

# Meryl Aldridge, 1945-2022

**Professor Alison Pilnick, of the University of Nottingham, writes about her colleague, Meryl Aldridge**



Meryl Aldridge, who died on 30 April 2022 after a sudden illness, was a sociologist who made a significant contribution to research, teaching and leadership of the discipline.

Born in December 1945, Meryl took a BA in sociology at Cardiff and an MA at Essex. She had research posts in the civil service and at Birmingham before coming to the University of Nottingham in 1972 as a lecturer employed to teach sociology to social work students in what was then the Department of Applied Social Science. Subsequently switching to become a member of the sociology team, she told colleagues at the time that she gained a day a week as a result of the reduced administration and student demands!

However, this disciplinary difference quickly disappeared as the sociology programme at Nottingham grew, and the department was renamed the School of Sociology and Social Policy. She was promoted to Reader and remained at Nottingham until her retirement in early 2008.

A committed sociologist, she was a trustee of the BSA from 1999-2003, serving as Chair from 2001-2003. In this role she provided leadership for the discipline at a time of rapid change in higher education. Fellow trustees and members of the executive recall the care and consideration with which she approached every task, her quiet wisdom and formidable chairing skills, but most of all her warm good humour.

Her initial academic work was on housing and planning, with her book *The British New Towns: A Programme Without a Policy*, published by Routledge in 1979. Having originally intended a career in journalism, she subsequently made this a subject for her

sociological study. She focused particularly on newspaper coverage of social work, and her book *Making Social Work News* was published by Routledge in 1994.

Meryl also had a specific interest in the role of local media; this was particularly significant given the more general tendency of sociologists of the media to study only national media. She extended this work into a more general interest in cultural industries and gender. Again, she approached this from a distinctive angle, with a particular emphasis on cultural production as people's work rather than the more common focus of cultural studies on outputs.

Meryl was the best kind of colleague – never afraid to speak her mind but always in a courteous and constructive fashion. She even took Sir David Attenborough to task in her work with Robert Dingwall on the representation of evolution in TV wildlife documentaries! She provided mentorship for a succession of more junior colleagues, and Nottingham staff past and present recall how welcome she made them feel when they joined the department where she was such a longstanding member, her general kindness, and how she was always a patient source of good advice about almost any academic matter.

She was also one of the first academics to observe the rise of 'promotional culture' in universities, where staff recognition and advancement would depend upon building a personal brand. Meryl was hugely popular

with students, both for her passion for sociology, which she conveyed with such ease, and also for her mellifluous speaking voice which added to the enjoyment of her lectures.

Meryl embraced retirement, though the plans and expectations that she and her husband Alan (a fellow sociologist and Reader in sociology at Nottingham) had for these years were dashed by his untimely death in 2018. She supported him through his last months with great love and care, and was determined to live an active and engaged life after his death. She was a longstanding Trustee of the Abel Collin Almshouses in Nottingham and extended this role to contribute to the National Association of Almshouses. She continued to sing, as she had done for many years, with the Nottingham Bach Choir.

She was a keen horticulturist and continued to cultivate a beautiful garden. Meryl also pushed herself to take up new interests, including joining a film discussion group at Nottingham's independent cinema. She enjoyed travel and found new ways to do so socially, managing to combine this with her love of food and French culture by taking a trip to France as part of a group, including the 'patron' of her favourite French restaurant.

Meryl retained an informed, sceptical and drily humorous perspective on social affairs and societal changes, exercising this over WhatsApp exchanges during the pandemic. She will be hugely missed by her friends and ex-colleagues at Nottingham and beyond.

## Would you like to contribute to Network?

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# Love and romance in the 1980s: project brings to life old data

Rachel Thomson, Professor of Childhood and Youth Studies at the University of Sussex, writes:

Have you ever wondered what happened to the materials collected for social research projects before the requirement to deposit them in the UK Data Archive? They were often destroyed or stored away in boxes in the homes of researchers. A precious few found their way into public archives. But is it possible that these 'data' might return to the communities that generated them and create new value?

The Reanimating Data project has tried to make this happen – saving, digitising and sharing a classic social science research project (entitled WRAP) which collected in-depth interviews with young women aged between 16-21 in 1989 about love, romance and sex in the shadow of HIV/Aids.

Thirty years later, the research team have liberated interviews from the archive, sharing them with groups of contemporary young women who have used creative methods to bring these materials back to life.

One 'experiment' involved working with

the Women's Theatre Society at the University of Manchester who were inspired by the stories of drama students in 1989 to make an original piece of theatre – weaving together stories from the past and the present. The WRAP data set is now available as a public open access archive, which expands to include the new documents produced with new users.

The archive is used by researchers, teachers, youth workers and artists. Working with the open access platform Omeka, created by academics at George Washington University as a platform for sharing archives, we are building a community around the archive where those working with the resources can create digital exhibitions and contribute to the blog, [reanimatingdata.co.uk](http://reanimatingdata.co.uk) – join us in telling new stories from old.

With the support of the NCRM the team ran an online methods training event in June. The aim of this workshop was to explore data reanimation as a qualitative research method.

The focus was on creative, participatory and innovative ways of working with archived

qualitative research materials for the purpose of secondary analysis, historical enquiry and data collection. During the workshop we explored different theoretical and disciplinary traditions informing data reanimation and considered the ethical challenges and possibilities of reanimating qualitative data sets.

We considered how this approach: enables creativity, reflexivity, experimentation and innovation in research; creates opportunities to engage non-specialist audiences and communities in collaborative secondary analysis, data collection and public engagement; and engages critically with ideas around social change and continuity.

• The Reanimating Data project was funded by the ESRC's Transformational Social Research programme. The Sussex team includes Rachel Thomson, Ester McGeeney and Rosie Gahnstrom in the Department of Social Work and Social Care, and Sharon Webb in History – and, at the University of Edinburgh, Niamh Moore and the community archive project Feminist Webs. The project is supported by the Sussex Humanities Lab.



## Meet the PhD: Tom Kisson

'I have enjoyed the process, though the PhD is all-encompassing – the only thing that takes my mind off it is tattooing'

My research explores how indigenous activists in Brazil use video and livestreaming on platforms like Instagram, TikTok and Kwai to inform distant others of their land and environmental struggles against the Brazilian state.

Brazil is a notoriously precarious and complex environment for indigenous people and their activism, and this has only been made more difficult under President Jair Bolsonaro, who is an advocate for violence and the opening up of indigenous territories.

Yet, in spite of all these challenges, my research is starting to yield evidence that indigenous activists can draw large audiences to their videos and speak to others in and of their communities about demonstrations, charity projects, learning exchanges and rituals.

In 2016/17, whilst living in Brazil, I began to observe the deforestation in the Amazon region and how violent attacks on indigenous communities were escalating. Subsequently, I began doing a great deal of advocacy regarding indigenous rights and on my return to London I kept pursuing the research topic during my master's degree at UCL in globalization and Latin American development.

I noticed that the coverage on television, radio and newspapers hardly ever included indigenous people's perspectives. That's why I decided to pursue my PhD. It looks at how, as a society, we interpret and value indigenous activists and communicators. In turn this could be key for how wider society might understand how to pressure leaders into fixing impending issues like the climate crisis. This research builds on my career as a digital video and livestreaming

expert for broadcasters and tech companies. I'm aiming to interview different activists from three or four different regions across Brazil, and NGO staff and live-streaming experts, to contextualise the data from the activists.

So far, I have really enjoyed the process at Cambridge and it has surprised me in some really great ways. Sociology as a subject is fascinating as it has the capacity to live alongside so many different disciplines and therefore there's a wide variety of research topics with my other peers at Cambridge, which has led to fruitful discussions and learning.

You need to be the sort of person who is extremely curious about everything, especially your own research and topic. I've also come to notice that you also need to be a bit neurotic and have an addictive personality, at least that's helped me, as for me, at least, the PhD is all-encompassing. To take my mind off it I have tried going for walks each day and cycling around Cambridge, but that allows you to think even more about the PhD. Oddly, the only thing that has seemed to work is tattooing. I realised that when I choose a tattoo, I can be doing something very different from my PhD and my mind can be somewhere else for a while. It still involves research but this time it's the art, reference images, tattoos and the artists. It gives me an outlet to not think about my research so much.

• 'Indigenous livestreaming as knowledge production: exercising citizenship and informing distant witnesses of environmental rights.' Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge, 2021-2024