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Globalisation, the media and UK communities

Discussion paper [or working paper, etc.]

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This paper:
- examines how global media has changed and its impact on low-income groups in the UK;
- explains how communities in the UK benefit from and influence their global news consumption; and
- discusses the potential widening of the digital divide.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) commissioned this paper as part of its programme on Globalisation, which explores and promotes awareness of the impacts of globalisation on the UK and focuses particularly on communities and people in poverty

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Contents

Introduction

UK communities find themselves in an increasingly complex world of news mediation. There are more channels of information from around the world that provide more varied sources of topical data and comment than ever before. Some UK communities such as minority ethnic groups or diaspora communities will be particularly connected into transnational media flows or networks. However, other low income, low literacy groups may find themselves increasingly marginalised as technologies become more expensive and sophisticated. At the same time the global media itself are changing. News media's ability to serve or represent the full range of UK communities and connect them to wider issues or other peoples can be threatened by a lack of both editorial resources and diversity. Globalisation of media is not a new phenomenon, but combined with other social factors it is increasingly a significant characteristic of citizens' communicative relationships.

This paper seeks to chart the impact of changes in global media on low-income groups in the UK and community dynamics. It will explore how their mediated relationship to the local and global world is affected by current trends in media production and consumption. What access is there for low-income groups to channels of information about globalisation? It will examine the role of media governance in setting the context of people's use of media. Are UK communities enabled to understand how media can inform and empower them? Then it will explore the ethical and political implications for UK communities in their mediated relationship between the local and global. Above all, we ask what value is there for UK communities in being more networked in a globalised media?

The implications for UK communities of current global patterns of media ownership and regulation in the UK

Does it matter who controls the media we consume? Yes, but the nature of media ownership itself is changing. There has been a long-term concentration of mainstream commercial news media in Britain that is unlikely to decrease in the face of economic recession and a crisis in the business model. This has been most dramatic at the local newspaper level where a constant stream of takeovers, mergers and closures means that four companies account for two thirds of sales.[1]

At the national level recent consolidation has been less extensive. Despite their economic troubles, no national newspaper, for example, has been taken over by a rival or gone out of business. In fact the arrival of Russian businessman Alexander Lebedev as the new owner of the London *Evening Standard* and Independent Newspapers has marginally increased ownership plurality.

Globally, there has been an expansion of media outlets that are available to UK audiences. On top of the established services from the BBC, CNN and Sky, 24-hour TV news is now available via the Internet and satellite from Al Jazeera English, Russia Today, France 24, Al Arabiya, and Press TV to name just a few. In addition to this UK and international newspapers now offer online versions that are usually free to access. However, with the introduction of *The Times'* paywall system of subscription for its online offerings, it is possible that other parts of the media industry will follow elite news organisations such as the *Wall Street Journal* and the FT.com in charging. While the amounts involved are relatively small – £2 for 30 days access to *The Times* online – experience tells us that any form of direct charging for news usually deters low income groups from making it part of their discretionary spending.

So overall, while ownership locally has become more important, in terms of national and international news it has become much less relevant in determining the range and quality of global news. One significant exception to this could be the example represented by News Corporation and its attempt to take full control over BSkyB. This is an interesting test case for this Government's more relaxed approach to regulating media ownership. The decision to be made by Business Secretary Vince Cable will not necessarily set a precedent. In essence it is a relative judgment about the degree to which any one company can dominate in different media sectors. However, there has been a fundamental shift in the composition of the news and information marketplace which may make this kind of cross-sectoral ownership problem more likely to arise.

The Internet means that companies such as Google, Twitter and Facebook, which didn't even exist a dozen years ago, are now challenging the old media giants for control of the vast revenues passing through the new digital

platforms. It is important to realise that the fundamental distribution mechanisms for news are changing. This means, for example, that control of the market for online search is as important now as control of broadcast spectrums or printing presses used to be. In that sense, ownership of newsrooms, journalists, archive or titles is no more valuable than the ownership of online communities, networks and software. That is why Rupert Murdoch bought MySpace. It is also likely that in the future, a company like Google – which provides a platform and functions such as search – will begin to seek to produce content as well.

At the same time, mainstream media (MSM) is not disappearing. It appears that much online media consumption is additional to, rather than displacing activities such as watching TV. However, traditional mainstream media companies are losing out on advertising revenue to new media. In response to that, MSM companies are radically reforming their business models. Newspaper and TV newsrooms are converging as they all go online. They are also slashing back on costs by cutting staff and closing foreign bureaux and adopting new revenue systems such as paywalls.

Media regulation is adapting to these changes. At present, the media regulators are responsible for what their sector does online. There is no specific authority to deal with the Internet in the UK. So the Press Complaints Commission, for example, has had to deal with a number of complaints about what newspapers publish on their websites. This challenge was discussed at a PCC seminar at the LSE. [2] This concluded that the Internet raises new practical problems, especially around privacy codes and the law on contempt, but in effect the PCC applies the same rules as it would to stories in a printed newspaper. Case studies discussed at the workshop also showed how the public is still struggling to understand regulation of the Internet and the rights and responsibilities of those who create or consume news online. Ofcom, "the independent regulator and competition authority for the UK communications industries", is the biggest regulator with the resources to address wider policy issues such as media literacy. [3] It also has a critical role in setting the limits on the role of public service broadcasters and helping to frame ownership guidelines and market rules issues such as advertising breaks and pricing. Decisions about takeovers remain with competition authorities.

Media policy is also set at a regional or transnational level through bodies such as the European Commission (EC), The Internet Governance Forum and UNESCO. The Internet Governance Forum[4] addresses technical regulation of the Internet, such as the protocol for domain names. It is also mandated by the UN "to support the United Nations Secretary-General in carrying out the mandate from the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) with regard to convening a new forum for multi-stakeholder policy dialogue". It has a UK section[5] that provides a way to raise the interests of UK stakeholders run by the not-for-profit company that controls the .UK domain. Participants in UKIGF tend to be groups directly related to the Internet such as London Internet Exchange, the Coalition on Internet Safety and the British Computer Society, although other interested groups such as Amnesty International are involved. Its core concerns are regulatory and have included

issues such as consumer protection and digital exclusion.[6] It is a relatively new organisation and has a limited consultative role but has recently adopted a policy to strengthen the stakeholder influence in its workings.

These bodies are currently limited to general industry policy frameworks at an international level. However, as mainstream media is threatened economically by competition from Internet companies, especially those based in the US, there have been indications that the EC in particular is considering regulations to protect European MSM newspapers and broadcasters. In practice, though, policy on content remains overwhelmingly a national concern. So in France, for example, President Sarkozy has introduced measures to further subsidise their newspapers. At the UK level the Digital Economy Bill passed in the final weeks of the Labour Government sought to set out an agenda for delivering media in the Internet age. Controversially, it set new limits on illegal file-sharing. These policy moves appear to be more motivated by a desire to protect media industries than any concern for services to more marginal audiences.

The Coalition Government will not repeal the Digital Economy Bill but it is generally adopting a less interventionist approach. It is concentrating on providing 'universal' access to high-speed broadband rather than seeking to determine content. It has ruled out direct subsidies for local newspapers but appears keen to relax ownership rules in an effort to promote market innovation such as local TV stations. It is also going to reform at least two of the regulatory bodies. Ofcom will be reduced in scope and size. This could have a significant impact on policies to promote media literacy. The BBC Trust will be reshaped. This could have strategic implications for the BBC in the longer-term with the licence fee review in 2012. It could also impact on BBC policy in regard to its partnerships with other media organisations and the decisions it takes about its market impact assessments.

At the same time the Government has retained the services of the Digital Inclusion Champion, Martha Lane Fox, who will be working with Lord Wei the social media entrepreneur and advisor to the government on its 'Big Society' policies of public engagement and citizen activism. What exactly that will mean in reality for low-income groups is not at all clear yet. Cuts in public spending mean that resources for digital inclusion will be under pressure. For example, many of the projects in the now-suspended school building programme were ICT-related and would have provided digital literacy resources for communities as well as students. However, the Government's desire to make the public sector more efficient through the greater use of online platforms would suggest that it is in the interest of the state to promote digital literacy and activity. For example, in her *Manifesto For A Networked Nation*[7], recently submitted to the Government, Martha Lane Fox claims that "if just 3.5% of unemployed non-internet users found a job by getting online it would deliver a net economic benefit of £560m".

So overall, outcomes will be driven by market and technological changes more than ownership or regulatory reform. The present government is not signalling a radical change in policy regarding the organisation of UK media or

the delivery of public media goods. Much more profound is the change in the market brought about by factors such as the Internet and digital communications that offer new products and services via online, satellite and mobile platforms. Critically, these are now potentially global. However, government and regulatory authorities can still influence the degree to which access to media is universal and affordable. They can invest in educating low-income groups in digital literacy so they can access online public services as well as online media in general. There are other organisations such as UK Online Centres[8] that deliver direct digital literacy training to low-income groups. However, to deliver widespread, if not universal online engagement will require the media and communications industry to make its products and services accessible. So it is arguable that if the regulators such as the BBC Trust or Ofcom have their scope or resources reduced then there will be less effort made to bridge the various digital divides and media barriers created through new technologies and new pricing structures and payment methods for media.

Trends in UK media content and audience consumption habits relating to international news

It is virtually impossible to describe with confidence and accuracy people's consumption of international news. Firstly there is a lack of data. Secondly it is difficult to define international news, beyond the most narrow range. Thirdly, both the consumption habits and production platforms are changing rapidly. There are trends but they are not irreversible. However, we can at least outline the dynamics and issues at stake. In addition we will try to examine the assumptions we make about why people consume international news and why that is assumed to be socially useful.

In the UK there is already regulation in place to support the production of international news. It is part of the public service broadcasting (PSB) settlement. Ofcom and the PSBs all have commitments in their charters to deliver international news to UK audiences. However, these commitments are vague and subject to the increasing pressure on resources and competition. So we see declining numbers of foreign correspondents and bureaux. A recent report[9] found that international news is seen by commissioners as a luxury. Commercial channels are the first to drop international news and these are often the channels most watched by low-income UK communities.[10] Likewise, tabloid newspapers are almost devoid of international news. The recent announcement of cut-backs to BBC funding and the merger of BBC World Service with the rest of the corporation pose a major challenge to the UK's most important source of international news coverage.

At the same time, thanks to Freeview, any home can be a multi-channel household at almost no cost. So there are more alternatives on offer for viewers to news in general and international news in particular. As we saw earlier, this greater choice includes many more international news sources that offer much greater variety than the relatively narrow agenda of mainstream media in the pre-digital age. However, the full range of those non-British outlets are only available to those with subscription cable and satellite TV packages.

There are now far more sources for international news online. People in the UK with an Internet connection can now access material from around the world. Much of this is from non-British media sources. A lot of it is unmediated blogs, websites and social networks where people can connect directly with other groups or individuals. During emergencies such as the Haiti earthquake for example, the first information to emerge from the disaster zone was via the micro-blogging service Twitter. Aid Agencies as well as ordinary Haitians were able to tell their stories online alongside the mainstream media coverage. There is some evidence[11] that the meteoric rise in blogs is now slowing, especially as young people turn to social networks and as other micro-blogging platforms such as Twitter replace the conventional blog-post. However, as we saw during the recent election protests in Iran, these other platforms also afford opportunities for enhanced international

communications.

However, opportunity does not always translate into actuality. Some reports have suggested (Fenyoe, 2010) that the Internet can reduce the breadth of people's interaction with international news. Generally, consumption of news online is in shorter bursts. The argument is also that people can customise their range of sources and so they tend to stick with familiar outlets and reduce the chance of encountering news outside their 'comfort zone'.

The trouble with this kind of research is that it is rarely comparative with previous media consumption. Indeed, that may be methodologically impossible. It is difficult to show whether people have more or less information about the world because of the Internet. Online news tends to be additional rather than replacing other sources so inevitably people's use of it will be for different purposes. It might be for instant alerts, for background information or for a human interest angle rather than for a conventional news briefing. It is also difficult to compare the quality of the consumption experience. If someone actively seeks out international news online and perhaps even comments on it, then surely that is a more substantial interaction than passively watching a TV news report?

So increasingly, the debate is moving on to the quality of the media message and the nature of the consumption rather than the headline figures about rating or unique visits. We should also ask why people should consume international news at all.

Implications of media trends for audience understanding and connection to the world

The idea that masses of people would ever consume substantial amounts of international news was always fanciful. There is no 'Golden Age' when low-income groups sat down in their millions to watch challenging documentaries about climate change. So even before the Internet, mainstream media was seeking more subtle ways to bring the world to audiences by bringing international issues into non-news programming or coverage. More people will have got a dose of African cultural understanding through the BBC TV series *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* than through Channel 4 News. However, recent (unpublished) research (Banaji, S., forthcoming) reminds us that fictional messages about distant people or places can also reinforce stereotypical images. Focus groups studied by Dr Shakuntala Banaji showed that viewers of the *Slumdog Millionaire* film came away from the fantasy account of Indian life with a decidedly more negative and distorted sense of the reality.

Having more information about the world does not necessarily make people think more generously about other people. Indeed, it may make them more fearful and sceptical. A recent survey[12] seemed to indicate that the UK public is conscious of global interdependencies. The Institute of Development Studies-based research showed that over 71 per cent of respondents "considered the life of people in the UK to be dependent on what happens in other parts of the world." However, "the degree of dependency was considered by respondents to be greatest for the state of the economy and the level of terrorist threat". Unfortunately there is no research that breaks those attitudes down into income, geographical or generational categories, but it is probably reasonable to assume that people in low-income groups were at least as concerned about perceived external threats to their well-being as everyone else.

A recent report on international coverage in UK PSB (Harding, 2009) attempted to give other reasons why people may make connections apart from humanitarian motives. In a globalised economy people are aware that their job may depend on a non-British owner or investor. It may rely on trade or export. People are aware that the current recession and the associated public spending cuts have international causes, although polling during the recent UK election campaign suggested they still hold the British Government responsible.

Some of the reasons cut across class and are not dependent on a high income, cosmopolitan lifestyle: holidays, participation in the armed forces, sport, and climate change. It can be indirectly political. During the South African World Cup of 2010, the BBC ran a series of reports by journalists on contemporary issues in that country alongside its football coverage. At one point it even had football pundit Alan Shearer reporting from a township on housing problems. Other reasons for interest in international news may be

directly political but framed in ways that can be ideologically antagonistic. The majority of the UK population that is hostile to further European integration is provided with regular (and hostile) reporting of EU affairs. People are also interested in UK Government foreign policy for political as well as utilitarian reasons. Coverage of the Iraq war and now the conflict in Afghanistan are part of UK political debate. More specifically, British Muslim groups make a connection to how UK foreign policy impacts on co-religionists around the world.

Perhaps the biggest issue, apart from economics, that connects UK communities to the wider world is immigration: "know the world, know your neighbour". To understand what it is to live in a multi-cultural society means knowing about the places you and other people are from. Being in an ethnic group is a strong driver of a kind of global awareness with multicultural households tending to have a greater range of international news sources. However, the actual range of interest might be relatively narrow. They will tend to consume only media from their own land of origin in addition to UK-produced material.

For diaspora groups in the UK new forms of mediation between the UK and their countries of origin offers a range of experiences. The relative ease of access through telecoms and the Internet means they are much more able to remain in direct, informed contact. They are also able to become media sources for communities in the UK and the home country. During the crisis in Zimbabwe, for example, there was a rich media-in-exile that was accessed both by the diaspora community and people in Zimbabwe itself.

Social media projects with diaspora or immigrant groups also allow them to use communications to work through issues about the practical, political and cultural problems they face living in the UK. The Maslaha website (www.Maslaha.org), for example, enables UK Muslims to investigate how to reconcile the teachings of their faith with practical problems about living in a non-Muslim country. It is a good example of how social media projects can be used to facilitate awareness and investigation for culturally diverse individuals that brings together their international and local identities.

So we need to think less simplistically about what we mean by 'understanding' and 'connections'. Should we value factual above fictional narratives, for example? Should we emphasise mediations that foster agency? What expectations should we have of media effects on audiences? Do we assume too readily that news media has any real influence of thinking or behaviour? MSM tends make editorial decision based on an assumption that there are two audiences for international understanding: one that is relatively expert and interested and another audience that doesn't care. Traditionally, approaches to engaging UK citizens in global issues has framed the question in terms of how much do you want to engage the latter and how far can you extend the former?

Research suggests that partial knowledge of distant others can reinforce apathy and even hostility rather than promoting understanding. The UK Public

Opinion Monitor survey (www.ukpublicmonitor.org) asked about coverage of the Haiti earthquake. A high proportion of the public said they trusted the media coverage and nearly 60 per cent said they were 'fairly concerned' about what was portrayed. However, despite extensive and harrowing media coverage, only 20 per cent were 'very concerned' and about a quarter were 'indifferent' or 'unconcerned'. Although the majority was supportive of aid agency efforts they were sceptical about long-term change. Respondents told the survey that they 'considered long-term aid was likely to be ineffective in bringing about development'. 49 per cent of the respondents had given to the Haiti appeal - a mean of £32. So even where people had connected themselves to a global event and acted, there were still considerable limitations on how much they wanted to empathise or feel positively about those in need and the possibility of solving their problems.

What's to be done? Structures and policies

So we have seen how changes in global media effect the media environment for UK communities, especially in their ability to access international news. Choice has expanded for those with access to the Internet and satellite/cable services but there are still significant barriers in terms of affordability, digital divides and media literacy. We have seen how UK and international regulatory bodies have some influence on these issues but how technology and market forces dominate.

In the UK low-income groups have no particular representation on the regulatory bodies for newspapers (PCC) or broadcasting (Ofcom) although both champion consumer rights in general. Both also encourage stakeholder participation through consultations and research. Online there are organisations geared more specifically at bridging the digital divide such as Digital Inclusion Champion Martha Lane Fox and the UK Online Centres. These organisations will find it difficult to increase media literacy among low-income groups as a time when general educational and social support resources will be cut.

The chances of the digital divides widening during recession are high and of great concern at a point where government is looking to increase provision of government services and benefits online. However, the prospects of a wider media access problem should not be ignored. Access to international news is currently predominantly through free-to-air public service broadcasting. To maintain the opportunity for UK communities to access that information, those resources need to be protected and open access guaranteed. Upcoming reform of the BBC Trust and the Charter Renewal process give UK community groups an opportunity to influence that process.

There are also opportunities for UK communities to empower themselves in relation to global media and to increase their connectedness to international news. Journalism has become more networked (Beckett, 2008).The public has more opportunity for participation in, interaction with, and creation of news media. Recent research (Beckett, 2010) shows how all forms of professional journalism are embracing new production processes that engage in new ways with the citizen. Journalists now routinely gather 'user generated content' from the public and encourage interactivity. Individual journalists blog and Twitter to promote engagement with audiences in the creation of news, as well as in reaction to it. The research (Beckett, 2010) also shows a growth in independent networked news media such as the parenting website *Mumsnet* and community-run neighbourhood 'hyper-local' website such as www.Kingscrossenvironment.com.This increase in networked journalism offers greater opportunities for the public to influence news production. The news agenda and the way that stories are narrated are now at least marginally determined by the audience. This is partly driven by the business crisis in journalism. Media organisations are desperate to attract the attention of the public in a much more competitive market where advertising income is increasingly hard to generate. The networking is facilitated by the new Web 2.0 technologies: texting, smart-phones, lap tops, camera phones, blogs,

email, RSS feeds and search engines. The result is that the citizen can participate in the reporting of the world as well as the analysis and debate about it. It can make for a much more open, multi-layered and responsive news media. Of course, the most media literate individuals will have the greatest impact on this networked news production, so the danger remains that low-income groups will continue to be disproportionately absent from that process.

Given the skills and resources, UK communities can influence the agenda and content of the global journalism they consume at different levels (www.charliebeckett.org/?p=2932):

- Local and hyper-local: independent local websites and professional neighbourhood news-sites.
- National: independent online fora such as Mumsnet as well as MSM online interactivity.
- International: MSM organisations such as the BBC and CNN as well as global networks such as Facebook or Global Voices.

This is an opportunity for those representing low-income groups. There is evidence that you can increase campaigning skills to enable UK communities to get their message onto MSM. An unpublished active research report by Mimi Doran of University College Dublin showed how direct intervention with activists on St Georges Estate in Dublin helped create a powerful media-based lobbying campaign. It combined offline protests geared towards MSM with online publicity targeted at the media as well as the wider public. Once it had reached a relatively sophisticated level of media literacy the activists assumed total ownership of the campaign.

Stakeholders are increasingly able to fund journalism itself. Foundations are now investing directly in investigative journalism (www.investigationsfund.org), for example. Organisations working with UK communities could also increase their media activity to include the co-creation of news to sustain flows of information in the global media environment. It means a shift for NGOs and other civil society organisations from PR to media participation and production. One example of this on an international level was *The Guardian*/Katine Project. *The Guardian* went into partnership with the development NGO AMREF to provide four years of interactive continuous media coverage of one Ugandan village's experience of development. As Polis reported, the project was not without tension, mistakes and failures (http://www.charliebeckett.org/?p=1017). However, it showed that with contemporary media technologies it is possible to create more cosmopolitan, intelligent and participatory international journalism that is better networked into the public and stakeholders. It invites replication around a UK set of issues and could even be extended to international partners. Those civil society groups who might seek to create this kind of 'stakeholder media' have a role as a trusted brand. However, they must also resist adopting simplistic advocacy or marketing communication strategies. They absolutely must take care to maintain transparency and the highest media standards. If they are going to be networked journalists, they should be 'good journalists'.[13]

So it is possible to see a dual direction to global media. On the one hand the abundance of outlets, platforms and material combined with increasing mechanisms for choice means it is becoming more individualised and local. On the other hand, news media are also tending towards focusing its resources on big events. So we see increasing concentration on live and expansive coverage of a particular issue or story. Hence, the non-stop broadcasting from the World Cup, *The Guardian's* live election blog and even coverage of the Haiti Earthquake. But this big live event mediation is now combined with personalized and multi-platform mediation through social networking sites as well on mobile phones, computers, TV, radio and papers or magazines. This is the complex environment referred to at the beginning of this essay. But I see it as a rich media eco-system rather than a dangerous or frightening one. Of course, that depends entirely on your ability to access and navigate those networks.

There is a danger is that we are headed for a divide between a super-informed elite and a less informed majority. Sales of the up market *Economist* and visits to its website keep increasing, indicating a growth in the demand for intelligent international news. But Britain's most popular middle market newspaper, the *Daily Mail* has displaced news with fashion and gossip on its hugely popular website. It is also possible that the increasing customisation of media consumption may reduce the level of common knowledge about global affairs, while deepening trans-national connectivity for other groups. This danger of media fragmentation was present in the pre-Internet Age and digitalisation does not make them inevitable. But if we want the trend to be in the other direction then we must foster mechanisms that promote the level and diversity of international news and that encourage the consumption and production of it by all in society. This will require increased investment in resources for international journalism, public media literacy and action to reduce digital divides.

Endnotes

[1] http://www.newspapersoc.org.uk/pdf/Top20-publishers_Jan-2010.pdf
[2] http://www.polismedia.org/news/newsdetail.aspx?id=322
[3] The most convenient definition of 'Media literacy' is Ofcom's: 'the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts.' http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/media-literacy/about/whatis/
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