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Does Reality Really Bite? Between Academia and 'The Real World': An Interview with Jane Roscoe

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Dr Jane Roscoe is currently Programme Executive at SBS Television in Australia. She started her career as an academic in London with a fondness for theory. During her time at The University of Waikato in Aotearoa, she became drawn to empirical research, and in particular audience research, in combination with an ongoing interest in documentary. She published numerous journal articles and authored two books on documentary: *Documentary in New Zealand: An Immigrant Nation* (1999) and (with Craig Hight) *Faking It: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality* (2001). She moved to Griffith University in 2000, and quickly became an influential intellectual presence in the field of Media and Cultural Studies in Australia. Her article 'Big Brother Australia: Performing the Real Twenty Four Seven' in *The International Journal of Cultural Studies* is still the most cited article of that journal five years on. However, it is not only her academic work that gives her presence importance, but also her tireless commitment to move her ideas beyond the academic context. She frequently appears on both radio and television, and in 2001 she was the first media academic to appear on *Big Brother Australia*. In short, she is the embodiment of 'the public intellectual'. After two years at Griffith, Jane moved out of the academy to become Head of the Centre for Screen Studies and Research at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School. She has been a programmer at SBS since 2005.

Given Jane's eclectic background, this interview will explore a number of main themes. Firstly, it will provide a rare insight into the decision making processes about television content and scheduling at the unique public broadcaster that is SBS. Secondly, Jane discusses her ideas and theoretical reflections on documentary as a genre and the influences of reality television. She is a passionate defender of both popular culture and innovation in television, with a particular focus on mock documentary and reality television. Related to her role as a public intellectual is the strong belief that Australia needs a 'television culture' because only then can television be taken seriously as an art form and an important part of the public sphere. The overarching theme is the often challenging but potentially highly productive blending of theory and practice, as the title of this interview suggests.

This interview was conducted in May 2006 in Brisbane. Jane was in town to deliver the annual Henry Mayer Lecture at The University of Queensland, entitled *Making Great Television: When Theory Met Practice*.

HH: Can you describe your role at SBS?

JR: I'm the programming executive, which sounds fancy, but means basically that I manage the creative side of the schedule on a day-to-day basis. So I co-ordinate the creative activities of the team that views everything we intend to purchase. We make recommendations on what we should buy, and then I make decisions about where those programs are going to go in the schedule. So that's the basic part of the job. More broadly I'm involved in developing strategies for the schedule, and for the network.

HH: So do you have a lot of creative freedom to do what you want to do with the schedule?

JR: Yeah...

HH: Are there lots of people involved in this, or...?

JR: Quite a lot of freedom. It's a smallish department. When we're talking about buying programs and deciding what to do with the schedule, I'm working with small teams of 3-4 people depending on whether we are looking at documentaries, features or short films for example. In terms of creative freedom, yes and no. We are restrained by a number of things. One is money: what we can actually afford to buy. Second, not so

much a constraint, but a guide: we have a charter, in our case a multicultural charter which instructs us to deliver on diversity and programming for all Australians. Our charter also instructs us to make sure that we buy enough programming that's in languages other than English. We aim to broadcast at least fifty percent of our material in Languages other than English (LOTE) and that is across the schedule as a whole.

HH: Right...

JR: So that's something that guides those creative choices. Also, you know, the schedule has a shape, and some things are harder to move than others. News and current affairs, obviously they're key building blocks of the schedule, so we work around our news, although, having a news break at 9:30 does mean you're constrained in a certain way about what you can play in the second part of the evening and how the evening is broken up. So, there are structural issues that guide us too.

HH: Because the news is half an hour isn't it?

JR: Yes, we have two half hour news bulletins; 6.30pm and 9.30pm. Having the second bulletin in the middle of prime time does have an impact on the schedule. I mean, it's a great building block, it's an important part of the schedule, but what you can do before and after is shaped by that. So...yeah, a lot of freedom, but you constantly work with limitations and constraints and guidelines, and trying to satisfy all those different agendas. So it's never easy when you say "hey, I've got this idea for a new slot". It might be a fantastic idea; you may have done all the research; yes, the audience will like this; it's not being done by anyone else; it's going to fulfil our charter requirements; and so on, but then you are left with the question 'where do we put it?' What are we willing to move for this new thing? So...lots of freedom, but it is a constant struggle to actually realise your ambitions for the schedule, within the constraints of the schedule.

HH: As part of that, how do you imagine your audience when you take those kinds of decisions? Does that depend on the time in the schedule, or do you have a kind of overall idea about the audience?

JR: A bit of both. One of the most important things that I do in my job is talk to the audience research department. And that's very easy for me, having been an audience researcher. I'm already focused on the audience and already interested in what they're doing. So, looking at the ratings, thinking about the feedback we get from viewers, and talking to the audience research department, you know I'm getting ideas about who comes to SBS, and how they watch and where they watch. And a big shock to me was finding out that in fact our core audience, the people who are most likely to come to our programs (smiles)...are men over 65.

HH: (laughs)

JR: And it wasn't quite what I thought SBS was: I had this image of us as this young, funky kind of station. But we have an older and very male-skewed demographic. Now, that's not to say other people don't watch, because they obviously do, at different times in the schedule we'll get different groups. For example Monday night is much younger; again it's male skewed, but younger males. Thursday night for Inspector Rex: much more heavily skewed towards the 50+ women.

HH: (laughs) I wonder why?

JR: (laughs) Yet Saturday night we tend to get a slightly more general audience around our entertainment programming. So it's very much about the days and the slots. And for me the challenge is thinking: am I delivering to our different audiences; am I giving them a good SBS experience, what they expect from us? But am I also working in the right ways to build that audience? Because we do want more women, we do want more young people; (grins) that core audience is very important to us, but we want to grow from there. So a big part of my job is constantly thinking: what am I doing with these young guys who come in on Monday night? It's great that they come on Monday, but can I get them anywhere else in the schedule, so they become more regular viewers of SBS? And how do I get more women? You know, I need to develop slots for female viewers, which is what I've been trying to work on. So, you know, finding out who actually watches and what they're watching is really important. And then thinking: how do we grow that, how do we develop it, and how do we move them away from the slots they may go to automatically? How do we get them to think more broadly: "SBS is my channel". And it's really hard! (laughs)

HH: South Park brought in a younger audience?

JR: Oh yes, and , Myth Busters, South Park, Pizza, Drawn Together...we've got a whole raft of programming that has introduced new audiences to SBS...

HH: And there's the soccer as well.

JR: Yeah, although not on Monday nights anymore.

HH: No...

JR: Soccer is more episodic; we play key matches. And we've got the World Cup, but we haven't got soccer on the Monday night as we used to. And that's just because we can't afford it anymore, not that we don't want it. Foxtel are spending up big on football. But where we do get a broader audience, or a younger audience, my job is to think: how do we keep them?

HH: Alright, in terms of your background as an academic and a theorist, how does that relate to your job? Does that ever create a conflict?

JR: Sometimes. I was given the opportunity at SBS partly because of the work I'd done as an academic. I didn't have any network programming or scheduling experience. It was a risk for them to put someone in who just didn't know the systems, because there's no time to really think: "Oh well, you know, we'll give you a year, see if you can get the hang of it". It's like, "actually we need someone scheduling now, and you need to be up to speed next week". So it was really on the basis of what I knew about audiences and multi-platform TV that got me the gig. I think I use a lot of my research background everyday, thinking about audiences, how they use television, and what might work in terms of strategies for developing the audience experience and so on. But a lot of things that you think will work intellectually, in practice don't.

HH: Can you give an example of that?

JR: I'll give you a couple of examples: things where I thought, this is going be a corker, you know this will really work. We have a documentary strand, a feature length strand on Tuesday nights called Hot Docs. I had this idea that I would show three Brian Hill documentaries. I am a big fan of the musical hybrid docs that he makes, and I have written about those academically. So I thought: oh, this will be a fantastic journey for the audience: Drinking for England, Feltham Sings, Pornography-The Musical, it is a journey about the development of the style and the issues, and so on. I wanted viewers to take that journey through documentary theory with me. So, I scheduled the three documentaries and finished the season with a very political docu-opera, The Death of Klinghoffer by Penny Woolcock. It was a logical step for me...for me as an academic, but not really as viewer. I thought, that'll be great, the audience will really get this. Well the audience didn't get it at all, and you know, the Brian Hill docs did okay, but it wasn't the same audience coming in each week, so they didn't take that journey with me. And of course the one that rated really well was the pornography one, because it had pornography in the title! And after The Death of Klinghoffer, the day after we screened it, it was referred to in the boardroom as 'the death of the schedule' because it bombed (laughs). I thought I'd given it context. But of course, you know, viewers aren't sitting down as academics thinking, "that's a lovely intellectual journey"...

HH: And how it relates to them...

JR: Yeah, I mean for them, it's like they've turned on, they want to see a great documentary, and they saw this weird documentary opera that was very hard work at ten o'clock at night. You know the Brian Hill docs did well. But it was a real kind of eye opener that, you know, just because you think intellectually you know these things, it may not work in practice. The gap between my theory and practice was really clear that day!

There are times when it does work, when you get it right. We did terrorism specials last year. We had two series: The Power of Nightmares, which was a BBC series about the way in which governments are using terrorism, and inflating the promise of terrorist acts in order to bolster their own war activities; quite a controversial documentary. We also bought another documentary series called The New Al Qaeda, which gave the opposite point of view, that said: yes, the threat is really real. And we thought we'll set this up as a debate. And instead of doing it over several weeks, we basically packaged it over two weeks: Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday of each week, at 8:30, a special season on terrorism. And it worked fabulously. The

audience stayed for the whole of the debate, and it created some great flow-on effects for those evenings. And that's where I thought: well actually audiences probably will like this, they'll like it because these and these reasons...you know, intellectually it seemed to work and it worked in practice. Unlike the Brian Hill one...(laughs). And there are many examples like that. You know, day in day out things I'm trying out. Sometimes it works, sometimes it surprises me. It's like, that's not how it is at all...you know? It's very interesting.

HH: It is interesting. You know you talked about the charter before, and SBS is a public broadcaster, with commercial aspects to it...

JR: Yeah...

HH: How, in a general sense, do you see the role of public broadcasting, into the future?

JR: I think it's very important. I think the public broadcasters have a real role to play in contemporary politics and to inform the public about world events. In this way Public Broadcasters can help activate real participatory citizenship. And not in that kind of old fashioned way of "we will tell you how the world is", but in the sense of the public broadcaster providing information, providing access to viewpoints and perspectives that we may not be getting through other channels; helping us to make informed decisions about real events and issues. And this is very much what SBS does. It tries to give the perspectives that we're not hearing elsewhere; give us access to cultures that we may not have access to otherwise, through film and language and things. And you know, to be part of debates that are important to us, like identity, what it means to be Australian. I think SBS is constantly delivering on the idea of presenting multiple versions of Australianness, and playing out the different ways we can be Australian. And I think the public broadcasters have a really important role to play in those sorts of debates. I think they're also important for trying to push the boundaries of how content is made, how content is delivered. So we're really focused on trying to develop multi-channelling and multi-platform content, to push the boundaries of what audiences can expect. And that, in turn, promotes work within the industry, pushes the industry further. So it's not just about delivering information to audiences, but also playing a role in the culture of television, in the production of television. But I think it's a constant challenge to stay relevant. And, you know, television has to keep changing. And we have to respond to those changes and not get too locked into particular models.

HH: And do you think that it's harder to respond to changes within public broadcasting systems?

JR: I think it is if you're at the ABC. But I think SBS is more flexible, we're smaller. We're much more independent than the ABC. I think we can respond more quickly to changes in the environment, well, you know, we certainly try to. But if we want to keep people watching, we are going to have to constantly find ways to stay relevant and to deliver content that actually connects with people. And that's hard...it's really hard.

HH: When you say multi-platform, do you mean for example delivering content to mobile phones?

JR: Yeah, could be mobile phones, or broadband initiatives, or, using radio more effectively in connection with television. I think we have to see television as a piece in a bigger picture. Television will always come first, but we want to be able to provide different ways to experience the content. The future for us...or actually not the future...now; the way we think of ourselves is as people who make content and are curating content. And what we should be doing is thinking: what's the best way to deliver and to distribute and to experience that content, rather than thinking: we make television and then we're going to add on things. And that's actually not such a big shift for someone like me who as an academic has always been interested in those issues, but for broadcasters that's a major shift. You know I often think "Crikey, we're not that flexible and it all takes a long time". But that's the way we're thinking, that's the way we're trying to move forward. And that's going to help the public broadcasters to stay relevant.

But I think the government also needs to get moving on those digital initiatives, and make a provision about free-to-air multi-channelling, because we are missing out on those opportunities and lagging behind. Foxtel is making all the in-roads at the moment.

HH: But there is always a fairly large cost to consumers attached to Foxtel you know...

JR: Yeah...

HH: ...and their subscription take up is usually driven by sports...

JR: Yeah...

HH: I think there is always going to be a fairly large group of people who will stay watching free-to-air...

JR: One would hope...one would hope. I think the future holds lots of opportunities for offering a greater diversity of content and platforms, and more choice for viewers (or prosumers). There will still be a place for television as it looks now. You know, not everything is going to be multi-platform or lateral or... different viewers want different experiences, different content requires different ways of presenting it, and you know, the key thing is understanding how to use the content most appropriately for your audiences. Understand their motivations and desires. I think that's the key to it.

HH: Okay, let's move into a slightly different direction. You have a strong background in documentary theory, which you've written about extensively, and particularly about new hybridised forms of documentary. Do you see this hybridisation as a positive development? Or do you feel it gets in the way of what has traditionally been considered 'serious' documentary?

JR: I love hybrids. And I think the good hybrids are stylistically challenging, entertaining and engaging, but can also deal with serious issues. And that's why I love the Brian Hill work...who'd have thought you could take such a serious issue as say alcoholism, and put songs and poetry in there, have a few laughs around it, and still come away having watched a very serious documentary on the issue. And so I think hybrids are fantastic for that. But I am also concerned about using style for style's sake. Not every topic warrants that, and I still enjoy watching a straight forward documentary; that has a good story and a good argument to be made. Again, it's thinking about what's appropriate. And what I like is a diversity of styles and approaches to topics. I would get bored just watching hybrids; even I would get bored watching them (laughs), if that was all that was on offer. I think what's really interesting is the way in which certain developments in factual programming feed back into more traditional forms, to re-enliven them in a way. You know reality television told traditional documentary filmmakers that they had to get more intimate, more personal, to connect more closely with their audience. And so we started seeing, instead of those old essay style documentaries or expository documentaries, the rise of the Morgan Spurlocks and...you know Michael Moore was already there, but you start seeing more documentaries made from personal perspectives or subjective, and that can be really great. It's not that every documentary has to be like this or that, but you want that constant movement of style and ideas. And I like showing those sorts of works on SBS. I'm very quick to pick up on any kind of new hybrids, and they know at SBS that it bypasses any of the preview offices, which is the usual port of call for a doco; they come straight to my desk.

HH: (laughs)

JR: They know at SBS. I'm always looking for work that pushes the boundaries, because I want to see that sort of work, and I think the audience would want that opportunity too. And sometimes they don't like it. Other times, it's like wild and...I was just thinking of this fantastic science series we bought called Dr Tatiana's Sex Advice to All Creation, that's a very long title (smiles), and...

HH: It's a very good one...

JR: And it's absolutely fantastic, it's completely mad. It's a hybrid, and it's a serious science documentary, and yet it's full of songs and pantomime, it's wacky, it's pretty funny, it's just gorgeous to look at. We put it in our very serious science slot. People loved it; it was engaging, it was silly, it was fun, but it was also solid science, fantastic. I don't like gimmicky stuff, I do like the hybrid...yeah.

HH: (laughs) Just to get back to the process of how that works. So you get docos that come across your desk. Do you also go actively looking for stuff?

JR: Oh yeah...yeah.

HH: So what's the kind of...

JR: ...the balance of that? Okay, we have preview officers and assistants for different areas like documentaries, for feature films, for short films, comedy, drama and so on. Half our job is just the hard slog: working with distributors and producers we already know, always in contact with them, what's new on your books, what have you got? We contact them, they contact us. So new stuff is constantly just being sent to us, because we've already made those contacts. But we also go to all the major markets every year, to look at what's new, to meet producers, to find out what's going on, you know the next big thing type of stuff. We literally travel the world looking for great content. I go overseas maybe 3 times a year. I'll go to a major film festival to buy features, a documentary festival and a big television festival. Because I don't specialise in any one area, I've got to look at the schedule as a whole, I'm looking for everything. Banff is the next stop for the World Television Festival, and at that particular one I'll be looking for comedy, animation, and long running drama series that I can run at 7:30. That is really hard, because very little drama that is suitable for SBS is made for that timeslot...very hard.

HH: Sounds like a pretty good job...(laughs)

JR: Yeah...great, it is my dream job. It's a television scholar's dream job! The travel is fun, but all the time there are questions and problems to solve. I'm thinking: Sunday night is looking great, but we're having problems on Monday night. What do I do??? So you're constantly, constantly re-evaluating what your priorities are. And because we schedule so far in advance, I'm also thinking about what we are going to be showing at the end of 2007, beginning 2008. What's going to be big in 2008? Well, hopefully I'll find out! (laughs). But you're always thinking: yeah things are going okay, but I need the next, the next and...it's like being a drug addict, we need the next hit...

HH: (laughs) Okay, you've written quite a lot about reality TV as well, and I saw that your Big Brother Australia article is still rated number one...

JR: (laughs)

HH: ...as the most cited article in The International Journal of Cultural Studies...(laughs)

JR: Which is just amazing, but...

HH: How do you see the impact of reality television on the television environment in general? And how do you see it develop from here?

JR: Hmm...

HH: Because, you know, it's had a huge impact.

JR: Yeah and I think anyone who sort of pooh-poohs reality television, you've got to take reality television seriously, because it's had a major impact on popular entertainment and on documentary, and in lots of different ways. I mean I think one of the things that I always thought was very interesting about Big Brother, which seems to become more and more relevant, was the way in which it put the viewer at the centre of the program: you know, voting, being interactive, using web sites, being part of the process. And I think that it may not always be direct, but in the whole shift to digital and multi-channelling, and this idea of delivering content over many platforms, the key is audience participation, and how we engage the audience in new ways. And so I think Big Brother is in fact the program that really raised that possibility of having a real active viewer, and that idea of viewers as both consumers and producers of the text. And so it seems more and more relevant to me now, that work I did around that. And I think maybe that's why there's still interest in that work because that's such a big part of it. In terms of ordinary people on TV, I think we've seen it have an impact across the board. But also the rise of popular entertainment again. Reality TV sort of breathed new life into the variety show indirectly. You know, what are the big hits at the moment across the television? Dancing With The Stars, you know, the kind of variety show, the new Channel 10 show Thank God You're Here; back to theatre sports and live entertainment. Those things don't seem to be connected to reality television, but all the elements are there in something like Big Brother, and different programs and genres are taking up different elements of it. So I think it's been very influential, and I think it will continue to have that kind of roll-on effect.

HH: It's very diverse as well...

JR: Yeah...yeah...

HH: It kind of builds on quiz shows as well, in an indirect way...

JR: Yeah...definitely; quiz shows, talk shows...reality television in a sense is an amalgamation of many, many different sorts of television, rolled into a package where the best of all those things are crystallised. You know you've got ordinary people; it's a bit of variety, it's a bit of talk show, the confessional element, it's a bit of documentary fly-on-the-wall, you know the idea of truth and getting to the real. So it brings all those things together, and of course it put viewers so centrally, which I think is still the key to why they're so popular.

HH: Alright, you've always mixed your role as a media academic with public appearances...How do you see that role?

JR: I actually think that that's one of the most important things people can do as academics. I think we have a responsibility to share the knowledge with a broader public. And when we're talking about television, not just audiences, but practitioners as well. I suppose a bee in my bonnet is that in Australia we seem to lack a real television culture. And I think academics getting out into different aspects of the public sphere and sharing their ideas is a good way to help a television culture actually developing here.

HH: What do you mean when you say it lacks a television culture?

JR: What I mean is that in Australia we don't seem to take television very seriously. We're not culturally very interested in it. We don't write a lot about television in the public sphere. You know we have movie shows, but you're lucky if you get a column on television. We don't talk about or write about television in sophisticated ways. We don't feel it's an art form. We don't take it seriously. I mean even the people who make television; often they don't watch it, and they feel they're making television because they can't make a film. And so it's always considered that kind of second rate medium, domestic and confined to the living room, and not to be publicly celebrated and enjoyed, and debated over. I think academics have a great opportunity to kind of make it more of a public celebration. Now, not everything on television is worth talking about. But I think academics can share their knowledge to enrich the experience of viewing, because that's what television culture is about. Viewing can be enhanced when you know something more about processes or ideas; it doesn't have to be like a lecture, and again, you know, not that idea of: if you knew more about what these representations mean, you would know more. But more: how would your viewing be enhanced if you knew more about the processes, or what the program makers were trying to achieve? How would program making itself be enhanced if producers knew more about how audiences relate to their material? And so, academics can play a really important role in exciting people about television, in making links where perhaps a viewer might not already see those. Enhancement rather than education though, I think is what I'm getting at. I like sharing those ideas with people, and I think it's important. Academics are publicly funded and should give back what they take, that's the bottom line. And I think that's an enjoyable way to do it.

HH: I guess it's partly a cultural thing as well, because if I compare it to Europe, academics here are probably more removed from...

JR: Yeah, the public...

HH: ...or at least the boundaries between them...

JR: Yeah, I think that that's true, because in Britain there is much more of a television culture, and academics move in some ways more freely in that space. And in each country that's embodied in different ways, but I think we could do more here to actually enliven the world of television.

HH: Alright, let's leave it there. I've got a few 'quickies' to round it off.

JR: Okay.

HH: So you just need a couple of words to say whatever pops into your mind.

JR: Okay.

HH: Trash TV

JR: Oohh...The OC and Hotel Babylon, and...pure pleasure!

HH: (laughs) Multiculturalism

JR: SBS...good stuff! (laughs)

HH: Mock-Documentary

JR: Fun, playfulness, pushing the boundaries.

HH: Celebrities

JR: Bluhh...The Logies, TV Week, yuk...

HH: Big Brother series 10, and we're now in series 6

JR: Oh my god, uhh...speechless...where will it be? It won't be in the house. They'd have taken them somewhere, maybe the moon (hopefully!).

HH: (laughs) Okay, and...the Soccer World Cup.

JR: Ohh...too excited to put into words. The Soccer World Cup is gonna be huge! Unfortunately, the Socceroos probably won't be in it for long though...(laughs)

HH: On that note, we'll leave it there.

JR: Cool, thank you.

HH: Thank you very much!

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