

Helen Wood, visiting scholar September 2010

Helen Wood, PhD and Reader in Media and Communications at De Montfort University in Leicester, UK. Her research mainly focuses on television studies, media theory, gender and social change.

How would you define your research?

- I'm interested in television as a form of sociability rather than television as just 'text' and I want to locate television in social action and interaction. My research has been mostly about trying to capture how people speak to, and around, the television as a part of a broader set of interests which relate to gender and social change.

- I try to locate the technologies within the environment in which they happen and take place, so to put text and reception together as a dynamic process rather than to discuss text and consumption as distinct entities. I've worked a lot on popular culture, talk-shows, and reality television mostly because they involve ordinary people in the media which further blurs traditional boundaries of text and context. As such I take a cultural studies approach which works with both humanities and social sciences, so I try to work across interdisciplinary borders.

Has any of the material you have gathered surprised you?

- Yes, all the time. Particularly in the last audience research project I've done with Beverley Skeggs which was about trying to capture how reality television enters into social relations. We thought that this reality-TV must be encouraging misanthropy, so much of it founded upon making moral judgements of other people, and in the UK in particular, so many of these reality tv programmes were structured by class. We thought that they might be having a grave impact on class relations. Whilst we did find this, we also actually found that people made great attempts to reach for empathy with participants on television, as viewers made comparisons with their own lives. It was the way in which our viewers could construct empathy or make moral judgements that told us about their class locations, rather than actually a straight forward mapping of affiliation based on identity. Whilst the programmes suggested pessimism our audience research offered us some optimism.

- I'm also working with a new project about women and television where we look at the history of television and it's relationship to gender and social change. We are curious about how broadcasting established itself in those early years. It's curious that the post-war years were so central to changing gender relations and also to the development of television, yet there's no rigorous history of the relationship between the two.

- We do a lot of television studies in the present and without much knowledge of the past. Everything is seemingly 'new' but our historical research keeps turning up precedents for what we see today. We are going to do some interviews with older women and their memories of television. Media scholars in their pursuit of the next new thing often focus on youth and tend to forget what it might have been like to adopt earlier technology.

What would your research be about if you had all the money in the world?

– I would like to bring together people with different expertise like film studies, anthropology, television studies and sociology. People use many different texts, technologies, forms with ease in one day and there is no distinct border between the different types in terms of consumption. Yet subjects develop specialism in media which puts up boundaries, but I would like us to work in the same way as people consume, across platforms.

– I think in unpacking this relationship between different media and texts we can begin to understand what media literacy actually is. We need a model that will help us understand how this easy movement between media works. This might help us have a more direct focus upon what we want from technology and what impacts we want it to have on our social life, social inequalities, and social relations. Then we would not only react to technology, but also be more proactive in our theorising and thinking.

What is your impression from visiting Linnaeus University and Sweden?

The University is a vibrant and exciting place and the people I've met have been extremely generous in terms of sharing ideas, incorporating and adopting new ideas. It's also good to be at a place that has such a refreshing range of debate, an openness about the perimeters of cultural sociology, but also an openness between students and professors. I've really enjoyed my time here.