

French lessons

Lucy Maddox on what we can learn from psychology's media prominence across the Channel

I was in France recently, to climb up a mountain, and on the way back I was transfixed in the airport shop by the amount of psychology-related magazines they had there. Psychology seems to be voraciously consumed in the French media, for reasons I'm not clear on (although perhaps I'll convince *The Psychologist* to fund an exploratory trip to find out).

Psychologies magazine originated in France but has spread its reach across La Manche. I spoke to Rebecca Alexander, Dossier Editor. She told me about several psychotherapist and psychologist contributors in this month's edition. 'This issue has articles from Lucy Beresford, a psychotherapist who does a dilemma page every month. The idea is people write to someone actually qualified with a difficult problem. We also have Ros Taylor, clinical psychologist, writing about finding your inner leader, and Dominique Picard, professor of social psychology in Paris, writing about daring to have difficult conversations.' Rebecca Alexander thought that psychologists brought unique skills to the magazine. 'Readers appreciate hearing direct from the experts. There is generally a real interest in what psychologists have to say... There is so much comment available, on Twitter for example, which is not really informed. Readers like psychologists because they are experts in their area and may have been studying it for 10 to 15 years.'

I spoke to contributor Ros Taylor, clinical psychologist, about her experiences. Her current feature for *Psychologies* is on leadership, but she said, 'I've done quite a few. It's a great experience.' Ros Taylor works in a business context, and has written

extensively on confidence, leadership and behaviour change. Speaking about the pros and cons of working with the media, she thought that 'initially it helps a little... it doesn't help you to get business but it helps to get your name out there. More than that it helps you to simplify what you do and be succinct. In terms of



communication it's a very good exercise.' Ros feels the pitfalls are few: 'only if you don't come across well'. Her tip on how to minimise the chance of this happening was to stick to what you know: 'Sometimes people ask you to comment on stuff which isn't your area of expertise. I just leave that alone. It's worth digging a little and being sure.'

I told Ros about the range of psychological publications on the shelves in France, and asked her if she thought we were more reticent about being in the press in the UK. 'Actually I always thought we were quite good', she said. 'Especially with *Big Brother*... psychologists were like lambs to the slaughter with that one. There were oodles of psychologists buzzing around

that... I think we're OK in the media. Although could we have a higher profile? Probably yes.'

Ros thought changes in television providers had influenced how much psychologists were involved in programming. 'I think we've lost our way a bit... So much TV is now in the hands of small media companies. Getting in front of people is difficult.' Ros thought being more proactive could help: 'To say how could we help you with programming?... What we can do to help them rather than the other way around.'

With Ros's experience of leadership coaching I couldn't resist asking her about the coverage of the political party conferences, which at the time of writing were in full swing. She thought that there had been missed opportunities for psychological comment in the media. She contrasted it with coverage of the US elections. 'I did a lot of work on Clinton and then on Obama... looking at footage and commenting.' Ros had been asked to compare Obama and McCain. 'I looked at their sense of humour and what worked and what didn't. Obama was very positive and gentle in his humour, which I viewed as a predictor of success... I was asked to put my view as a psychologist.' This contrasts with the lack of psychological comment on the party conferences in the UK. 'We should be doing more,' said Taylor.

I asked Ros what she thought of Ed Miliband's speech. Her view was that it was 'ill conceived... he is trying to carve out his own way but he didn't do it terribly well...'. She made reference to Miliband's body language and facial expressions. Ros also thought his use of comparison to previous internal leaders was unhelpful – a more outlooking approach comparing himself to opposition leaders would have been more effective positioning.

I was left thinking it was interesting that there hadn't been more psychological involvement in the media coverage of the conferences, both in terms of the process and the political content. Changes happening in the NHS at present affect many of our professions and there are media outlets for us to speak about it. One outlet is *The Psychologist*, but nationally there are forums too, for example Comment is Free on the *Guardian* website. Comment is Free welcomes articles from professionals who have opinions on current news stories, and there are clear guidelines on their website of how to pitch an idea. Apart from anything else, as Ros says, 'It's fabulous fun. It's just a challenge.'

contribute

The Media page is coordinated by the Society's Media and Press Committee, with the aim of

promoting and discussing psychology in the media. If you would like to contribute, please contact the 'Media'

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