

From The Tartan Other to Cecil the Lion: 2015 Dissertation series

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2016/03/17/from-gustatory-nationalism-to-cecil-the-lion-2015-dissertation-series/

2016-3-17

Ruth Garland is a PhD researcher in Media and Communications at the London School of Economics, and is co-editor, with Bart Cammaerts and Nick Anstead, of the *Media@LSE Working Paper series*. She is researching into government communications and reviews books regularly for [LSE Review of Books](#).

“What does national security really mean?”, I asked my companion over a mint tea at a café near Hampstead Heath. Before she could answer, I stunned her into silence with the idea that the conventional definition of security is an “imaginary experience” rather than a straightforward assessment of personal or collective safety. I had just read a theoretical paper by a talented LSE masters student, [Kathryn Higgins](#), which questions the very starting points for discussion about what constitutes security.

I’ve spent an absorbing month or so snatched from time taken writing up my PhD thesis, to edit the 20 best Media and Communications Masters dissertations from the 2014-15 cohort, of which Kathryn’s is one, for uploading on to the website as part of the [Media@LSE dissertation series](#). The students had just five months to conduct an original piece of research, not to mention the literature review and conceptual framework. The projects featured here are all novel and exciting, if necessarily small-scale, but taking them as a whole, what impresses me is the thoroughness and engagement with modernity, change and critique which is hard to achieve even for established academics.



Alex Salmond, alone and in the dark

Politics and the asymmetric exercise of power are never far from the surface. I must admit to being frequently irritated at Alex Salmond’s anti-English rhetoric but is it fair, as [Ross Longton](#) demonstrates in *The Tartan Other*, that in the British online press at least, he is so often photographed alone, in shadow and against a dark background?

In an analysis of photographs of forced migrants distributed by Associated Press and Reuters, [Woo-chul Kim](#) found another marked bias: Syrian refugees were depicted as remote ‘oriental sufferers’, while migrants in the Calais camps were seen as more threatening ‘folk devils’. Could this help to explain David Cameron’s insistence on giving priority to Syrian refugees over those already in Europe?

Others questioned the capacity of mainstream journalism to adequately reflect socioeconomic and cultural complexity. Financial journalism was supposed to be our watchdog, so why did it fail to draw attention to the impending US financial crisis of 2007, asks [Tran Thuy-Anh Huynh](#)? Journalists have been accused of relying too much on biased sources within the finance industry, but, against a backdrop of uncertainty, ambiguity and professional risk, they also faced considerable constraints in the struggle to understand, let alone report, what was happening.

The St Louis suburb of Ferguson hit national and international headlines when Michael Brown was shot dead by police in August 2014. [John Ray’s](#) analysis of network news found that the event and the location were presented in isolation, in opposition to the nation as a whole, and as a place set apart from its surroundings.

[Ciara Spencer](#) examined coverage of the Queen’s visit to Ireland in May 2011, finding very different depictions of reconciliation vs the “dissident other”.





Different depictions of reconciliation vs the "dissident other".

The concept of the disadvantaged 'other' features in several papers. [Maria Paola Pofi](#) asks why there was so little coverage of the massacre of more than 100 people by Boko Haram in Baga, Nigeria, in January 2015, the same month that the world witnessed the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris. In her research into perceptions of the plight of refugees, [Isabel Kuhn](#) found that although Angelina Jolie was successful in engaging the emotions of viewers, the very act of identifying with her led to a lower level of engagement in the subjects of the story – the refugees. Is the use of celebrities more a case of NGO branding than informing or fundraising?



Angelina Jolie's speech on World Refugee Day 2009

This generation of researchers has grown up with social media, so it isn't surprising that so many of them are adept at posing questions about the social dimensions of such technologies, especially in the lives of young people. In *Tweens Logged In*, [Kalina Asparouhova](#) interviews 10-12-year-olds, and finds that although they are more sensible than their parents might think in their assessments of how to behave on the web, their social media literacy is 'shallow' and requires further investigation. The digital consumption of music by young people is not an unalloyed success, as [Alessandro Volonte](#) and [Eva Tkave](#) found, while [Arina Vlasova](#) questions the practices of online retailers in offering different prices to different online customers according to their online behaviour. On a more positive note, the photo blog *Humans of New York* (HONY), which portrays daily life in one of the most iconic and stereotyped cities in the world, helps to foster "a more cosmopolitan understanding of cities and urban life," according to [Mariele O'Reilly](#). [Ana Ecaterina Tan](#) looks at the success or otherwise of 'crowd creation' by the 'open collaborative production company' hitRECORD, in providing an alternative space and voice within the context of the dominant mainstream media industry.

There is much concern at a lack of engagement in politics among young people. 'Leaders Live' was a Youtube series of live streamed debates between young people (16-25) and political candidates taking part in the UK 2015 General Election campaign, involving both offline and online (in the studio) participation. [Matilde Giglio](#) concludes from her interviews with participants that the ability to network and to operate well on the internet acts as a form of capital which creates an unequal level of participation.

Some of the projects show a striking level of reflexivity. Here at the LSE, it is clear that the international student, as part of the "middling transnational hypermobile class", is a growing demographic, but how does this group of young people perceive and portray itself? [Nguyen Quynh Tram Doan](#) analysed peer-led discussions in International Lounge, an internet forum for international students in the UK, and found that individuals used personal strategies to utilise and display mobility capital to establish a globalised identity.

Being a foreigner has its stresses, so for the home-sick expatriate, food is a poignant reminder of home but it can also be used to exercise state power over nationals living abroad, argues [Felicia Wong](#), with reference to the state-sponsored "gustatory and olfactory dimensions" of Singapore Day.



Singapore Day, New York 2012



Kam, a Burmese immigrant, anxious in Bangkok, from Pimtong Boonyapatano's visual semiotic analysis of unequal depictions of the Burmese in Thai films.

I carried out in-depth interviews for my own research but I was impressed with [Steffi Lau](#)'s courage, determination and mastery of technique in getting Asian American males to examine stereotypical media portrayals, asking them how these depictions impacted on their own masculine identities. The respondents resisted such portrayals of Asian-American men as either 'sidekicks' or comic figures, yet still carried the burden of "unwanted identities" which led to damaging perceptions of themselves and others. Such marginalisation can run very deep, as one of her respondents 'Robert', revealed in this poignant comment:

I have deep shame around the fact that my father is an Asian man. It makes me fearful...I don't feel safe living in America with an Asian father. I couldn't look to the man closest to me for a role model. [emotional, frustrated] It's not safe to be him so I didn't want to become him. I didn't trust my father enough to acknowledge the fact that this was a man who had wounded me through childhood, simply by being an immigrant. I didn't want to admit that my childhood was imperfect because of his racial experience. I didn't want to acknowledge his experiences, his pain.

This brings us, finally, to Cecil the Lion, along with Tilly the whale and sheep sent for slaughter. By examining media coverage of the death of the world famous 'Zimbabwean' lion, the killing by a captive whale of her trainer, and the mistreatment of sheep in a halal abattoir, [Sana Ali](#) uses Foucault's notion of biopolitics to expose the contradictions in our notion of human-animal difference. Through the personalisation or depersonalisation of non-human animals, readers are able to see themselves as un-implicated in their exploitation and suffering, while assigning blame and moral outrage in a direction which serves other purposes.

As a former biology student, I'm struggling to review Allen Meek's book based on Foucault's concept of biopolitics at the moment^[1], as it is not an intuitive concept, so I think it would help to re-read Sana's dissertation. Interestingly, one of the case studies in Meek's book refers to one of Hitler's early acts as Chancellor. In April 1933, a law was passed banning kosher slaughter on the grounds that it was 'inhuman'.

All 20 of these thought-provoking pieces of work are available [here](#).

By Ruth Garland

[1] Biopolitical Media: Catastrophe, Immunity and Bare Life by Allen Meek (Routledge) 2016.

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science