

PLANNING AN ACADEMIC CAREER: A REPORT ON A YECREA PANEL AT THE THIRD EUROPEAN COMMUNICATION CONFERENCE, HAMBURG, 2010

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AMBITIONS, UNCERTAINTIES, DECISIONS

In this brief essay, we review insights from a European experience exchange panel which brought together scholars from diverse epistemological, intellectual and regional locations to reflect on their careers. It was with two contrasting questions in mind that we set out to organise an experience exchange panel: on the one hand we asked ourselves, how best can an academic career be planned? That is, how do we seek out the right opportunities? How do we prepare ourselves for unexpected moves, and how, if at all, do we prepare for intellectual changes of direction? What counts as important in building an academic CV? On the other hand, we were perplexed by the range of stories around us about successful careers being founded on chance meetings, impulsive ideas and unanticipated dilemmas. How then, can a career be planned at all? It was with these two opposing views in mind that we set out on this task of bringing together scholars at diverse points in their careers to focus on three themes, as they spoke to a new generation of researchers. We focused on (1) aspects of planning; (2) decisions involved in mobility; and (3) dilemmas in the early days of an emergent career. In selecting these themes, we knew we would open up a European network of experiences, where 'what counts' and 'what plans are the best', would soon become relative questions. And this all, doubtless, in the context of intense competition, financial uncertainties and a changing field of media and communication research which throws up newer interdisciplinarity every day.

We intended this session to open up a dialogic space rather than a lecture space, and to identify questions of importance and uncertainties of significance rather than distribute fixed answers waiting to be handed out. The session was attended by about one hundred young scholars and academics, with nine speakers sharing insights from across Europe.

Speakers were Nico Carpentier (Belgium), Uwe Hasebrink (Germany), Saila Poutiainen (Finland), Nuria Simelio (Spain), Michele Sorice (Italy), Roberto Suarez (Germany), Tomáš Trampota (Czech Republic), Elena Vartanova (Russian Federation) and Tamara Witschge (UK). The high attendance and subsequent positive feedback draws attention to the fact that the workshop fulfilled a need, one that is in keeping with ECREA missions of cross-cultural exchanges as well as YECREA ambitions of better supporting emergent scholars at various stages in their doctoral work. In what follows we recap central insights from what was said on the day, following our three key themes of planning, mobility and early career dilemmas.

PLANNING

In our first theme we asked scholars about their personal encounters with planned careers. **Uwe Hasebrink** reminded us that while careers cannot be planned to their last details, in reality, they do, however, need to be planned from the outset as careers cannot be left to accident. The guiding principle, however, must not be an instrumental one as Hasebrink stressed, but rather a question of following one's passions and identifying what one's core research strengths and interests are. He reminded us also of a persistent division between theoretically bent researchers and empirically inclined ones, and between qualitative strengths and quantitative ones. While these binaries are meant to be transcended, they are often indicators of what one is good at. So, for instance, a survey researcher who has spent many years designing, administering and analysing surveys in media and communication research has a demonstrable strength in quantitative methodologies, as an experienced interviewer or observer has in qualitative methods. These strengths are, as Hasebrink noted, crucial to highlight and exploit in the job-seeking process. This passion for one's key strengths, according to Hasebrink, has a way of making itself evident in a CV, something distinctly different from the strategically placed, and perhaps more instrumental, 'evidence' of quality found in tailor-made and professionalised cover letters which are often treated with scepticism. Also, it is important to remember that one's interests in the field of media and communication are not necessarily always evidenced by an endless list of publications but, rather, a well-rounded academic experience spanning projects, networks, publications, and conferences among other things. For **Nico Carpentier**, too, it was a question of pursuing one's own talents but being realistic throughout. Carpentier reminded us that not everyone will have equally successful careers, as competition is intense. However, it is indeed possible to have successful careers which are built on accurate identification of strengths and talents and, most importantly, evidence of activity. Far from getting lost in the details of one's thesis topic, the real agenda should be, in the words of both Hasebrink and Carpentier, to be active, develop well-rounded networks, publish and put one's work out there. **Tamara Witschge** stressed similar points about developing active research profiles with a word of caution – one's agenda behind networking must necessarily stem from intellectual passion rather than overtly instrumental goals, for these make themselves apparent in interpersonal interactions and ultimately do not further the task of networking. Witschge spoke of how organising a conference and designing its intellectual narrative had provided her an excellent intellectual experience that later turned out to be transformative, for without passion – something Hasebrink and Carpentier stressed many times – she notes, confidence too is absent. And this is all linked to endless frustrations, as **Tomáš Trampota** noted, for applications follow countless rounds of disappointments even when one has done everything right. The key then, beyond passion, commitment and a diverse research profile, is perseverance. The striking concurrence amongst the speakers on planning was not simply that all stressed to varying extents the unplanned nature of their careers but that all outlined how a strong commitment to key research interests and to diversification of activities as a young scholar are central to successful careers.

MOBILITY

For young scholars, moving across borders for early career positions poses a lot of opportunities but also potential challenges, as application practices may differ in different national contexts. **Roberto Suarez** stressed the importance of building a cross-European network and of being ambitious and, most of all, persistent – to ‘fight for it’, as he put it. Suarez relocated to Germany from Spain on one of the EU’s Marie Curie postdoctoral scholarships. Using his experiences of applying for his Marie Curie postdoctoral fellowship as an example, Suarez told us of how he applied twice for the fellowship and was rejected twice. After receiving his second rejection, Suarez contested the decision formally and was successful in reversing the decision. Before starting the application process, Suarez was proactive and initiated contact with established academics at different European universities, testifying to the importance of not giving up when we face obstacles and rejections. He also told us that the ECREA Summer School had provided an important source of contacts for potential host institutions. **Saila Poutiainen** was also proactive in her approach. Addressing the issue of differences in application practices in Europe and the US, Poutiainen noted the emphasis on ‘paper work’ that characterises the US application process. Recommendation letters particularly play a major role. Applying for postgraduate positions in the late 1990s, Poutiainen described how she was reading brick-sized books on the universities she was considering prior to deciding on the University of Massachusetts. While this studious part of Poutiainen’s application process was partly due to the scarcity of elaborate university websites 15 years ago, Poutiainen later learned that ‘shopping around’ – visiting universities and talking to professors – was considered a common practice in the US. While shopping around at universities and conferences is still very much an important part of the US application practices, Suarez’s story shows that being proactive and talking to potential collaborators and employers can create opportunities on both sides of the Atlantic and across Europe.

DILEMMAS

The expectations that scholars are faced with in the early stages of their career trajectories may vary depending on the type of academic position they are applying for and where the job is based. For example, whether they are applying for positions funded by departments, universities, national research councils, the EU, pan European networks, whether it is a research based position, involves teaching responsibilities, is a tenure track position or a fixed contract position. Meeting these different expectations regarding publications, successful funding applications, teaching experience and experience from collaborative research projects creates a range of dilemmas for young scholars. Speaking of his experience in the interdisciplinary field of philosophy, reception studies, semiotics and cultural studies in Italy, **Michele Sorice** shared his experiences as a young scholar when he faced challenges of both navigating an emerging field and localistic power struggles. At the time, semiotics was new in the social sciences in Italy and subject to a lack of confidence. Instead of being dissuaded, Sorice saw this as an opportunity to carve out a unique position for himself as a researcher. Today, he encourages his students similarly to position themselves in relation to strategic research fields by creating a ‘unique mix’ of research interests and competencies. Sorice noted that venturing down new avenues in this way involves taking risks, but stressed that an academic career requires you to be bold. And it is this strategic positioning that Sorice stressed as his way of circumventing the importance of belonging to what he called an academic lobby in building an academic career in Italy. From a Russian perspective, **Elena Vartanova** addressed dilemmas brought about by tensions between funded, contracted and independent research. Vartanova suggested that these tensions are accentuated by the lack of funding in academic research institutions in the field of communication, me-

dia and journalism coupled with the media industries' capacity for providing funding through contracted research. In the Soviet context of Vartanova's early career, this entailed political dilemmas – dilemmas that Vartanova argued can also be found, albeit in less explicit forms, in academia across Europe: choices between practical research that resembles propaganda versus independent, academic research. **Nuria Simelio** talked about dilemmas between evaluation systems and passion. Simelio argued that the competitiveness of performance indicators is antithetical to passion and collective efforts and interpersonal influences. Against this backdrop, trying to move ahead in academia requires privileging research over teaching. And this is difficult for young scholars, because teaching often represents a vital source of income and a way to establish a foothold in a department. It is thus a question of balancing what you want and what is viable.

Responding to questions about dilemmas of age versus experience raised in the question and answer session, Hasebrink and Carpentier argued that EU policies are bringing about a focus on speedy completion. At the same time, they both stressed the importance of being ready, of confidence and maturity, as well as a CV that demonstrates a diverse range of scholarly engagement. The latter point was also stressed by Suarez who felt that his involvement in different side projects was instrumental in getting his postdoctoral position.

PASSION AND PERSEVERANCE: OR A GAMBLER'S LIFE?

During the question and answer session, Alenka Jelen drew a parallel that passion is required to maintain perseverance and a gambler's life. Using an example from gambling research¹, Alenka Jelen pointed to similarities in the ways in which academics and gamblers enjoy the constant challenge: academics resemble gamblers in their commitment to their vocation which is often so strong that it is detrimental to their mental health and family relations. Moreover, both pursue financially insecure career paths that can benefit from strategic planning but which, crucially, also involve an element of luck, and can be characterised by emotional highs and lows. Finally, both types of career path are structured around self-management. This ties in with the two overarching themes that emerged from the experiences shared by speakers in their presentations: passion and perseverance. Across countries, scholarly generations and sub-disciplines, speakers emphasised the importance of perseverance. For example, both Nico Carpentier and Roberto Suarez advised young scholars not to give up and not to be discouraged by rejections. Dovetailing on this, Tomáš Trampota warned that applications are often rejected even when we have submitted proficient project proposals and built a promising CV, calling for diligence and not taking disappointments as defeats. Here, Tamara Witschge argued for the need for academic careers to be grounded in passion, because passion is ultimately what will help foster the perseverance that is required to prosper in academia. Elena Vartanova reiterated this relationship between passion and perseverance, arguing that commitment to influence how the world is understood helps balance challenges of the isolation of writing, low salaries, making ends meet and work overload that characterise academic careers in media and communication (and gambling).

ENDNOTES

- 1 The example was taken from Pat Bazeley's book *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo*.

NOTES ON SPEAKERS

Nico Carpentier is Senior Lecturer at the Social Sciences department of the Uni-

versity of Loughborough. He is also vice-president of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA).

Uwe Hasebrink (born 1958) is Director of the Hans Bredow Institute for Media Research and Professor for Empirical Communication Research at the University of Hamburg.

Saila Poutiainen (Ph.D. in Communication, University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA) is tenured university lecturer and the head of the unit of Speech Communication in the Institute of Behavioural Sciences (former Department of Speech Sciences) at the University of Helsinki, Finland.

Núria Simelio, Chair of the ECREA Women's Network, is a Lecturer at the Faculty of Communication Studies, Autonomous University of Barcelona. Her principal area of research is focused on gender and cultural diversity in the media.

Michele Sorice is Professor of Political Communication and Media Studies at LUISS University, Rome, where he is also director of the Centre for Media and Communication Studies.

Roberto Suárez Candell works as a Marie Curie Post-doctoral researcher at the Hans Bredow Institute for Media Research in Hamburg. Since February 2010, he has been in charge of a project that analyses the redefinition and reposition of public service broadcasting in the multiplatform media scenario [www.psb-digital.eu].

Tomáš Trampota is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Media Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University; there, and at Vyšší odborná škola publicistiky, he has taught courses on Sociology of News, Media and Society, Media Content Analysis, and Analysis of Media.

Elena Vartanova is Full Professor, Dean and Chair in Media Theory and Media Economics at the Faculty of Journalism, Lomonosov Moscow State University.

Tamara Witschge is a lecturer at the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. Tamara's main research interests are media and democracy, changes in the journalistic field, and equality and diversity in the public sphere. She is the General Secretary of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA).