

A Sense of Wonder: Remembering Martin Barker

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It seems only fitting that any tribute to Martin Barker should appear in the journal which he founded, *Participations*, which over the last twenty years has continued to reflect his on-going passion and dedication to the field of audience studies. As joint editor for a number of those years (I honestly cannot quite remember when Martin first asked me to join him in the task), I was privileged to be on the receiving end of many excited emails when he discovered a new angle, a new author, or a new approach that had inspired him. And Martin was often inspired, his enthusiasm being one of his most endearing qualities as an academic, and as a human being.

Participations began in November 2003 with an editorial written by Martin and Ernest Mathjis brimming with determination – and wonder:

We believe audience and reception studies matter and we are prepared to make a fuss about it, up to the choice of the title. We claim they matter a lot to whoever is in media studies, whoever is involved in media policy, in media economics, sociology, psychology, basically to anyone who has any interest in fields of cultural inquiry. They matter because they give room to a basic sense of wonder about the relationships between media and publics. (Barker and Mathjis, 2003)

Participations was Martin's domain where that sense of wonder was expressed over and over again in his editorials, as well as in his intense appreciation of every paper that came his way.

Perhaps one of the most idiosyncratic characteristics of *Participations* was Martin's adherence to the principle of open refereeing which ensured that authors would know who was reviewing their work, and referees would know who had written the paper which they were reading. Martin was firmly of the opinion that this not only improved the quality of the refereeing, but also helped foster collaboration and collegiality in the field. Although this was indeed the case most of the time, as I know only too well, there were moments when the 'editor' had to intercede in order to make sure the right tone was achieved in relaying the

comments. For the most part, however, the open-refereeing system proved to be far superior to the alternative, especially when it came to early career academics, many of whom have been devastated by a harsh review from an anonymous referee, and I would include myself here.

I first met Martin in the late 1990s, when I was one of those early career academics who had only recently completed her Ph.D. Because of my involvement with the Australian Teachers of Media, and work on the Media Curriculum Framework for the Victorian Certificate of Education, I was invited to the New Zealand Teachers of Media conference held at Auckland University where Martin was a keynote speaker. Although my Ph.D research had involved a year-long 'ethnographic' study in a girl's high school in Melbourne, I was asked to talk about the media violence debate, an issue that was already appearing on the media curriculum in schools and about which I thought I knew something at that time. The use of scare quotes around ethnography is deliberate here because as a method it had become somewhat controversial in Australia following an essay (Nightingale, 1989) that questioned its application in a number of significant audience studies in the 80s. Despite the controversy, I would still argue that my study was indeed ethnographic (Turnbull, 1993).

Be that as it may, I was somewhat taken aback when Martin came into the room where I was presenting, not only because he was the esteemed keynote speaker at the conference, but also the co-editor of *Ill Effects: The Media Violence Debate* (Barker and Petley, 1997) and therefore probably much better qualified to talk about the issue than myself. Nevertheless, I soldiered on thinking that the media teachers in the room probably needed some background into the ways in which the audience had been framed in theory and in practice in order to tackle the problematic notion of media effects. I also had some revealing examples drawn from recent kerfuffles in Australia where the finger was mistakenly pointed at the popular media (Turnbull, 2001). After the presentation, Martin was effusive and invited me for drinks, an event which was the beginning of our lasting friendship and collaboration even though I talked *way* too much. What we agreed upon was not only the value and significance of audience research, but also that in order to understand how people made sense of the media, you had to understand where they were coming from. As simplistic as this sounds, it is of course the hardest thing to achieve. That, of course, is both the challenge and the fascination of media audience research.

Martin's last editorial introduction to Issue 18, volume 2 in 2021 was tinged with regret, he did not think we had paid enough attention to poetry readers, poetry performance audiences, gallery and museum visitors, but there was also a sense of pride that *Participations* had steered a steady course over the last eighteen years and 38 issues. He was also proud of the 'ethos' that had grown up around the journal, one that encouraged authors to develop their contributions rather than simply rejecting them out of hand. Martin would often send a paper back two or three times with helpful comments for further development. He was always reluctant to let one go when he could see even just a glimmer of hope. Optimism was another of his endearing characteristics, although this faded towards the end as a consequence of his ill-health.

I knew he was dying, but it was with immense sadness that I read the email from his Judith informing me he had gone. This also included the beautiful aside that Martin would have been extremely miffed that the Queen stole his thunder by choosing to die on the same day. I laughed and I cried. I could just imagine his indignation. I also think Martin would have been really chuffed to read how much he was appreciated and would have loved to have been a respondent in the room when it came to a discussion of his contribution to the field. I also know he would have been delighted that *Participations* will continue and that his legacy will indeed endure. Vale Martin. You are much missed, but your sense of wonder continues to inspire us all.

Biographical Note

Sue Turnbull is Senior Professor of Communication and Media at the University of Wollongong. Her publications include *Media Audiences* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020), *The TV Crime Drama* (Edinburgh University Press 2014) and *Media and Communications in Australia* with co-editor Bridget Griffen-Foley (Routledge 2023).

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