

Talking about communication

How did you come to be Director of Publications and Communications?

I became Director of Publications and Communications in June 2001 following Ingrid Lunt's term of office. I responded to a call for expressions of interest and was interviewed for the post by members of the Board of Directors and the Chief Executive.

Why were you interested?

It reflects interests I had before I became a psychologist. I used to be an illustrator and have worked in various areas peripherally associated with publications and communications. Also I feel dissemination is a very important but sometimes overlooked aspect of work done by the Society. Most of the business of P&C is to do with outcomes, the face of the Society; in the past the various activities in this area have not always been linked. The focus of members was within the various committees such as journals, press and *The Psychologist*, and at the staff end on the production side.

So you felt it was a neglected area when you were a member?

I never thought about how it happened before – publications and communications happened and happened very well. Now, though, I realise that before the directorate was developed there was no clear strategic link to other parts of the Society or between the various activities. Ingrid Lunt started work on this; hopefully with the support of the board I have continued to take this further. I think it's important to bring our publications and communications activities together and link them to the dissemination of science and practice to the widest possible audience. I think it's important that there's member input. Clearly the committees that were operating under P&C were operating effectively but not necessarily together, so maybe we were not best utilising our resources.

THE PSYCHOLOGIST interviewed Pam Maras, Chair (formerly Director) of the Publications and Communications Board.

And do you think you've managed to do that, since you started?

I think we're heading in the right direction. A huge amount of time and expertise is involved in all of the committees of the directorate – staff in the office ensure the smooth running of the directorate. Most of the work involves meeting tight and immovable deadlines. Business has to go on whilst strategy is developed.

The Society is trying to get more people involved in committees, and is emphasising the benefits of that involvement. What are they?

The benefits are involvement itself, having input and being part of new developments. I can't think of anybody who couldn't make a useful input into different parts of the Society. In terms of P&C, involvement might be directly linked to the various committees or more broadly to the strategic work of the board. The focus of either type of involvement would be on the promotion and dissemination of psychology.

Our journals are very successful both financially and scientifically. Do you think it's possible to further enhance that scientific reputation?

They are successful. Currently there's a review of journals, led by Mike West as the Chair of the Journals Committee. I believe that review of all of our activities is something we should do regularly, we should continually appraise as a developmental exercise. We know that our journals are held in esteem. They bring in over a million pounds a year, so certainly they are successful in that sense. Journals are supported by quite a small team, smaller than many commercial publishers – we're very efficient at producing them. Our journals are good; we're looking at

building on this in terms of impact, and possible gaps.

What would be the process for setting up a new journal?

Anybody can propose to set up a journal. There are guidelines with the Journals Committee, who in the first instance consider proposals. How far a proposal gets will depend on whether a proposal meets set criteria – the market gap, the audience, who will be writing for the journal, the proposed editorial team. Any proposal would have to include a clear business plan, and demonstrate how the rigour of the science will be maintained.

It seems like quite a few things you have been involved with have been fairly commercial decisions. There's a lot of income to protect. Have you been surprised as an academic, having to make such decisions?

No. Clearly the P&C Board, apart from the *Appointments Memorandum*, is the place where the main income of the Society is generated, so no I haven't been surprised.

Is your thinking guided by those commercial concerns?

No, not solely. My thinking is guided by the objects of the Society. The issue about whether we do or don't generate income is also important – we have to be cautious: we are duty bound not to deliberately engage in activities that lose money. The main criteria though are whether activities further the aims of the Society, the diffusion and dissemination of psychology. We don't go out to not generate income, and a number of the activities that we engage in do not, inevitably, generate income. Of course, decisions in P&C also have to be seen in the light of strategic

decision making across the Society generally. P&C does not operate in isolation from the other directorates.

So our books operation going into partnership with Blackwell – presumably that was a largely commercial decision based on the fact that it was losing money?

It was not purely a commercial decision. Clearly though, we did have to consider this. As I have said we have a duty to take account of losses and income. We also needed to look at the length and content of our list and the focus and direction of our books publishing. These days it's very difficult to compete in the commercial world of book publishing. We've got a number of excellent books that were produced with the books team and the Books and Special Projects Group (BSPG), but I think there comes a time when one has to think more widely. The amount of resources needed just to go out and recruit authors, or identify areas and market books, is immense in terms of people and time.

Are you happy with the way the partnership has gone?

Although we signed the contract in July 2001, because of the issues to do with terminating the contract with our previous distributor, Blackwell only actually took complete responsibility for our books and managing the new imprint in January. This year's Annual Conference was the first time we've really had the BPS Blackwell imprint on show. We do though have a number of books lined up, and yes I am delighted with the partnership.

Some members have said that BPS Books were good at publishing 'niche' books, that fulfilled a need but probably wouldn't sell that many. Will Blackwell publish such books?

The current strategy is to focus primarily on three types of book – for students, for practitioners, and for the wider market – thus disseminating psychology across a wide audience. The contract with Blackwell does allow us, if it's appropriate, to publish books that don't make a profit. There's an editorial strategy group with four representatives from the Society and two from Blackwell that meets twice a year, and obviously I'm in contact with Blackwell between these meetings. We also have a group of experts who are advisers, about 15 of them, in key areas of psychology. Sarah Bird at Blackwell meets with them to identify potential authors and



topics. Reviewing and other activities are managed by Blackwell under 'normal' publishing conditions; in the past members of the BSPG often individually reviewed books, it was a very different process.

How does *The Psychologist* fit in with the Society's strategy?

I think *The Psychologist* is interesting really because it serves two purposes. On the one hand it communicates with members, on the other hand it serves the Society's main aim: to promote the advancement and diffusion of a knowledge of psychology. You publish articles on current issues related to psychology and current debates, research related to psychology, and activities that are going on. There is a tension between these roles. I think it's helpful therefore that the PPC [the Psychologist Policy Committee] is currently working with Graham Davey, our President, and myself on developing a clear set of guidance on how *The*

Psychologist meets the objects of the Society.

Many psychologists still appear reluctant to deal with the media. Are they right to be wary?

They're right to be wary if they're not prepared, but as long as they are prepared I think we should be dealing with the media all the time. When a newspaper is quoting psychology it should be a psychologist who has supplied the information. We have a very efficient press office, and Press Committee who are experts and able to offer advice.

And how do P&C activities go towards preparing people?

We have media training days, which I had a number of years ago and found beneficial. There are things you have to remember when speaking to the media – try to get the questions beforehand, don't get pushed into a corner when you're talking on the

telephone, with a journalist saying 'I've got to have this now', if you don't feel confident.

Journalists want certainties, and psychology doesn't seem to be a subject for certainties.

This is all the more reason to provide clear and thoughtful responses and to make full use of the press office. We know psychologists get misquoted on occasions, but the bottom line is if we don't respond, somebody else will.

Are we a real force in Parliament?

Not yet, no. But we will be. We have a member, Judi Ellis, who represents parliamentary strategy on the P&C Board. We have had a half-time parliamentary officer for one year, Nicky Edwards. We're working towards a parliamentary strategy, psychologists have been involved in Parliament and the Society has responded to many government papers and initiatives over the years. We're trying now to coordinate this through one route.

Why?

Because psychology is central to very

many current issues. We don't want to contradict ourselves; we don't want to unintentionally undermine each other. We cannot possibly respond to all enquiries, there is a need to prioritise. I think collective working is the best and most effective working to ensure that the Society is perceived as an important voice.

But speaking with a collective voice is very difficult.

It is, but I see parliamentary activities as important to the dissemination of psychology. As I said, we cannot respond to all initiatives and we must be strategic and coordinated.

So the first step is that you want them to think of you, to think 'We should contact the BPS'?

Yes, but at the moment they might not know that they want us. It's not just about speaking to MPs; it's government offices, the parliamentary estate. Clerks and researchers need to know about psychology, MPs are busy. It's about having a presence; we should be somewhere they call for information

and know they will get a quick and accurate response.

So we can publish books, journals, whatever, but the more you break it down and think about what's required, the more you realise that what we need is for people to understand what psychology is.

Yes, and not say to psychologists 'I bet you know what I'm thinking'. People want psychology, they like it, think it's interesting. I think we have been very good at talking to ourselves, we now need to take this further and speak more clearly to others.

You've been in post for over two years now. What do you hope to have achieved by the end of your term of office?

I would like a few more people to know what psychology is, particularly the important people and groups in terms of policy. I'd like us to be involved in advising on current issues, but also more widely in relation to clear and useful information for users of psychology and the general public. I'd like to have the board working efficiently. I think the

Society has to be 'corporate' in a sense because that will affect how strong our image is – but that doesn't mean everything has to be the same.

Mostly it sounds like maintenance activities. Any innovation?

We're looking at a number of activities to further the centenary slogan 'Bringing psychology to society' in a targeted way: open lectures, parliamentary receptions and scientific meetings, and the development of straightforward information for users of psychology and the general public. There are new ideas there, and it's about more than maintenance, it's about review and development. Innovation will be in strategy, the way we do activities, their impact and effects.

Has your academic work suffered because of your role?

No. The role has taken a lot of additional time, mostly outside my normal working hours, but I've still managed to maintain my research. Fortunately, the university is supportive of my role. As Chair of the P&C Board I'm not working on my research, but my involvement in the psychological community and with the public reflects its applied nature. Currently, I'm working mostly with local authorities, on pupils' behaviour. I'm looking at schemes that aim to increase inclusion and reduce disaffection and antisocial behaviour. Many are founded on a view that self-esteem is at the root of these difficulties. But I am interested in the agency of behaviour; and whether it may often serve a function of increasing a sense of self-worth. Theoretically I'm looking at social identity and self-concept.

Do you think low self-esteem is a problem in British schools?

I don't think self-esteem is a useful concept for schools, in the way it's used. It's used too readily in a rather simple, commonsense way. Schemes aimed at reducing disaffection invariably have self-esteem in them without a real sense of what the term means. It's often seen as unitary, without consideration of different aspects of self-concept or links between personal and social identity. Physical appearance, athletic competence and peer relations, things that are often more salient to young people than school and academic ability are often not considered. Attendance may be seen as key, but young people who are physically present but psychologically absent, not engaged with learning, are often ignored. That's what I'm working on... I have to get it done this year.

ABOUT THE PUBLICATIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTORATE

The staff end of the directorate is composed of teams that all report to the Publications and Communications Board either directly or through specialist committees – Journals, Press, Psychologist Policy. Many of the teams are directly responsible for producing a product, all of which go to achieve the Society's Charter objective – to advance and diffuse a knowledge of the discipline.

Journals – This team of six is headed by Julie Neason. They are responsible for the organisation of the review process, final proofing, production, distribution and marketing. The Society's journals operation is hugely important to the overall financial stability of the organisation – last year the gross income exceeded £1.08million, at a time when institutional purchase in this area was shrinking. Marketing is becoming more important, to ensure that the dissemination and financial success continues.

The journals team advises, and has its general policy directions set by, the Journals Committee, chaired by Professor Michael West and composed of the journal editors. The committee reports to the P&C Board where matters of a wider, more strategic, nature are discussed.

The Psychologist – The staff team here is small for a monthly publication going to over 34,000 people. The editor, Dr Jon Sutton, splits his time between this publication and his role as the Society's 'Staff Writer', rewriting and editing Society leaflets and giving editorial advice to other authors of Society documentation. Jon is the first editor who is actually a staff member: recognition of how the role has grown. The rest of the *Psychologist* team consists of an assistant editor, a sub-editor and a member of staff within the Finance Directorate to deal with advertising.

As with Journals there is a member committee, chaired by Dr Graham Powell, that provides the policy leadership for the publication. Other volunteer member input comes in the shape of associate editors and book review consultants.

Press – This is a team of three headed by Douglas Brown, who joined the Society's staff in April. The role of the press office is both proactive (putting out media releases based on Society activity) and reactive (responding to journalists' enquiries when they are looking for psychological input). The reactive work has been growing over the years – the press office team deal with between 50 and 70 calls a day. The press team hold a database of over 1000 Society members who have said they are prepared to talk to the media.

The Press Committee, chaired by Professor Pam Briggs, drafts most of the media releases and helps staff the press office at main Society conferences.

Parliament – In September last year the Society appointed its first and only staff member to work within this field: Nicky Edwards, based at the London office. The appointment was for a fixed term of one year and her brief was quite specific – to develop databases of information that would allow the Society to 'talk' more efficiently with various parliamentary targets and to advise on a future parliamentary strategy for the Society. Policy control and direction in this area is handled in the first instance by Dr Judi Ellis, the Parliamentary Representative on the P&C Board, and then by the full board itself.

Preparation for Publication – 'P4P' is our in-house design and artwork team. Geoff Ellis is the team leader, supported by three staff. Their work encompasses not only major publications such as the Annual Report but also, at present, 22 of the Society's subsystem publications as well as board reports and all the Society's information leaflets. This team also make material ready for transfer to the website.

Print – Ray Efford and his team of four have a great deal of highly complex print and reprographics machinery to output the vast quantity of materials which the Society demands – from simple leaflets and committee papers right through to more complex colour and finishing work. The aim of the unit is to provide as complete a service as possible in-house so that our print costs are kept to a minimum: *The Psychologist* and journals are externally printed simply because of the huge numbers involved.

And finally... The Directorate Manager is Stephen White. His role is to act as the principal adviser to the Publications and Communications Board, to oversee the various directorate teams and to be a part of the Society's senior management team, a group set up to advise the Chief Executive, Barry Brooking.