I believe, that animated his whole, remarkable body of writings. Along with so many others, I will be searching for ways to repay that generosity for years to come.

### **Biography**

Nick Couldry is Professor of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths College, University of London, UK. He is the author of four books including most recently *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (Routledge, 2003) and *Listening Beyond the Echoes: Media, Ethics and Agency in an uncertain World* (Paradigm Books, US, 2006).

### **Reference**

Schwarz, B. (2006) The 'Poetics' of Communication in J. Curran and D. Morley, eds, *Media and Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge, 19-29.

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<sup>i</sup> See my obituary of Roger Silverstone, *The Independent*, 20 July 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> For a sensitive, if critical, review of Roger Silverstone's late style, see Schwarz (2006: 25-26).