

**Phil Harding**

# The great global switch-off: international coverage in UK public service broadcasting

## Report

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# The Great Global Switch-Off

## International Coverage in UK Public Service Broadcasting

A Report by Phil Harding

# THE GREAT GLOBAL SWITCH-OFF

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## Preface

**“There’s a very ‘purist’ view of what international coverage should be. Our critics have got to remember that the competition for audiences is very fierce out there.” *Senior Executive***

International coverage is commonly agreed to be a vital test of the value of any public service broadcasting system. We all seem to think that showing people the world is a Good Thing. Yet, no one seems to have defined why bringing the world to people in Britain is important or even what this kind of Public Service Broadcasting looks like in the digital age.

International coverage is a bit like broccoli. It may not be particularly appetising but it is good for us. Yet, no one has done the research to work out the real nutritional value or the correct measures to ensure that it is retained as a staple within the national media diet. This report attempts to do just that.

This is a critical moment for international coverage in Public Service Broadcasting. Understanding the world and taking an active interest in it has never been more important to our political, cultural, economic and environmental health. Public Service Broadcasting, with television at its heart, is still the predominant way that people can know about their world and what it means to them. At the same time, that public service broadcasting system in the UK faces momentous upheavals.

The quality and breadth of British television is still enviously regarded by those outside of the UK. However, there is a real danger that we are sleep-walking into a broadcasting future that is virtually free of international coverage.

A great global switch off looms as the review of Public Service Broadcasting moves forward. Commitments to international coverage sit quietly in charters of the broadcasters with no strategy, measures or accountability to ensure that these promises are fulfilled.

It would be an act of cultural vandalism that would replace the prospect of a cosmopolitan and interconnected view of the world with a parochial, passport-free version of reality. All too soon our PSB landscape could resemble the narrow scope of mainstream American TV.

The mapping in this report shows that we already suffer from a grossly distorted view of the world where international coverage means wildlife or travel TV. This needs rebalancing. This report is not just a call to broadcasters but to all those people who claim to value international coverage.

Without urgent action, there is a very real threat that the international agenda could fade from our mainstream channels. This future is not the outcome of design or a result of malicious intent but benign apathy as those that should champion it stay quiet.

We believe it is vital that a serious and imaginative debate around international coverage is held as part of shaping our public service media. This paper written by Phil Harding with the support of Oxfam, Polis and the International Broadcasting Trust is a way of starting that conversation with the media world, the policy-makers and the public.

- Oxfam believes that people in Britain benefit from knowing about the world so that they can contribute towards Britain making a significant impact on the big global issues that affect us all.
- IBT believes that TV producers have a critical role to play in portraying the world and engaging the public in an active response to international news, documentaries, drama or entertainment.
- Polis believes that we live in an increasingly interconnected world where the media must be more reflexive and responsible about the part it plays in witnessing and engaging people around the globe.

This year the Ofcom review and the Digital Britain process show clearly how the PSB system is facing radical change. If we do not get this right then there is the prospect of a period of depletion and disintegration.

Phil Harding argues in this paper that, given the right understanding of international value and given the knowledge about why it matters to citizens, it is possible to argue from a position of strength, that international coverage must be enhanced, not just safeguarded.

International coverage must also be re-imagined as we begin to embrace the digital dividends of new technology but with television as the central driving force.

To achieve this means coming up with a framework to define the value of international coverage. We cannot put it into pounds and pence or a table of social indicators. Media effects on society are notoriously hard to pin down. However, we can go beyond the instinctive and subjective and self-serving vague measures of the past.

There has long been a patronising assumption that international coverage was an elitist taste, a minority pursuit. Foreign news was seen as up market, foreign drama or documentaries were for a select few. Phil Harding argues that international coverage is important for everyone and that a wide range of the public demands it for a diverse set of reasons. Public Service Broadcasting does not have the luxury of complacent assumptions about international coverage. It must justify itself.

We hope this report and the imaginative recommendations it makes are the start of a serious dialogue. Instead of seeing international coverage as a moral fig leaf or an onerous obligation, we hope that future PSB systems put it at the heart of programme strategies and public priorities. That way public service broadcasting can continue to inform future generations of the world around them.

**Sam Barratt, Oxfam**  
**Charlie Beckett, Polis**  
**Mark Galloway, IBT**

# THE GREAT GLOBAL SWITCH-OFF

By Phil Harding

## 1.0 Executive Summary

1. Up until now much of the debate about the future of public broadcasting has concentrated on money and structures. With the exception of regional news, very little has been about content. Yet what matters most to the public is content, the programmes they are going to be able to see and hear in the future.
2. This report by Phil Harding, a former senior editor and executive at the BBC, focuses on one of the crucial areas that make British public service broadcasting distinctive: its coverage of the world outside the United Kingdom. Against the background of the current debate on the future of public broadcasting it looks at what the role of international programming could and should be in any future system.
3. In the course of compiling this report, the author undertook extensive research which included in-depth interviews with a large number of senior people – executives, producers, commissioners and controllers - working across the broadcast and media industries as well as with those with an interest in international coverage and/or broadcast policy.
4. **The report argues that, while there is currently much good coverage and some exceptional programming about the wider world, this key area of public service broadcasting is under serious threat.**
5. At a time when globalization is making our planet an ever more inter-dependant place, the need for an understanding of the cultural forces, the migratory forces and the environmental forces that are shaping the world has never been greater. Britons need to know about these trends and to understand the part they are playing in shaping their everyday lives. Public service broadcasting has a vital role to play in that process. (Chapter Three)
6. The report concentrates on television as it is the most important and influential medium in this country and is likely to remain so for some time to come. (Chapter Four)
7. **The two most immediate areas of threat are to the prominence of what is broadcast and to its quality. In quality there is an over-reliance on certain formats, too much caution in commissioning and a lack of innovation and risk-taking. In terms of prominence there has been a sharp migration of internationally-based factual content from the mainstream channels to the digital channels in recent years. Since the digital channels have lower audiences this has had the inevitable consequence that international programming is now seen by fewer viewers. Thus such programming is already becoming marginalized in the schedules. The risk is that it will be pushed further to the edge of the**

**schedules and then disappear altogether. This wouldn't happen by design, no one would have actually wanted it to happen, but the end result would be a global switch-off on British television. (Chapter Two).**

**8. The report makes ten recommendations. These include the requirement that each public service broadcaster should draw up an explicit international strategy to shape and inform its programme and content commissioning and should appoint a senior executive at Board level as international champion to oversee that strategy; that public service broadcasters should draw up measures of success which are more wide-ranging than just audience ratings; that there should be a new Importance Index ; that the BBC World News Channel should be available in the UK; that if there is to be contestable public funding in the future, some of that should be ear-marked for international content; that the BBC iPlayer should be expanded to include more international non-BBC content; that there should be new combined international portal for video and information from non-broadcast organizations and NGO's. (Chapter Ten)**

9. Commitments to cover the wider world form an important part of the public service definitions of Ofcom, the BBC and Channel 4. ITV and Channel Five's Ofcom licences contain specific commitments for international material in their news and current affairs programmes. (Chapter Four).

10. Audience research shows that the public think international news on television is important. Audiences believe an understanding what is going on in the world is a critical element of public service broadcasting. People think public service broadcasting has important functions to fulfill over and beyond audience ratings and competitive market pressures. (Chapter Five).

**11. There is little hard data about the sorts of audience ratings international programmes get. But what is beyond doubt is that **there is a near-universal belief among those working in the industry that international programmes get lower ratings than domestic ones. This has a major impact on the way commissioners behave and on which programmes do and don't get commissioned. (Chapter Five)****

12. In-depth group research suggests that audiences come to international programming with different attitudes and expectations and find different types of international programming attractive and interesting. There is a core audience that is interested in international affairs. There is another audience that, while not possessing such a high degree of interest or knowledge, is interested in programming which contains good story-telling combined with strong central characters and which explains the relevance of the subject matter. A third group is attracted by international themes when they are contained in established formats and series, such as dramas and soaps, or when they are presented by a well-liked presenter. (Chapter Five)

13. International news is seen by the audience as being an important source of information about the wider world. But there are increasing pressures

on international newsgathering budgets with considerable risks to original on-the-spot reporting. (Chapter Six)

14. Channel 4 News might be one of the areas vulnerable to Channel 4's financial difficulties but removing money from the BBC licence fee to preserve things such as Channel 4 News could have consequences for the BBC's overseas newsgathering presence - one of the things that makes the BBC's foreign coverage distinctive. (Chapter Six)
15. The report argues that the BBC World News Channel should now be made available in the UK. (Chapter Six)
16. Tracking studies on the amount of international factual programming on British television show that there has been a big reduction on ITV and Channel Five and a move away from the mainstream channels to digital platforms. **This has led to a marginalisation of such coverage as programmes on the digital-only channels are seen by far fewer viewers.** (Chapter Seven)
17. The report looks at the parts of world covered by British television in factual programming and draws up maps of the world as it is seen by the British viewer. The maps show that **British viewers are given a distorted view of the world. There is an overwhelming concentration on coverage of the United States and Europe and the English speaking world.** By comparison Africa is tiny and heavily skewed. Only three countries out of the 52 on the continent are normally ever seen because coverage of Africa is almost entirely about wildlife. South America is also virtually ignored. (Chapter Seven)
18. **In terms of programming quality, while there are still many very good and some outstanding programmes being shown, too many are of the same type.** Two formats seem to predominate at the moment - various forms of television anthropology, usually involving remote tribes, and the celebrity-led guided tour. While many of these are very good and are successful in reaching out to a wider audience, the concentration on them has been to the exclusion of much else. **In the view of many in the industry - producers and executives - there is a cautiousness and a fear of risk-taking in television commissioning at the moment.** (Chapter Eight)
19. The present commissioning system has become too cumbersome and multi-layered with too many people able to say no and too few able to say yes. (Chapter Eight)
20. This combined with the over-riding importance attached to audience ratings and the belief that internationally themed programmes get lower ratings has led to a marked reluctance on the part of many commissioners to commit to international programmes that are either innovative, risky or do not involve a ratings-banker celebrity. (Chapter Eight)
21. **Public service broadcasters must take a much broader view of what is to be regarded as a successful programme.** Programmes which get lower ratings but which are highly valued by their audience are as important as those large audience programmes which do not make much of an impact on their audience. More priority should be given to measures of success such as the Appreciation Index and feedback from

devices such as the BBC's Pulse rating system. The report also argues that there should be a totally new measure of success, the Importance Index, which would measure how important an audience thought it was that such a programme had been made and shown. (Chapter Eight)

22. **There is a fundamental gap in the present programming processes of public service broadcasters. There is a lack of a coherent strategy for international content.** While the broadcasters – especially the BBC and Channel 4 – proudly proclaim coverage of the wider world as being one of their key purposes and the BBC details how these purposes are to be met in its Channel Service Licences, it is clear that there is then a large gulf between those strategic imperatives and the individual commissioning decisions which determine which actual programmes and content get made and shown. **There is an urgent need for each of the public service broadcasters to draw up a coherent overall international strategy to shape and inform its commissioning. It should be 'owned' by one senior executive for each broadcaster at Board level who would be responsible for overseeing the strategy and for its delivery.** Such a strategy would be able to look at the totality of what is being commissioned, would stop a glut of particular types of programmes, identify any gaps in coverage in terms of significant issues uncovered and spot any parts of the world which are being unjustifiably ignored. (Chapter Eight)
23. The 'Real World' seminars which have been successfully staged by the International Broadcasting Trust and the BBC have made a real difference to the perceptions of broadcasters. This idea should be extended to other broadcasters. (Chapter Eight)
24. The report looks at some of the likely future trends for the media in the next few years and argues that several of them, such as the growth of social networking and international virtual friendship groups, could be beneficial for international coverage in the sense of making such content feel much more relevant and 'real' for the British audience in the future. (Chapter Nine)
25. The report concludes by making ten recommendations for the future. (Chapter Ten)

## 2.0 INTRODUCTION

*"I do not advocate that we turn television into a 27-inch wailing wall, where longhairs constantly moan about the state of our culture and our defense. But I would just like to see it reflect occasionally the hard, unyielding realities of the world in which we live. I would like to see it done inside the existing framework, and I would like to see the doing of it redound to the credit of those who finance and program it.....This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box."*

Ed Murrow

Speech to U.S. Radio & Television News Directors Conference 1958.

For most people, public service broadcasting (PSB) is not some lofty concept debated at conferences and in pamphlets like this. It is quite simply what they, the public, see on their screens and hear on their speakers and earphones. It is about programmes. In the jargon of today, it is about content. Yet so far astonishingly little of the debate about public service broadcasting has been about content. Up until now it has been a largely one-dimensional argument about money – who gets it and who should get it in the future – and about shared facilities and structures. Apart from the debate about regional news and an odd too-brief excursion into the future of children's television, there has been precious little discussion about what the public will actually see and hear in the future. If the debate continues in this truncated form, it will be a massive missed opportunity. For the most part there will have been little or no discussion about what sorts of programmes we will be offered in the future or what they will be about or about the tone and approach we expect public service broadcasters to adopt.

This report is an attempt to redress some of that balance by focussing on one area of content which is one of the most distinctive aspects of public service broadcasting: the coverage of the world outside Britain. It is an area that is under serious threat. British television faces the serious risk of a global switch-off. At such a critical time this report offers an opportunity to rethink current international coverage, to take stock of what has been offered so far, what has worked and what hasn't and to offer some practical ideas about how to refresh and re-energize it in the future. It will examine programming across the full range of genres: news, documentaries, drama, comedy and entertainment and ask what part such output could and should play in the public broadcasting of the future.

On the face of it the commitment to international coverage in public service broadcasting appears clear. The mission to bring the wider world to British audiences is clearly identified by both the regulator and the broadcasters. Ofcom lists "Informing our understanding of the world" as one of the key roles of public broadcasting in Britain today. One of the BBC's six key purposes is that of 'bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK'. Channel 4's recent document, redefining its role in the digital era, listed a quartet of purposes prominent among them 'to challenge people to see the world differently'.

Thus both the main public broadcasters and the regulator see the international dimension of content as being key to the current and future roles of public service broadcasting. This importance is further highlighted in their Annual Reports and performance reviews. But beyond the official sweet reassurances there are some hard questions to be asked about the reality of what is currently on offer.

There are some even harder questions to be asked about the future. How well will the fine words and good intentions hold up against the ever harsher realities of the media world of the next few years? The risk is that Britain could go the way of the United States. Some see the danger signs here already. In America market fragmentation and commercial pressures have caused an already conservative broadcasting system to retract even further into its domestic shell. Programmes about countries and cultures outside the United States are rare, few risks are taken with documentaries (with some occasional exceptions on PBS). After a brief post-9/11 spurt, American news has slumped back into introspection and most American news organizations now operate with a skeletal staff outside the U.S. Even CNN, which does maintain a sizable foreign bureau network, shows little of that on its two domestic news networks.

The risk for British audiences is clear. It is about prominence and quality. In terms of quality, much of what is already shown is very good. There are some really excellent programmes. But too much of it is too similar. One of British television's great failings is that once something is shown to have worked, everyone rushes to copy it. The end result is not only large clusters of programmes all aping the same format or style but everywhere else a real lack of diversity of approach and often a lack of innovation and risk-taking with large gaps in the output in terms of the issues and the parts of the globe covered. As the maps of the world - as seen through the eyes of British television - in Chapter Seven show, British viewers get a distorted view of the world. Overwhelmingly British factual television concentrates on the United States and Europe and on the English-speaking world. African people almost never appear on our screens outside of news - where coverage is often about natural disasters and famine - because almost all of the non-news programming from Africa is about animals and wildlife. South America is also largely ignored.

In terms of quantity, it's not that there isn't enough - at least at the moment. I am not advocating more or endless hours of programming. The issue is about the amount of programming that gets shown *prominently*. It is about where the broadcasters place those programmes that do get shown. As I show in Chapter Seven there has been a big shift in the scheduling of international programming away from two of the mainstream channels - ITV and Channel Five - and towards the digital channels. The end result of this is that international programming is now seen by far fewer viewers than it would have been a few years ago. If this marginalisation continues then such programming will progressively retreat to the outer edges of even the digital channels and then will begin to disappear altogether. That is why the American model is quoted by many as a warning of what could happen here.

Without a continued commitment, backed by actions and resources, and without a systematic plan to protect and nurture such coverage, programming about the wider world on British television will become first marginalised and then disappear altogether. As I explain in later Chapters, it wouldn't happen because anybody wanted it to; it would happen because the financial and competitive pressures overwhelmed even the best of intentions. But by the time anyone realised it had gone, it would be too late. The world would have disappeared from our screens. The global switch-off would have happened. The risk is plain. The time for debate, followed closely by action is now.

### 3.0 WHY INTERNATIONAL COVERAGE MATTERS

**“It’s becoming a smaller world. We all need to know each other better. It’s becoming ever more important that we know who our neighbours are, where they come from and their backgrounds. Television can allow you to get to know someone better.” *Journalist and Producer***

#### **The Globalised World**

It has become one of the truisms of our times that we are living in a globalised world. The world is becoming smaller, flatter, ever closer, ever more intimate. We are seeing the death of distance.

All of the reasons for this, the increasing ease and interconnectedness of information technology and media, the greater wealth of and travel from the developed world, the poverty and inequality in the developing world and the speed of development of the in-between countries such as China and India, are all likely to accelerate this century. The present economic crisis may affect the short-term rate of change but it will not affect the long-term trends.

The everyday lives of Britons are increasingly affected by this inter-connected world. Contracts are won, jobs are lost, families’ standards of living are determined by decisions made or shaped thousands of miles away. British investors queue outside their bank to safeguard their savings as a result of reckless sale pitches made on the porches of houses in California and Arkansas. Others are left potentially bereft after they see their savings frozen when Iceland’s banking bubble bursts. Large communities of refugees and asylum seekers come to our cities and grow up in our midst because of wars and conflicts in Somalia and Congo. The price of food in our supermarkets goes up because of the failure of the rice crop in Indonesia or the fact that China has bought up most of Argentina’s soya crop – soya which our farmers had previously bought as feed for British beef. When a farmer in the Amazon rain forest clears another thousand acres or when an Indian planning committee decides to build another coal-fired power station they affect the future path of climate change not only in Brazil or India but in Bradford and Inverness too.

But Britons can often be ignorant of the causes of these social changes. In a recent survey for the British Red Cross asking respondents to name countries currently experiencing conflict, 69% and 65% of those questioned identified Iraq and Afghanistan respectively, but fewer than 1% of respondents were able to identify other countries including Sudan, Somalia and the Central African Republic.

Perhaps if broadcasters had spent a little more time examining the economy and the culture of the people of Afghanistan rather than concentrating so much on spending time with the British troops, the British public might understand more about why the Taliban are proving so hard to defeat and hence the reasons why so many British troops are dying in that fighting.

This globalised world is also a world in which our first-hand personal experiences of other cultures are being extended. The British holidaymaker is now as likely to reach for the Lonely Planet guide as the Spanish phrase book. A Thai political crisis also becomes one in which six thousand Britons find themselves trapped at Bangkok airport.

In London schools more than 300 languages are spoken, in Glasgow schools 138 languages, the figure for Manchester schools is 72. This mix of languages has made London and our other large cities ideal globally for the recruitment of multi-lingual staff. This, together with the high rate of entrepreneurship among recent immigrants, has given this country a distinct edge over others. Diversity brings many advantages to this country but it also brings issues of social cohesion. An understanding of your child's friends' background and that of your neighbours – of their country and their culture - is an important part of life in modern Britain today. In a world of increasing global migration to know the world is to know your street.

### **A Rounded World**

The informational role of television is vital but the medium can and should do more than that. At its best it can also enthuse, move and inspire. In reflecting the wider world public service television should do all those things. Viewers need to have a well-rounded view of the world – one that is about portrayal as well as reportage. A rounded view is one that contains comedy as well as tragedy, drama as well as crisis. It portrays a world in which people appear as more than victims. International programming is not just about news or factual programmes, it is about drama and entertainment and comedy too.

Television should encourage people in this country to feel that they are a part of this globe, that alongside the things that make us different there is also much that we have in common: that we all share a common humanity and we all have a stake in the world, that we share a global citizenship.

### **The Electronic World**

This is a world in which the electronic horizons are shrinking too. Satellite television brings worldwide media into every living room; live coverage of the Mumbai bombings came to British homes not only from the international news channels but from the Indian news channel NDTV too. Internet users can scour the worldwide web for millions of pages of international news; mobile services such as Twitter bring instant networks of global information. Where once worldwide networks of friends and family were based on emigration and immigration, today social networking sites enable any user to build up a network of close virtual friends anywhere in the world.

For Britons to understand and have control over their lives in today's changing world they need to know about and understand the forces across the globe that are crucially shaping events here in Britain and elsewhere: the economic forces, the cultural forces, the migratory forces, the environmental forces. To do that they need to be able to access sufficient information to understand the world and its connections. They need to know about the cultures and peoples of the world. In a vibrant democracy people need to have enough reliable information to be able to make political choices about those who will exercise power on their behalf. The media, especially the broadcast media and in particular video and television, have a crucial role to play in this.

## 4.0 THE PRESENT DAY

**“International programming *is* more expensive than domestic programming, obviously, and it doesn’t rate as well, so without some form of compulsion from Ofcom and the DCMS then broadcasters will commission more programmes about freaks in Fishguard than they will films like *China’s Stolen Children*, *The Transplant Trade* and *Dying for Drugs*.” Executive Producer**

### Television Still Matters

Much of the present day debate about broadcasting is driven by technological innovation and the changes that brings in audience and user behaviour. Digitalisation, the internet, Web 2.0, the increasing use of mobile devices, all these, together with changes in the flows of advertising spend are raising enormous questions about the future of public service broadcasting. Doubtless there will be more momentous changes to come.

Yet the fact remains that at the moment television remains the dominant medium for most people in this country and is likely to remain so for some time to come. In the UK we still spend more than three times as long watching television as we do in front of a computer screen. As the Culture Secretary, Andy Burnham, pointed out in a recent speech, despite all the changes, television viewing in Britain has decreased by only six minutes over the last five years and recently has actually increased. Though audience shares (the percentage of the audience watching at any one time) for its main channels have dropped markedly over the past decade, the audience reach for BBC television (the number of people who watch at some time during the week) is still at 85% and went up slightly last year.

As well as being widely watched, television is an important source of information for the public. A recent Ofcom survey showed that 67% of respondents said that television was their main source of news about the UK and 68% said it was their main source of news about the world. The respective figures for the internet were 4% and 6%, behind newspapers (13% and 11%) and radio (8% and 6%). It is likely that the present balance of media will change in the next few years and work done by the Pew Foundation and others in the US suggest that the figures in the UK for reliance on the internet will rise. But nevertheless television is going to remain the most important source of information in Britain for quite some time ahead.

It is also going to continue to be an important place for audiences to watch big events – national live events and the entertainment spectaculars. The finals of *Strictly Come Dancing* and *The X Factor* drew record audiences this year. *The X Factor* final drew an audience of 14 million – the highest audience for a television entertainment programme since a Christmas edition of *Only Fools and Horses* five years ago.

Some people have talked about the internet replacing television. Some of that may happen with the growth of internet TV to which I will return to later. But in a converged world the definitions start to blur anyway. What is BBC1 or ITV1 when it is streamed and watched live over the web – is that television or the internet?

But those who talk about one medium replacing another often misunderstand the very different roles those media play in peoples’ lives. Certainly what some of the

recent Ofcom research has suggested is that even those people with a full repertoire of media choices see television and the internet as performing different but complementary roles and that they value the social functions of television for things that they think the internet cannot provide.

### **The Public Service Broadcasting Context**

**“To be honest our remit in this area has not been interrogated very hard since it was published. What do we actually mean by those words ?” *Senior Executive***

If words alone – and the prominence given to those words - were to be the barometer, there is little doubt that coverage of international issues would play a major part in what we see and hear on our airwaves. When asked to define what they are about, why they exist, both the regulator and the two main public broadcasters – the BBC and Channel Four - give a very prominent place to the importance of international coverage and issues. But the current schizophrenic nature of public broadcasting is sharply illustrated when one compares those commitments with the more limited one of ITV and Channel Five.

### **Ofcom**

At the start of its public broadcasting consultation, Ofcom tried to define public service broadcasting. It came up with what it called four purposes and six characteristics. First among the purposes was 'informing understanding of the world'. Here are Ofcom's four purposes in full:

1. Informing our understanding of the world - To inform ourselves and others and to increase our understanding of the world through news, information and analysis of current events and ideas
2. Stimulating knowledge and learning -To stimulate our interest in and knowledge of arts, science, history and other topics, through content that is accessible and can encourage informal learning
3. Reflecting UK cultural identity - To reflect and strengthen our cultural identity through original programming at UK, national and regional level, on occasion bringing audiences together for shared experiences
4. Representing diversity and alternative viewpoints - To make us aware of different cultures and alternative viewpoints, through programmes that reflect the lives of other people and other communities, both within the UK and elsewhere

So for Ofcom coverage of the world is defined as a key component of public service broadcasting.

### **The BBC**

The BBC, when it started to redefine its role for its Charter Review in 2006, produced six key purposes. Prominent among them was international coverage both from the BBC to the world and by 'bringing...the world to the UK'

Those six key purposes were defined by the BBC as:

1. Sustaining citizenship and civil society
2. Promoting education and learning
3. Stimulating creativity and cultural excellence
4. Representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities
5. Bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK
6. In promoting its other Purposes, help to deliver to the public the benefit of emerging communications technologies and services and take a leading role in the switchover to digital television

### **BBC Service Licences**

The importance for the BBC of an international focus is further reflected in the more detailed Service Licences which have been drawn up by the BBC Trust as part of its new governance structure for the various Channels. I list here those commitments that specifically apply against the international purpose:

#### **BBC1**

##### 5.5 Bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK

BBC One should play its part in contributing to this purpose amongst its audience, primarily by bringing the world to the UK, by covering international events and issues.

Its news bulletins should reflect a global as well as national agenda, its factual and documentary output should include global topics, and its arts and music programmes should also feature non-UK artists.

BBC One should acquire and co-produce some high quality international content with broad audience appeal.

#### **BBC2**

##### 5.5 Bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK

BBC Two should contribute to this purpose amongst its audience, primarily by bringing the world to the UK, by following a broad international agenda in its current affairs and by regularly covering international stories in its news analysis.

BBC Two should ensure that its factual, music and arts output reflect international themes and the channel should show high quality non-UK output across a range of genres, including feature films, sport, children's, drama and comedy, when available at reasonable cost.

Interestingly there is no "Statutory Requirement" for international subject matter on BBC2 in terms of the minimum hours to be broadcast. But there is for arts programming (a minimum of 200 hours of arts and music programming) and for religious programming (together with BBC1, at least 110 hours each year).

BBC3's remit is thinner (more with *Gavin and Stacey* in mind perhaps than Ghana and Somalia, though with programmes such as *Blood, Sweat and T-Shirts* the channel has shown some innovative international programmes).

### **BBC3**

#### 5.5 Bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK

BBC Three should play its part in supporting this purpose amongst its audience, primarily by bringing the world to the UK, through its coverage of international issues, including in its news and current affairs output.

Of all the BBC television channels it is BBC4 which is given the meatiest and most explicit international role (Note the words "very important contribution" below):

#### 5.2 Bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK

BBC Four should make a very important contribution to this purpose amongst its audience, primarily by bringing the world to the UK.

It should offer a secure home for the best international and foreign language feature films, programming and documentaries. In documentary, BBC Four should contribute to the BBC's ambition to co-produce or acquire the best programming from around the world by frequently broadcasting new documentaries from around the world.

As part of the channel's commitment to cinema it should acquire first run and classic international and foreign language feature films, help to support their distribution and appreciation in the UK and should provide context and review on screen and online.

Foreign language output should regularly be subtitled, including in peaktime, to allow people from around the world to be heard in their own voices.

BBC Four's nightly news and regular current affairs programming should demonstrate a distinctively international perspective. Within its own commissions, BBC Four should include UK perspectives on international culture and life.

But BBC4's only statutory commitment is to "Premiere at least 20 new international film titles each year".

### **Channel 4**

Channel 4 is equally clear about the importance of its international remit. In its recent document *Next On 4*, in which it redefined its public broadcasting role in the digital age, it put forward four "distinct core purposes". Again with the third of these the international focus was explicit and prominent:

1. Nurture new talent and original ideas
2. Champion alternative voices and fresh perspectives
3. Challenge people to see the world differently
4. Inspire change in people's lives.

Channel 4 also publishes a statement of Programme Policy every year which, as well as highlighting individual programmes with an international theme, also contains a separate international cross-genre section highlighting forthcoming seasons and productions.

In Channel 4's Licence with Ofcom the only specific mentions of 'international' are in connection with its news and current affairs output:

The Corporation shall include news programmes and current affairs programmes in the Channel 4 Service that are of high quality and deal with both national and international matters.

The most specific references are in the Annex to the Licence:

#### **News**

(a) News programmes shall be provided at intervals throughout the period for which the Channel 4 Service is provided, with at least one programme at lunchtimes each weekday and one in the early evening each weekday and a programme in the early evening at weekends on both Saturday and Sunday.

(b) Not less than 208 hours in each calendar year of the Licensing Period of news programmes in peak viewing time shall be included in the Channel 4 Service. Such news programmes shall be of high quality and deal with both national and international matters. Coverage shall be accurate, impartial, authoritative and comprehensive, in terms both of geography and subject matter. Live coverage of important, fast-moving events shall be provided, with news flashes outside regular bulletins as appropriate.

#### **Current affairs**

The Corporation shall ensure that there are not less than 208 hours in each calendar year of the Licensing Period of current affairs programmes included in the Channel 4 Service which are of high quality and deal with both national and international matters, of which 80 hours shall be in peak viewing time.

### **ITV**

ITV, under considerable financial pressure, has spent a large part of the last year trying to move away from as many of its public service commitments as it can negotiate with Ofcom. At one point its executive chairman, Michael Grade, wondered out loud whether ITV would move away from being a public service broadcaster altogether.

ITV's current licence with Ofcom mentions international coverage only in terms of news and current affairs. The most specific commitment is in the Annex to the Licence which says:

#### **News**

The Licensee must broadcast a total of at least 365 hours per calendar year of high quality national and international news programmes between 9.25 am and midnight of which at least 125 hours must be shown in peak viewing time. Programmes must be shown at intervals throughout the day and appropriate news programmes must be shown at weekends in peak viewing time and out of peak viewing time and during public holiday periods.

### **Current affairs**

The Licensee must broadcast a total of at least 78 hours per calendar year of high quality national and international current affairs programmes between 9.25 am and midnight of which at least 35 hours must be shown in peak viewing time.

In its Programme Review for 2007 and statement of Programme Promises for 2008, ITV is able to point to some occasional international documentaries such as *John Pilger's War on Democracy* (a rare examination of South America on British television as we shall see in Chapter Seven) and *21 Up South Africa*.

But overall from the document, it is clear that for ITV, outside of news, international content is not a key priority.

### **Channel Five**

Channel Five's Ofcom Licence and Annex also talks about international content in terms of news and current affairs:

#### **News**

Not less than 408 hours in each calendar year of the Licensing Period of news programmes shall be included in the Channel 5 service between 6 am and midnight and 100 hours in each calendar year in peak viewing time. Such news programmes shall be of high quality and deal with both national and international matters. News programmes shall be provided at intervals during the day – at least one programme at lunchtimes, one in the early evening, one in the mid-evening and headlines at other times each day except on Sunday when no mid-evening programme is required.

#### **Current affairs**

Not less than 130 hours in each calendar year of the Licensing Period of current affairs programmes which are of high quality and deal with national and international matters shall be included in the Channel 5 service of which 10 hours in each calendar year shall be in peak viewing.

In terms of broader international programming in its statement of Programme Promises, Channel Five points to the *Paul Merton in...* series but, set alongside *Britain's Bravest* and *The Kate Moss Years*, I think it is fair to say that this does not appear to be a major priority for the channel.

### **The Public Contract**

Why do all these fine words matter ? They matter because they are in essence the contract between the public and the public service broadcaster. In return for public money and/or access to a public asset, in this case the electromagnetic spectrum, the public service broadcaster undertakes to do certain things, to show certain types of programme, to the public. But words can only go so far; what matters to the viewing public is to what extent and how well those promises are carried out on the screen.

## 5.0 AUDIENCES

**“People can sometimes get very worthy about the wider world and what they expect television to do. On the mainstream channels there is a need for strong elements of escapism. Audiences don’t want too much reality rammed down their throats.” *Senior Commissioner***

This section looks at what audiences say they want, what they watch and what they think of what they watch. As any television researcher will tell you, what audiences say they want and what they actually do can sometimes be two totally different things.

### **What Audiences Expect**

Recent YouGov research for Channel 4 has underlined the importance of international news in public expectations. 91% of those surveyed rated international news on television as ‘important’, 63% rated it as ‘very important’.

Ofcom has also been doing a lot of research for its public broadcasting review asking the public what they expect from a public service broadcaster. According to this research, audiences believe understanding what is going on in the world is a critical element of public broadcasting. Faced with a series of 12 statements about what is important to public broadcasting, ranging from “trustworthy news” to “high quality soaps and dramas”, 84% of those questioned chose “helps me understand what is going on in the world” as a key element. That made it second in importance only to “trustworthy news” (86%). By comparison, soaps and dramas rated 56%.

This suggests – as indeed do most of the answers to the Ofcom research - that people are pretty clear that they think public service broadcasting has important functions to fulfil over and beyond audience ratings and market pressures. When they are asked how well public broadcasting is doing in fulfilling this remit of ‘helping me understand the world’, 67% of those asked were satisfied that it did help them. In such surveys there is usually a gap between perceived importance and performance. In this survey the gap of 17% (between 84% and 67%) is smaller than for some other genres such as children’s, where the gap was much bigger. When asked which channels were best at helping people understand the world, perhaps unsurprisingly, the news channels BBC News and Sky News scored highest (89% satisfied), with BBC1 next (79%) followed by BBC2 (73%) then ITV1 (69%) and Channel 4 on 59%. BBC4 scored quite low with only 53% which is interesting in the light of its particular international remit.

News is clearly seen as playing an important role in international programming. Knowing ‘what’s going on in the world’ is the biggest single factor when people are asked why they watch the news. 70% picked this answer out, 5% more than those who chose the domestic equivalent answer: ‘to know what’s going on in the UK’. 40% say they are specifically interested in ‘worldwide politics and current events’. Interestingly, interest in worldwide politics and current events varies markedly among the UK audience when the responses are broken down by UK ethnic group. People of African origin score this attribute highest (53% do so), people of Caribbean origin score it lowest (36%), with Whites (41%) and Asians (41%) somewhere in between.

In qualitative research – where people are asked in groups to discuss various topics in depth – news and current affairs programmes are seen as having a critical role in reflecting the wider world. The sorts of comments that people make are that they think news “provides a window on the world” and that it is

"important that everyone watches news so we are connected to the world around us"; while current affairs "helps to keep people up to speed with contemporary global issues" and "could help people to make informed decisions regarding current global issues".

### **What Do People Actually Watch ?**

So people say they want public service broadcasting to fulfil an important international role. But do people actually watch television programmes with an international theme ?

There is a shortage of hard data about this. Television audiences are measured by a joint industry body, BARB, which uses a panel and an electronic meter. There is not a separate category for programming with an international theme or location. It would be possible to go through the schedules and categorise each programme, individually, as to whether it is domestic or international and then compare the audience figures. But it would be a gigantic task and no one has done it yet.

What is absolutely clear, from all my conversations, is that there is a near-universal belief among those working in television that programmes with international themes get lower ratings. One or two would put in some caveats and point out that some formats can get decent audiences. Some also point to some exceptions such as *The No.1 Ladies Detective Agency* and from further back *Divorce Iranian Style*. But the fact remains that the very widespread view in the industry is that international equals low audiences. This belief has a major impact on what does and doesn't get commissioned. I will examine the far-reaching consequences of this in Chapter Seven: Pressures and Structures.

### **Audience Reactions**

What do audiences think of those international programmes they do watch ? 3WE, the International Broadcasting Trust's former sister organization, carried out some research on this in 2005 in collaboration with the BBC. The survey tried to qualitatively assess the impact of international programming on viewers, primarily using data gathered by the BBC's online Pulse Panel. Those surveyed were questioned about the quality of the various programmes they had seen and asked whether or not they 'agreed strongly, 'agreed' or 'disagreed' with a series of statements about the programmes.

When it came to what were described as the 'harder' programmes (and by that they meant programmes dealing with topics such as Conflict and Disaster; Politics; Development and the Environment and Human Rights), 64% strongly felt such programmes were "high quality"; 56% strongly felt they had learnt a lot from the programme. 50% strongly agreed that they would talk to others about the programme. But, perhaps not surprisingly given the subject matter, only 16% found these programmes very entertaining. Wildlife and History programmes were considered to have delivered the highest quality: 67% strongly agreed these programmes were of high quality. But only 49% of viewers strongly agreed that wildlife programmes were original, and only 41% strongly agreed that history programmes were original. Wildlife was considered the most entertaining category of international programming with 55% describing it as very entertaining.

To compare these results with the reaction to some other programmes, the panel was also asked to watch and comment on a mixed bag of programmes from the rest of the output (including *My Family*, *Wife Swap*, *Ant & Dec's Gameshow*, *Marathon* and *X Factor*.) Respondents generally felt this programming was of lesser quality than the

factual international output, only 47% strongly agreed that it was of high quality (compared to 64% for the 'harder' international programming above, for instance). But – and again no surprise – they did find it more entertaining.

In general therefore there does seem to be a split between those programmes which audiences think are worthwhile and those they find entertaining. Therefore at those times when some of the audience wants to sit back and be entertained their viewing might not include those more demanding programmes. But the Ofcom research about expectations clearly shows they expect such programmes to be made and shown and to be an important part of the public television schedule. This question of the right balance in the public broadcast mix is one we return to in later Chapters.

We can also glean quite a lot about what audiences think of international programmes from two other pieces of research. In 2003 the BBC carried out quite an extensive research project into attitudes to world affairs programming on BBC2 at a time when it was thinking of changing from the format of the *Correspondent* programme over to what became *This World*. Six groups of regular viewers of BBC2 or Channel 4 from across the country, half of them regular viewers of *Correspondent*, were shown a series of clips from various past editions of the programme. The clips ranged in subject matter from the Euro to Hells Angels to an Abortion Ship. The researchers found there were important differences between the regular viewers of *Correspondent* – the core audience – and the others who could be regarded as potential viewers. The regular viewers wanted 'to be informed' and 'to be a part of things', they were looking for 'intelligent company and 'intellectual interest'; whereas the potential viewers wanted 'human drama' with an 'emotional connection' and a 'powerful experience'. Importantly though both groups wanted 'fascinating stories'.

When the respondents gave their responses to the clips of the programmes they had been shown, the researchers found that the 'core' and potential' viewers each split into two further groups. The core viewers divided into the 'engaged' – those who were well-informed and keen on international issues and applied a 'sense of morality' to what they saw – and what the researchers described as the 'sceptics' – who though not cynical felt they had 'seen it all before' and became impatient with such programmes. The so-called potential viewers (i.e. those who were not regular viewers of *Correspondent* but did watch BBC2 and/or Channel 4) again could be split into two further groups. There were the 'insular' who were described as having limited horizons, didn't like to be challenged and 'put their world first'. They were mostly younger males. Set against them was a largely female group who were described as the 'emotionals'. This group felt alienated by politics but loved 'involving documentaries', liked 'real stories' and were eager for facts when they were combined with 'powerful human interest'. The 'emotionals' were felt to represent the best bet for the new programme to be able to reach out to a wider audience.

In 2005, the International Broadcasting Trust carried out another piece of audience research for its report *Reflecting The Real World*. In this survey groups of viewers, deliberately chosen because they had differing attitudes to the developing world, took part in in-depth discussion groups. As one might expect, those with a more positive attitude to the developing world were relatively well informed, and more widely travelled. Their favourite types of programme often included news and documentaries, serious drama and wildlife programmes. Those with more negative attitudes towards the developing world were very absorbed in their domestic lives and felt they were right to be so. Their favourite programmes were light escapism such as soaps, comedies and reality TV. All the groups were then shown a series of clips from a variety of programmes about the developing world, mostly about Africa. The programmes which had the strongest appeal and impact with all the groups were *Living with Aids*, a Sorious Samora documentary for Channel 4, and *African School* from BBC 4. Both programmes were felt to show life in the developing world in a clear

and personal way. All the viewer groups felt the presence of strong characters was important for building interest. Done in the right way, some serious international programmes clearly can reach out to wider audiences, something commissioners and schedulers should note carefully.

But there were important differences between the two groups in their reactions to other clips. The tone of *Sex Traffic*, a Channel 4 programme about the illegal trafficking of prostitutes was very popular among the 'positive' respondents who liked the fact that it was hard-hitting and shocking, yet still educational. The 'negative' respondents much preferred the special African edition of the BBC drama *Holby City* made as part of BBC1's Africa season. It was a programme many of them watched anyway and they said they felt engaged by this kind treatment. Many of the 'negative' respondents felt stories of this kind could feature more in soaps in the future. This research about *Holby City* is an important reminder that when it comes to reaching that section of the audience who do not normally watch news and the heavier documentaries, drama and humour can be very important avenues for programming about the developing world.

In all of the clips, elements of light-heartedness and humour were especially helpful in engaging the more negative respondents.

None of the groups liked the BBC2 documentary *Battle for the Amazon*. They disliked the fact that it was entirely issue based with no characters they could relate to. Furthermore the 'negatives' felt that the issues were not directly relevant to their lives. For them programme makers need to ensure that their programmes make clear how issues relate to viewers and their lives. This is something that all programme makers need to take to heart no matter who their target audience. Too often the connections and therefore the relevance are taken for granted or are insufficiently explained.

### **Some Conclusions**

So what can we learn from all this ? First is the overwhelming view across the industry that international programmes do not get good audiences. But what comes across from the actual audience research is a much more complex and nuanced picture. It suggests that different sections of the audience will come to international issues and programmes with differing attitudes and expectations. Different programmes and different formats will appeal to different sections of the audience. Controllers and commissioners are well aware of this complexity but set against their other priorities they often do not act on it.

There clearly is a core foreign affairs audience that is pre-inclined to want to watch such programmes and to find them engaging. They come to their television watching with a relatively positive set of attitudes to the world outside the UK and often come with a higher level of knowledge about the world than the rest of the population. They are more interested in international issues and appreciate relatively straightforward treatments of these issues. They watch the news and international documentaries. Sometimes this group is thought of as being a tiny minority but that may be an underestimate of their size and importance. A million people give to Oxfam every year. In a world of fragmenting audiences these sorts of figures start to seem more sizable. Importantly in terms of audience impact this group highly values such programming.

Another audience group are those who do not have a high degree of knowledge about the rest of the world but who will be grabbed by well-told powerful stories, will be attracted by strong and sympathetic central characters and welcome having the relevance of international stories clearly explained to them.

Finally, there is another group who are initially resistant to international themes in programmes and think such programming has 'nothing to do with me or my family'. Again explaining the relevance of international stories is very important, as is human interest. But what comes across most strongly from the research into this group is they can be more easily reached by introducing international themes into popular drama and by extending familiar formats. That is why both fiction programmes – especially soaps and long-running dramas – and the use of well-known popular celebrities as guides to unfamiliar subjects and places can be powerful tools in reaching out to these viewers and beyond the straightforward foreign affairs audience.

## 6.0 THE FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL NEWS

**“Everything has to be successful, there is no longer any room for failure. Commissioners feel they need to be able to trust the people who are making the programme. They only know a small circle therefore they only commission from a small circle.” *Independent Executive***

### **The Pressures on International News Gathering**

The shape of news provision has changed in recent years and is likely to change a lot more in the future. This chapter looks at the future pressures on international news and international news organizations.

News, as we have seen, is a crucial element in what audiences want in terms of getting an international perspective. The figures from the research by Ofcom and others on this are compelling. Television remains the most important source. Though internet use is increasing at the moment this is mostly used as a supplement to television news rather than as replacement for it.

At the moment most viewers seem fairly happy with what they are getting in terms of international news. The gap between perceived importance and performance is relatively small. The news channels are seen as doing a reasonable job in terms of providing a mixed diet of national and international news. An Ofcom study called *New News, Future News* in 2007 showed that international content in the major news bulletins had gone up over a 4 year period. But there are significant issues for television news about its overall performance with two sections of the audience: younger viewers and viewers from British ethnic minority populations. In terms of international news specifically, it's interesting to note that interest in world events is higher among ethnic minorities than it is among young white people.

### **BBC News**

BBC News is the most important news provider in Britain today. Across all its services, its news content regularly reaches more of the UK population than any other news provider. It is also the largest broadcast newsgathering organization in the world. The BBC has some 200 foreign correspondents and sponsored staff spread across the world with another 400-plus correspondents doing some work for the BBC, mostly for the World Service but available to all BBC outlets when needed. They produce some outstanding coverage. This network is one of the things that make BBC News distinctive and highly valued. A recent study by Leeds University pointed out that across the world it's now only Reuters, AFP and

the BBC that have an extensive international news gathering network anymore. Increasingly others have cut back. So the bigger picture worldwide for news has been one of an explosion of outlets combined with an implosion of the journalistic networks needed to sustain those outlets. The reasons for this are of course economic. Foreign newsgathering is expensive.

The BBC is not immune from these pressures either. So far its international newsgathering network has emerged relatively, though not totally, unscathed from the recent rounds of savings. But faced with a property slump and the falling pound, it's clear there will be further savings to be found at the BBC and BBC News is likely to face a call for a share of cuts. Its precious foreign network will be under serious threat.

Any future top-slicing of the licence fee could threaten it further. Channel 4 says it will not be able to sustain programmes like Channel 4 News or its future commissioning of international programmes without public subsidy. Ofcom says it is convinced by most of 4's figures. Since the total amount of money for public service broadcasting is highly unlikely to expand, this will be a zero-sum game. If there are winners there will be losers. This is not to take sides in this particular argument, only to point out that there are likely to be consequences for international coverage either way if this does become a financial tug-of-war.

The main BBC News programmes do a good job in reporting foreign news. The balance between domestic and international stories is not always an easy one to maintain. Different programmes have different briefs; on the whole the BBC News at Ten does more foreign than the Six. It is important that the difference in international coverage between the two programmes does not become unbalanced.

The relatively new 8pm BBC1 short bulletin has, according to internal BBC research, been effective at reaching viewers who do not normally watch its main news programmes. Thus far this bulletin has done a good job of keeping a reasonable balance between domestic and international agendas. It is important that it continues to do so and does not fall into the populist trap of thinking 'this is news for people who don't like news therefore we won't put much news in it'.

*Newsnight* which has had an impressive record of foreign reporting in the past has been subject to the recent round of savings and certainly to my eyes – and to those of others – is doing less original foreign reporting. The cuts there do seem to have had visible consequences.

Of the digital channels BBC4 News has a specific international brief in line with that of the channel. It is broadcast jointly on the BBC World News channel (more about BBC World News below). The great shame is that its transmission slot was moved to 7pm so it now clashes directly with Channel Four News.

## **ITN**

ITN, the provider of ITV News and Channel 4 News, has rightly won its fair share of international reporting awards over the years. In the last two years it has opened a new bureau in Beijing which went some way to compensate for the earlier closure of Moscow. But ITN, especially ITV News, remains under great financial pressure from its shareholders. This means that ITV News has to work harder than ever to find resources for big international stories such as Burma and to maintain its reputation for first-hand foreign reporting.

Of the terrestrial channel programmes, Channel 4 News, also produced by ITN, carries a wider range of foreign stories than any other. Its foreign coverage is impressive. A crucial part of the reason Channel 4 News is able to do this, as well as the commitment of its editorial team, is the greater length of the programme. At just under an hour it is able to do all the main news of the day and still have time to report from places and on significant stories that have not pushed their way to the top of the daily editorial agenda. Its foreign coverage overall is less event-driven and its coverage of developing countries is less often about natural disasters. The length of Channel 4 News matters a lot to its ability to pursue this broader agenda. It is to Channel 4's credit that it has kept the programme at that length since its inception. From the perspective of international news, it is vital that Channel 4 keeps it at that length no matter what future guise as a public broadcaster it adopts.

### **Future Pressures on Foreign News**

Foreign news is going to become both more important and more expensive. In order to sustain levels of foreign coverage, news organizations are going to have to rethink their methods. They will have to do so in imaginative ways which cut costs while at the same time identifying and maintaining the essential elements of good reporting and analysis. They will have to rethink the cost base of the big fixed bureau and the foreign-based correspondent. Smaller crewing, self-operating, multi-skilling and the drop in satellite and transmissions costs will all help. It will become ever more important to decide where the foreign correspondent can really add value in judgement, context and analysis and where the more straightforward reporting can be done by locally based reporters. There will be more sponsored "stringers", more reporters from the country concerned and fewer "fly-ins".

News organizations will have to embrace the opportunities of citizen-based journalism across the world but ensure they maintain the core values of accuracy and impartiality. With care and ingenuity it can be done. It will have to be.

### **Sky News**

Though it is not a public broadcaster in the sense of receiving public money or using public assets and therefore strictly outside the terms of reference of this report, Sky News is an important provider of international news in the UK and should be acknowledged as such. Research for the BBC has shown that the audience think it does a good job in providing foreign coverage. It is at its best with breaking news and has won several awards for its coverage in the last few years.

### **The BBC World News Channel**

A sizable chunk of the BBC's foreign reporting goes unseen in this country. That is because it is on the BBC World News channel. World News is normally unavailable in this country as a stand-alone channel though it does share some programming overnight with the domestic BBC News channel and the half-hour BBC4 News is a joint production. Most Britons only see the channel when they go abroad in their hotel rooms. It is not funded by the licence fee. Alone of the BBC's news channels it is commercially funded and takes advertising. The reason for this is that when in 1990 the Thatcher government turned down a request for public funding, the BBC decided a global news channel was too important an asset not to have one and launched it as a commercial operation. Along with most other international

news channels BBC World has never made a profit though the losses are decreasing (it is subsidised by BBC Worldwide) – or at least were decreasing until the global credit crisis hit.

BBC World News has never been shown in the UK because it is advertising funded and up until now the BBC has not wanted to open that particular Pandora's Box. It is now time to re-examine this particular embargo. It does not make sense any longer to deny British viewers access to this important BBC service. It would offer an important domestic outlet for some of the BBC's international reports that do not find an outlet elsewhere and would give British audiences an additional international perspective. It would sit alongside other international news channels such as CNN International and Al Jazeera. If British viewers can see these international channels, why not the BBC's ?

The arguments within the BBC about allowing a commercially funded channel such as BBC World News into the UK and whether that would undermine the whole idea of the licence fee are much less powerful than they were a decade ago. BBC programmes are now shown alongside adverts every day of the week on various channels on the Sky EPG and on Freeview. In any case the BBC could strip out the adverts from BBC World News for the UK.

The BBC's competitors might complain about another rival channel – though it would only be one more among dozens of news channels. The BBC Trust should decide that the public service arguments for showing it in the UK strongly outweigh such considerations. (*See Chapter Ten: Recommendations*).

## 7.0 INTERNATIONAL COVERAGE TODAY

**“Increasingly, on telly, international programming is getting either ghettoised into a curious ‘oh, look at that’ kind of fare where Stephen Fry or somebody walks around and finds the world’s smallest strongman; or, it’s into the news and current affairs sector. The problem with that is that current affairs by its very nature doesn’t let you get to know people. It’s not about understanding people and getting into their heads and their reality.” *Independent Executive Producer***

This chapter examines the amount of international coverage on British television and the geographical spread of that coverage.

### **How Much Gets Shown?**

Since 1989, a series of studies have tracked the amount of international factual programming on UK television. These quantitative studies, run by the International Broadcasting Trust (IBT) count the numbers of hours of programming and plot the trends. Having been on the receiving end of the some of their criticisms, I know that broadcasters think there are severe limitations to this approach – and there are. Definitions of what constitutes ‘international’ can be open to different interpretations and the numbers can fluctuate for all sorts of superficial reasons. But nevertheless this is a highly important and useful study

and the findings are revealing. Here are their figures for this decade by channel for international coverage broken down into developed and developing world:

**Table 4: International and developing country factual programme hours by channel, 2000/01 – 2007**

	2000/01		2003		2005		2007	
	Developing	Developed	Developing	Developed	Developing	Developed	Developing	Developed
BBC1	38.6	94.8	19.8	79.6	56.8	100.7	52.6	64.4
BBC2	70.3	144	63.4	115.0	117.9	179.9	103.7	116.2
ITV1	52.0	83.5	14.9	126.4	49.6	81.2	5.1	30.2
C4	95.3	206.8	70.6	151.7	35.8	171.5	66.0	143.2
FIVE	41.2	199	29.5	111.1	31.3	176.4	54.4	97.5
Digital Channels	0.0	0.0	64.9	66.7	68.9	101.3	90.0	128.9

These figures tell an interesting story. As you can see, the total number of hours on all channels has remained remarkably constant. (And despite a big drop in the 1990's, the figures today are pretty close to the totals for 1989/90). But within that overall total a lot has changed.

BBC1 and BBC2 have stayed pretty consistent in terms of the hours of international programming transmitted. Channel 4 has dropped from its high point of 2001 but since then has stayed pretty constant too. The dramatic change is at ITV where international coverage has dropped by 73% in the last two years and where coverage of the developing world has practically disappeared (5 hours for the whole year). This means that, with the exception of its news coverage, most of the world outside Britain has disappeared from one of the country's most watched broadcasters. Although, from what I have heard recently about some future projects at ITV, I would expect this very low figure to rise a bit soon, nevertheless the trend is unmistakable.

The other main commercial terrestrial broadcaster Channel Five has also dropped in volume too, though it has maintained some international presence.

So if there is such a big drop-off among the two commercial broadcasters, why has the overall total stayed the same? The answer is that the digital channels have taken up the shortfall. BBC3 and 4 and More 4, which didn't exist at the start of the decade, are together showing considerable numbers of hours of international material. But these channels have much lower viewing figures than ITV or Channel Five therefore the inevitable result of this switch is that international programming is now being seen by far fewer people.

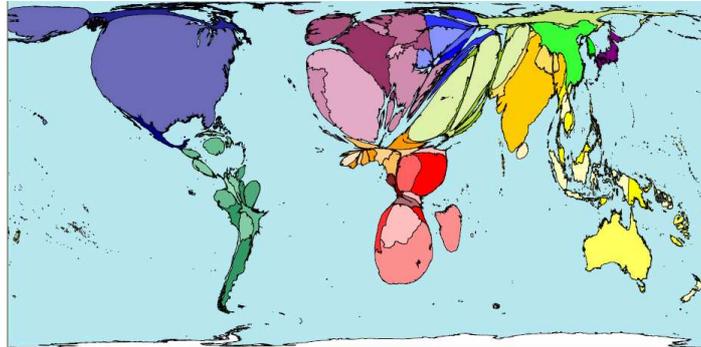
What is clear from this research is that by the actions of the broadcasters and the inaction of the regulator the marginalisation of international content – the first step to the 'global switch-off' is well under way.

### **Where Gets Shown?**

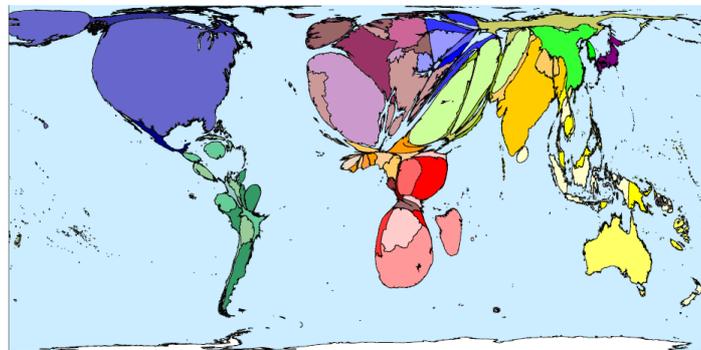
For this report, we decided to commission some world maps to give a simple view of how British television views the world. In these maps (reproduced below) the relative size of each country is proportionate to the amount of coverage that country received. The maps are based on the figures for factual television from the 2007 IBT research.

The first map shows the world based on coverage by the terrestrial channels only. The second map shows the world through the prism of the terrestrial and digital

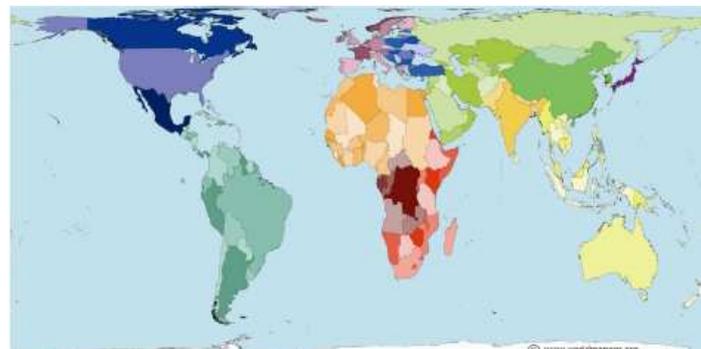
channels together. (Neither map includes the UK as they are about coverage of the world outside the UK). For comparison, we also reproduce two other maps: map 3 is based on land mass, and map 4 based on the relative populations of each country.



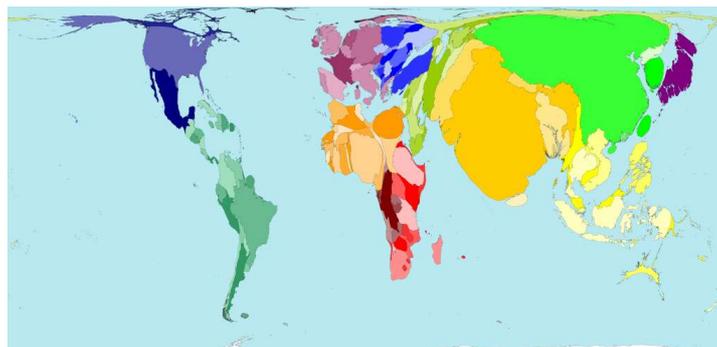
**Map 1: New Factual programming in the UK Terrestrial Channels**



**Map 2: New Factual programming in the UK Terrestrial and digital channels**



**Map 3: Land Mass**



## Map 4: Country Populations

What stands out from the television maps is the overwhelming dominance of coverage of the United States. (Remember this was British factual television so without any Hollywood feature films). Western Europe looms large too especially Ireland and Spain. Europe and North America together make up 47% of all international factual output. Australia is also very large – especially given its population.

Overall, there is an enormous bias towards the English-speaking world.

Certain parts of the globe seem to have been effectively ignored or 'switched off'. South America gets very little coverage. Africa is small and distorted because it consists almost entirely of three countries – South Africa, Kenya and Uganda. This is because almost all most coverage of Africa on British television outside of news programmes is wildlife programming.

Iraq and Afghanistan stand out, as one might expect. In Asia, India gets a lot of coverage but China is tiny proportionate to its size and population. This was the year before the Beijing Olympics. The map for 2008 will obviously look different, but will the map for 2009?

The two television maps, terrestrial-only and terrestrial-plus-digital, are strikingly similar. When you include the digital elements there is a bit more Cuba (is that world music?), a bit more Japan and proportionately less Africa (there is not much wildlife on the digital channels). But overall what the comparison between the two television maps shows is that the digital channels are following the same geographical trends as their terrestrial cousins. This is a shame. The digital channels, with less of a need to attract a mainstream audience, could do a lot more to spread the global range of their coverage.

The maps show that television takes a very limited view of the world. The range of subject matter is also very restricted. As noted above, Africa is almost entirely about animals, while most coverage of Europe is about travel with some property programming added in. Coverage of the United States is mostly about crime.

What sort of picture of the world does the British viewer get from this? Commissioners and regulators should take a long hard look at these maps and ask themselves whether they feel British television really is reflecting the world.

## 8.0 PRESSURES AND STRUCTURES

**"In the end the only way you will get people to do things is if they have it written down and it is included in the objectives. Too many controllers and commissioners are still judged by audience size, share and reach."  
*Senior Executive.***

This chapter looks at the processes that lead to international programme proposals being commissioned or rejected. How are decisions arrived at and

subsequently signed off? What are the pressures on the decision-makers ? What are the consequences for international programming ? Do the structures in place help or hinder?

### **The Overall Picture**

The first thing to say is that a lot of very good international programmes and reports get commissioned, get produced and get shown. From long-form documentaries like *China's Stolen Children* and *Sisters In Law* to series like *Amazon* and *Indian School* to regular reports on *Dispatches* and *Panorama* to dramas such as *The Death of Thomas Hurndall* and *The No.1 Ladies Detective Agency*, at its best, the quality is impressive. On the digital channels, *Storyville* and *True Stories* can delight and surprise. Quality international content is one of the features that makes British broadcasting good. As we saw from previous chapters, it is highly valued by the audience, though not always widely watched. International dramas are rarer and they are expensive but the *The No.1 Ladies Detective Agency* got a good audience in its BBC1 slot. Nor should the important role of Channel 4 with Film 4 and feature films like *The Last King of Scotland* or *Slumdog Millionaire* be overlooked. Audience research suggests that for many feature films are an important window on the developing world.

It's also worth noting that, from all the conversations I've had with many people across the broadcast and media industry, it is clear that there are a lot of people working in the industry who are highly committed to and excited by international content. Many of them have fought good fights to get such stuff on the air. Sometimes – some might even say often - they have succeeded.

### **What Gets Commissioned**

As we saw from the previous chapter the amount of international content on British television has remained relatively constant in terms of the numbers of hours transmitted. But where it gets shown has shifted sharply towards the digital channels and away from ITV and Channel Five. That means that fewer people see it. But that is only half the story. The other half is what those hours of television actually consist of. What do we get to see?

Having watched a great deal of output recently certain things stand out. I was interested to discover how widely my impressions were shared across the television industry.

Television is very good at copying itself. Once one type of programme is seen to succeed, then before you can say 'Jack Flash' a succession of very similar programmes appear on our screens. With the explosion of channels, this trend seems to be even more pronounced. At the moment there appear to be two prevailing types of international programme.

### **Anthropological**

Type One is what might loosely be called the anthropological programme. Some are participatory, some are observational. In varying guises, a presenter or a team of contestants go out to some far-flung place and discover or take part in some aspect of tribal or folk life. As one of my interviewees said with a certain amount of sardonic wit: "There cannot be a remote tribe left in the world who have not been filmed or at least put forward in a commissioning proposal in the last twelve months." That is not to denigrate this genre. In the right hands it can be genuinely revealing and insightful and introduce you to cultures and people

you would never have known about otherwise. Some of the competition and team programmes have been innovative. But in the wrong hands they can be guileless and trite, telling you more about your guide than perhaps you ever wanted to know and leaving the host people as little more than silent or patronised backdrops to the overbearing personality or unrestrained angst of the guide. In these bad programmes, despite the location, you learn more about Surrey than Sarawak.

### **Personality**

The second type of international programme that dominates at the moment is the personality-celebrity led travel documentary. It started some time back with the highly watchable Michael Palin programmes but now we have a real spate of such programmes with Stephen Fry speeding through every American state, Griff Rhys Jones leading ITV's charge through the cities of the world and Channel Five's Paul Merton in India and China. Such programmes can certainly be entertaining, sometimes amusing and from time to time with the right host and producer insightful. With a combination of a big name and less demanding content they will find a decent wider audience on the main channels, given the right slot.

What both these types of programme have in common is that they depend upon a western, usually British, guide (or team of participants) to introduce you to and take you through the country or region in question. Sometimes the local people get to speak for themselves but usually only in short bursts; mostly they stand around while the presenter talks to the camera or sit silently at the side of a camp fire. All is mediated through our host or guide. The desire of commissioners to commit to such programmes is understandable. Foreign languages and subtitles can be more demanding; a big name will get instant recognition on the listings and the EPG and good foreign documentary reporting and using an expert interpreter as a guide for the audience can be a good and valuable device for making the unfamiliar accessible. But it does mean that the people of the country visited are more often seen as objects rather than subjects.

I am not knocking either of these types of programme. They can get substantial audiences. When done well, they do a very good job on the mainstream channels in reaching audiences who not want to sit through heavier fare. Both have an important part to play in a mixed schedule of international programming. The problem at the moment, thanks to the cloning instincts of the commissioning process, is that there is a glut of them. There are just too many of them. They are dominating what gets shown and crowding out much else.

### **What's Missing**

With the schedules so full of anthropology and celebrity what is largely missing – certainly in prominence and quantity – is the harder end of foreign reporting. Again of course there are major exceptions – some of the programmes listed at the top of this chapter have done this brilliantly as have BBC2's *This World* and Channel 4's *Unreported World*. (Though if Channel 4 are so committed to *Unreported World* why is it not shown in a more prominent slot?)

### **Questioning**

Part of the range of programming currently under-represented is that which asks the harder questions: the more journalistically challenging programmes. Now of course, as we have seen, audiences may find such programmes less 'entertaining' and those seeking diversion may not watch. But if public broadcasting is to be a rich mix of content it needs to transmit the uncomfortable as well as the

comfortable. At the moment there don't seem to be many slots available for, in the words of one producer "difficult challenging films about parts of the of the world you don't normally hear much about". Have we got the mix right at the moment?

### **Connections**

Another example of what is missing: where in this globalised world that is talked about so much are the programmes that make the connections between the different parts of the world and explain how our lives are affected by the actions and decisions taken thousands of miles away? Where was the programme examining why and how Iceland had managed to become such a financial centre as to be able to sustain such a large banking sector? A proper examination of this on television would have been a real public service. In fact I did hear a radio documentary on this and it was very revealing. Programmes about global connections also meet that test of audience relevance for commissioners. If the sceptical commissioner asks what has this got to do with the British viewer, the answer in this case would be a lot.

We hear a lot of talk about a globalised world and the connections across it but it seems much of our television output has yet to fully grasp this important idea.

Some of this critique applies to news as well as to the long-form areas of factual output. But some programmes and reports have made the connections. BBC3's *Blood Sweat and T-shirts* did it very well, as did a recent clever report on BBC News showing how the collapse in the market for waste paper in the UK could be tracked back though the recyclers in China to the declining sales in the big box stores in the US.

### **Risk taking**

Above all what is missing from the mix is the innovation and the risk-taking. The whole commissioning process has become risk-adverse. When different approaches are tried but are not altogether successful, such as Channel 4's *Millionaires' Mission*, the reaction seems to be not what can we learn from that but to run a million miles from attempting anything like it ever again.

To take another example, where in the BBC1 mix are the occasional schedule-busting international big-takes to match domestic investigations like *The Undercover Soldier* or *The Secret Policeman*?

### **Pressures**

The experience of most producers I spoke to is that it is often hard to get this sort of international material commissioned. Now some of this could be put down to the disgruntlement of people naturally disappointed by pitches not green-lit but it seems to me the malaise is more widespread and goes further and deeper than that.

So what are the pressures that are keeping this material off our screens?

Chief among them is the competitive pressure for ratings and the widespread belief that programmes with an international theme do not get good audiences.

Scheduling and commissioning is a sophisticated process. Not every programme will be commissioned because it is expected to get a mass audience. But it appears to be the view of most commissioners – at least as judged by their

behaviour - that channel for channel, slot for slot international programmes will get lower ratings than domestic ones.

Ratings are still the biggest factor for broadcasters in judging whether a programme has been successful. In the commercial media sector the broadcasters need to be able to sell their air-time to advertisers and advertisers need audience size (and occasionally demographics) in order to be persuaded to buy that air-time. In the BBC there has been a long-standing culture of competitiveness where success is measured by audience size. In both public and commercial television ratings have become the only currency that matters.

Added to the ratings disincentive for international content is the question of cost. Programmes made outside the UK are almost by definition more expensive. They involve flights, they usually involve more complicated production schedules. At a time when commercial companies like ITV now have a sophisticated Return on Investment analysis which looks at the revenue earned by a programme against its costs, lower ratings plus higher cost is a big disincentive for commissioners.

### **Other Measures of Success**

In recent years the BBC has shown some signs of moving away from judging success solely by ratings, although the extent of that is disputed by those outside the BBC. For a long time the BBC faced a big strategic problem. It said it wasn't only interested in ratings but the only measurable index of the success of a programme was its audience rating. As in many businesses, in the BBC there was a strong tendency to value most that which it could measure. There was a separate index of audience appreciation but it wasn't taken that seriously.

But in recent years in its public pronouncements the BBC has placed a greater emphasis on other measures of success. The BBC Trust has now laid down four criteria against which it will judge the success of BBC channels. These are: total reach (i.e. the number who watch in a week), quality, impact and value for money. As part of this new approach, the BBC has devised ways of attempting to measure all of these including the less immediately quantifiable characteristics of quality and impact.

Channel 4 is now looking at devising something similar though obviously, as a commercially funded organization, ratings are always going to play a sizable part in its decision-making.

Has this made a difference at the BBC? The answer appears to be some difference. The Appreciation Index of a programme – a measure of how much an audience liked a programme – does now play a bigger part in judging the success of a programme, though not enough of a part according to many. And the BBC's Pulse survey, a nationwide online panel of 15,000 viewers who are asked to rate and comment on the programmes they have seen, is also playing a bigger role in judging the success of programmes. Thus a programme which scored a relatively low audience but rated high on other attributes may be deemed to be very successful. This combined with the Appreciation Index (which is now measured in a couple of days rather than weeks) means that for the first time there is a method of measuring the relative success of a programme apart from its audience size.

A more sophisticated approach to judging the success of programmes has to play a far bigger part in commissioning decisions. This is an essential part of a good public broadcasting system. It has to be built into the managerial processes and

structures of each broadcaster. Commissioners and controllers have got to pay more than lip service to other measures of success if the international elements of public broadcasting – and indeed public broadcasting more generally – is to be distinctive. At the moment, when it comes to commissioning decisions, as we have seen, the ratings argument still predominates too much. This must change. The Boards of the BBC and Channel 4 must ensure that in future the fine words in their remits translate more readily into actions. One of the most effective ways of doing this would be to ensure that a sufficiently wide basket of measures of success, in addition to audience reach, are built into each individual executive's performance objectives and that this is reflected in their pay and bonuses. (See *Chapter Ten: Recommendations*).

### **The Importance of Programmes**

It is clear from the audience research referred to in Chapter Five that the public have a quite sophisticated view about what they think public broadcasting should offer. They have a view about what it should offer them as individuals but they also have a view about what it should offer viewers and society as a whole. They understand that, among other things, it is about diversity and scope – providing a wider range of programmes than just the most popular – and that it is about a range of programmes and subjects that they think it is important for the public to be able to see. This measure of the *importance* of a programme – how much the audience says that it matters that such a programme gets made and shown – needs to be captured as part of the overall measurement of success, discussed above. What I have called an Importance Index needs to be added to the mix. (See *Chapter Ten: Recommendations*).

### **Structures & the Centralization of Commissioning**

Most people I talked to thought that most of the current commissioning processes for programmes were cumbersome, over-centralised and micro-managed. The BBC and Channel Four were seen as being the worst offenders.

This applied to all output not just international programmes but I think it may be having a particular effect on international output. Again one has to aim off for the natural unhappiness of producers who do not get all their programme ideas commissioned but again I think there is something deeper and more problematic lying behind a lot of these comments. The critics say this over-centralisation is leading to a very conservative approach to commissioning. In the words of one producer: "the layers involved in commissioning these days mean that there are far too many people who can say 'no' and too few who can say 'yes'". Another said: "The system means they [the commissioners] are institutionally risk-averse".

If international programming is considered riskier, costlier and less audience-friendly in the first place, then under a risk-averse system it is even less likely to get commissioned. Hence the over-reliance on safe and tried formats. The big loser under this system is the viewer in search of something less predictable. Public broadcasting has to be about risk-taking and trying new things. It needs to move more in that direction. The respective Boards and Trusts of the public broadcasters need to give it a firm shove in that direction. One big step they could take to do that would be to insist on a proper international strategy for each broadcaster.

## **The Need for Strategy**

Judging from all my conversations the single biggest thing that seems to be missing and one that could address many of the weaknesses identified above is the lack of any sort of international strategy by the main broadcasters. Given their stated remits, this is especially noticeable at the BBC and Channel 4. International programming is given such a prominent role in their public purposes and this is further reflected in the BBC Channel Licences. But below this there is a big gap when it comes deciding which programmes do and don't get made. Rightly commissioning decisions are made on the merits of the proposal. But this also means that commissioning decisions about international content are made on an ad-hoc basis. At the moment little or no thought seems to be given to the net effect of all of these individual decisions.

None of the public broadcasters is asking themselves hard enough questions about whether, across the full range of their programmes, genres and services, they have got the right spread of subjects, whether they are over-investing in certain formats, whether there are certain issues that are getting over-looked, whether there are important parts of world that are being ignored. An international strategy for each broadcaster would ensure that these essential questions are asked and addressed. This would not replace the individual commissioning decisions – and nor should it, commissioning must be based on the merit of the proposals and the quality of the programmes – but it would shape and mould it. It should also produce a wider and more innovative variety of commissions and of pitches from producers. Above all, it would ensure a more coherent offer to the viewing public. If the BBC can have a Learning Strategy, why not an International one? (See *Chapter Ten: Recommendations*)

Each broadcaster should also identify one senior executive who would be in charge of this strategy and would be responsible for delivering it. At the moment when you ask who is responsible across the whole organization for delivering this remit you either get the answer 'no one is' or you get the answer 'everyone is', which in the end also means no one is. (See *Chapter Ten: Recommendations*)

## **Real World Seminars**

One recent positive initiative has been the recent series of 'Real World' seminars which the BBC has run in conjunction with the International Broadcasting Trust. These day-long events have been practical and story-led. During our discussions, several people at the BBC praised them highly. They seem to have given a clear message from the top that this sort of programming is valued. They have reached out to executives who might otherwise have been more oblivious to these sorts of topics. Commissioners and producers came from all genres including non-factual areas such as comedy and drama.

One executive said to me that while *The No 1 Ladies Detective Agency* project would have been a strong candidate for commissioning anyway, given the success of the books and the involvement of Anthony Minghella, but what the seminar had done was to give the commissioners the extra confidence to go ahead with it.

The success of these seminars could be repeated with other broadcasters. Channel 4 has not yet done something similar. They could and should. From all that I have heard from the BBC, they would profit from it greatly in terms of generating new perspectives and ideas. ITV and Channel Five – though less obviously fertile ground – should also experiment with such an initiative. (See *Chapter Ten: Recommendations*).

## 9.0 ON THE HORIZON

**“Those of us who use online a lot are a lot more used to diversity and that will affect audience expectations in the future.” *Online journalist and commentator***

This section looks forward to the future and how the media picture might look in a few years time and how that, in turn, might affect international coverage.

There are a couple of important caveats to be entered right at the start. I don't have a crystal ball but neither for that matter do a lot of people a lot smarter than me. Alan Rusbridger, the editor of the Guardian and part of one of the more far-sighted media groups, described their digital strategy as “invest and hope”. Even that wily old fox Rupert Murdoch is reported to have said that he can't see further than two years ahead. So I will leave the big predictions and the sketching of scenarios to the futurologists and the wizards of Ofcom and elsewhere. Instead what I am going to do here is point to some of the possible developments which could have an impact on the development of international coverage.

### **Linear Media and the Mainstream Channels**

Much has been written about the death of conventional television channels; much of it is over-apocalyptic. At Davos two years ago Bill Gates prophesied that the internet would revolutionize television in five years. He might be partly right about that. He was certainly wrong when in 2004 he predicted the death of the linear TV schedule. I don't see any sign of it dying yet and certainly not any time soon. The big live events – be it the *X Factor* or *Strictly Come Dancing* or their successors – and the big news and sporting events will draw sizable audiences for some time to come. But there are also some big disruptive factors at work, such as on-demand television, which are changing viewing habits thanks to Sky Plus and the recent success of the BBC's iPlayer. Internet television will obviously have an impact too and an even bigger one when it is standard to have a pc. facility wired into the TV. But these various ways of watching time-shifted television are for the most part substitutes for one another. It is unlikely that the introduction of internet television will have as radical an effect as it would have done if it had been the first device to time-shift traditional viewing. There is growing evidence too that the web will not supplant television but supplement it. Lean-back and lean-to viewing are different activities to suit different moods. There will still be times when audiences will want to leave their viewing priorities to a scheduler. The devices may converge, the viewing habits may not.

Therefore my view - and that of most of the people I have talked to - is that the mainstream channels will be around for some time to come. Furthermore where viewing does shift away from the linear schedules, these channels or their host broadcaster will still be the principal originators of the content that draws in viewers. It's worth noting that in the United States, though the last US election was described as being the 'internet election' – and indeed the Obama campaign made stunning use of the internet for campaigning and fund-raising – the big campaign-changing media moments all started their lives on television. They may have been watched subsequently many times over on websites and on YouTube but all – ranging from the vice-presidential debate (70m. live viewers) to Sarah

Palin with Katie Couric on CBS and John McCain not on David Letterman to Tina Fey uncannily as Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live* – aired first on network television.

The mainstream channels are likely to be important both as broadcasters and as providers of content for quite some time to come. More and more content will be commissioned for multi-platform use but most of what this report has talked about in terms of commissioning processes and culture is likely to apply for some time to come.

### **Catch-Up and On-Demand Media**

Clearly on-demand viewing will become more important in the future; the uncertainty is how quickly and to what extent. In the future viewing is likely to polarize between time-shifting those programmes that are relatively timeless – the dramas, the soaps, the documentaries – and those in which the content is felt by the audience to be time-critical – where you feel you have missed out if you have not seen it – the sporting events, the big news events and the big live contests.

The technical success of the BBC iPlayer has been quickly adopted by sections of the audience. The BBC has now proposed sharing this with other broadcasters. This notion of extending the scope of the iPlayer could easily be extended further. It could be used to offer international content that has not already been broadcast in the UK. It could also be used as an important archive for previously broadcast material which is not otherwise available because it is not sufficiently attractive commercially. (Where for example can you currently watch many award-winning documentary programmes such as recent BAFTA winners ?) This could offer audiences an extraordinary range of choice for international material and could exploit a 'long tail' of programmes. There will of course be rights and other issues to be resolved. As a first step, the BBC should offer on an experimental basis the best international factual material from one or two of this year's film festivals such as the Sheffield Documentary Festival. (see *Chapter 10: Recommendations*).

### **The Long-Tail Audience**

The growth of on-demand viewing will alter the way we think about programme ratings in the future. The importance of the scheduled "first night" audience will decrease and the importance of the cumulative audience will grow as programmes are watched days and weeks after their premiere.

This should benefit international programming. The existence of a strong programme archive readily available on demand will mean that more and more people will have the chance to view such programming over a longer period of time. It's the long tail principle: a programme may only attract a small niche audience at first but with repeated opportunities to watch the total audience could grow into a sizable total.

But there are two important caveats to this broad welcome.

The first is about how audiences are measured. Unless the "long tail" of the catch-up audience is measured properly and, as importantly, is valued properly by the broadcasters then it will have little impact on the culture of commissioning in these organizations.

The second is that any large-scale growth in on-demand viewing is likely to lead to a decrease in serendipitous viewing i.e. the chance that the viewer will come across a programme by chance and discover they like it, even though they didn't know they would beforehand. According to Ofcom research this serendipitous viewing is one of the things that people value about public service broadcasting. The paradox of choice is that the more choice that is available to people, the more they are likely to seek out that with which they are already familiar. This drift to the familiar will be accentuated in the on-demand world if the marketing and promotions priorities on devices such as the iPlayer concentrate only on the already established rating busters. If the front page only features *Eastenders* and *Spooks* then a big opportunity will have been missed to encourage the viewer to try the unfamiliar and the surprising.

### **Citizen Journalism and User Generated Content**

The old model of access to broadcasting, confined to a few organisations with the money and resources to send people around the world, was based on limited access to technology. Whoever had that power was in a great position. Now, almost anybody anywhere can do the same thing with an Internet connection and a laptop. The basic model has been totally undercut by the internet and technology.

All sorts of producers of international content will now be able to 'broadcast' their content without the need for any sort of conventional broadcaster. The old model of 'one to many' becomes 'many to many'. The only drawback to this utopian vision is that the 'many to many' may not actually reach that many. While some of the videos on YouTube and other sites are viewed by millions, most are seen by few. Broadcasting is "push"; the web is "pull". In other words with the web you have to go and seek out the content and have some idea of what you are looking for in the first place. While producers of international content will now have limitless access (there were a trillion web pages at the last count) the impact of most material on the web will be limited, most of the web will remain niche. In terms of getting more international content seen by more people the web is not the panacea that some seem to think it is.

### **Partnerships**

This means that partnerships will matter a lot more in the new media world. Two of the most important tools of the internet are search and aggregation. People usually find content either by search engine or by bookmarking a site. For a producer looking to post material on the web the key is not access but getting the material known about and seen. If you put it up on the web how are people going to find it? Getting it on a site that lots of people routinely use is going to be important. Partnerships will be crucial in this. Thus when the BBC and Save The Children co-operated on a project about the Sierra Leone coastal slum of Kroo Bay for the BBC website, the result was a much wider audience for Save The Children than it would have achieved on its own website, while the BBC had access to material that it would never have had the time to generate on its own. Such partnerships point a way for the future. (See *Chapter Ten: Recommendations*)

At the moment a lot of good international material is widely spread across a lot of different websites. You never know where to find it. As well as establishing more partnerships with existing media sites, non-broadcast organizations and NGO's (and anyone else with an interest) should set up a joint portal where you could easily access international material from across the world. It may be that a site such as Global Voices Online could be a model for such a site or maybe even a

partner. The International Broadcasting Trust should take on the facilitation of the first steps of this project. (See *Chapter Ten: Recommendations*)

### **Editors and Journalists**

Some people have forecast that the explosion of user generated material – sometimes called citizen journalism – means the end of the professional journalist. Again this is so much hyperbole and again an over-reaction to an important development. In the media world of the future there will still be journalists and there will still be editors. Yes there will be a lot more material that will have been gathered by non-professionals, but there will still be a big need for people on the ground with the experience and judgment to make sense of events.

The question for the future is where and how can the established journalist really add value ? It will still be important in the future to establish clear facts in confusing situations and to be able to interpret them and put events into a fuller context.

Thanks to the internet the number of available sources has increased exponentially and will continue to do so. This enables people to become their own individual newsroom seeking out a whole array of reports and voices. But only a few people will have the will or the time to do this. There is still going to be a demand from audiences for a professionally edited digest of what has happened. Users will want the continued expertise of journalists they feel they can trust. There will be a role for professional editors in the future.

It was interesting to see that during the aftermath of the recent Mumbai bombings, when the BBC started an online minute-by-minute log mixing in reportage from its own correspondents with that from other sources such as emails and a Twitter strand, this produced a strong hostile reaction from sections of the audience who said that they looked to the BBC to put out an authoritative account of what had happened not, as they put it, a stream of garbled reports and unverified accounts.

### **Diversity and Audience Expectations**

The fact that the internet is such a global phenomenon is slowly but surely having an impact on audience expectations. People who use online a lot are much more used to electronically 'rubbing up' against different parts of the globe and therefore are becoming a lot more familiar with global diversity. This is going to have an effect on user and audience expectations over time. Audiences of the future will be a lot more willing to accept cultural experiences outside their own. Longer-term that should make international content become more attractive to UK audiences both on television and the web.

### **Social Networking Sites**

Similarly, the rapid growth of social networking sites is likely to have a large and growing impact on the perceptions of UK audiences towards international content. Facebook, a site which was only launched in February of 2004 now has an estimated 120 million users worldwide, eight and a half million of them in the UK. The phenomenon of networks of remote electronic friends, who of course you may never have met face to face, is proving to be a powerful force with younger generations. These friends can be anywhere in the world. But thanks to the various devices such as photos, video and instant messaging on the site they can

become very real in a personal sense – nearly as real as your mates round the corner. Social networking sites will lead to more and more worldwide friendship networks. This in turn will make more parts of world personally relevant to increasing numbers of UK viewers and media consumers.

### **The Future of Search**

Search engines – Google in particular – have become central to the internet experience. But what we have now in terms of search capacity is very unsophisticated and mechanical. Search will become much more sophisticated in the future. Some of this will emerge through what has been labeled “the semantic web”. Others call it Web 3.0. This is how Tim Berners-Lee described the difference between the present web and the semantic web:

“The Semantic Web will bring structure to the meaningful content of Web pages, creating an environment where software agents roaming from page to page can readily carry out sophisticated tasks for users.”

We are also likely to see the search engines becoming more personalised, where the engine ‘remembers’ what you seemed to like and how long you spent on each site. Greater sophistication of search, which will include video and audio, will make all content much easier to find and hence it will enable people to find international content on the web much more easily and will increase its potential audience.

## **10.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

**On the basis of my research I list here the actions that would make a serious difference to the quality of international material available from public service broadcasters.**

- **An International Strategy for each broadcaster.** Each public service broadcaster should draw up an explicit international strategy. This should go further and be more detailed than the current generalities of Purposes and Channel Licences. It should identify and anticipate significant themes and ensure that important parts of the world are not over-looked. It should be cross-genre and cross-platform. This strategy would be submitted to and endorsed by each broadcaster’s board. Commissioning of individual programmes and series would still be done by individual genre commissioners on a merit basis but such a strategy would provide a framework for and shape their decisions. It would also offer producers more of guide as to what might be looked for in this area and therefore should improve the quality of offers. Such a strategy should also give commissioners and controllers both the support and, where necessary, the ‘shove’ to be prepared to take more risks. Such a strategy should become part of the licensing or regulatory requirements of each public service broadcaster.
- **International Champions.** There should be a named senior executive at each broadcaster who has overall responsibility for their international content. This person should be at board level. S/he would be responsible for drawing

up and 'owning' that broadcaster's international strategy. This person would be responsible to the respective regulators for the delivery of that strategy and should act as the principal point of contact for outside organizations and individuals. This should form a formal part of their individual performance objectives and of their bonus arrangements.

- **Measures of Success.** Broadcasters – especially the BBC and Channel 4 - should be required by their respective Boards to draw up and use a balanced basket of measures by which to judge the success of programmes. Controllers and commissioners should act on those measures and not give the impression of just paying lip service to them. Where they are not already, such scorecards should be incorporated into individual commissioner's and controller's performance objectives.
- **An Importance Index.** Broadcasters should be encouraged to experiment with a new measure - an "Importance Index" - which would measure how important viewers thought it was that a particular programme they had seen had been made and shown.
- **Seminars.** The recent series of joint BBC/IBT seminars do seem to have made a difference. They seem to have generated lots of good ideas which have been carried over into output. Cleverly, they have been story-led and have not degenerated into finger-wagging lectures. They should be continued at the BBC and they should be spread to other broadcasters. One of the first priorities of the next seminars should be to concentrate on ways of discovering great stories and devising formats about the inter-connectedness of the world which everyone says they know about but which still seems to be largely missing from our screens.
- **Contestable Funding.** At the time of writing there is still a great deal of debate and uncertainty about the concept of 'contestable funding', the idea that some portion of public broadcast money rather than being assigned to one broadcaster or another should be more widely available to be competed for on a merit basis. (Different models have been drawn up at different times as to how this might be done). This paper does not have the space to discuss the merits and de-merits of this idea. But were it to happen then there would be a strong case for at least a portion of such a fund being ear-marked for international programming as one of the future 'endangered species' of broadcasting.
- **BBC World News into the UK.** The BBC World News channel should be made available in the UK, probably without advertising. It does not make sense for British audiences to be denied another important window on the world. In the same way that British audiences can 'eavesdrop' on the BBC World Service radio network in Britain so they should similarly be able to watch the World News channel. The BBC has always shied away from this in the past because the channel is commercially funded and it was thought that this would open the Pandora's Box of advertising on the BBC. But the media landscape has changed dramatically since then. There are BBC programmes on commercial channels all over the EPG now and, at a time when British audiences can see CNN International, Al Jazeera and other international channels, it no longer seems to make sense to deny this BBC service to British viewers.
- **Expand the international scope of the BBC iPlayer.** The BBC has already proposed expanding the scope of the successful iPlayer to take in other broadcasters. Thought should be given to taking this much further and

expanding it to international material that has not already been broadcast in the U.K. This could give an opportunity for a wider range of material to be made available than that which finds its way to air by conventional broadcast means. However this should not become a way for broadcasters to shunt such material off their regular channels. There will be issues to be thought through with such a proposal such as funding – do producers get paid for this? – and gate-keeping – do the regular commissioners also decide what goes into this window ? There is not room to resolve these here. But as another window on the world this could be a valuable device. I would propose initially, perhaps as a first experiment, that there should be an 'Electronic International Festival' in 2009. This would be a showcase – like a large scale film festival - of as yet untransmitted international material on the iPlayer. It would be available for a limited period, perhaps a month, and would show the best documentaries shown at one or two festivals that year - say the 'Best of the Sheffield Documentary Festival'. Producers would allow their material to be shown for that strictly limited period for free – as they would at a festival - and the BBC would host it and draw in the traffic.

- **Partnerships.** Broadcast and non-broadcast organizations should find ways of working more closely together, collaborating on projects like video and text diaries to be posted on the web sites of the broadcasters. This would exploit the possibilities of low-cost production now available to non-broadcast organizations. The result of this would be a richer range of material for the broadcasters' web-sites than would be available to them using only their own resources, while the non-broadcast organizations get their material seen and read. There will be issues to be worked out in terms of editorial values such as impartiality, attribution and branding but the looser architecture of the web – and the different user/viewer expectations - makes this a lot easier to achieve.
- **Build and brand an international portal.** At the moment the big problem with the potential of the web for international material is that it is scattered all over the place and is difficult to find. Those organizations with an interest in seeing the wider dissemination of international material should consider pooling their resources and material with a view to building a branded international internet portal which would host a wealth of international material. This could carry both material that has already been broadcast and material which is original and would act as one-stop shop. How such a portal might be funded would of course need to be worked out but with a strong international/developing world focus several Foundations might be interested in joining. Whether such a portal would exist separately from existing sites like YouTube or whether it should work in collaboration would also need to be thought through.

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In researching this report I spoke to a large number of producers, commissioners, controllers, senior executives and regulators across the broadcasting and media industries as well as to a number of others outside the industry with an interest in this subject and that of international affairs and development. I interviewed all of

them on an off-the-record basis as I felt that way they would be able to speak more freely. I am grateful to all of them for their time, help, insight and wisdom.

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This subject covers a big area. I am bound to have over-simplified at times. I am sure there are important caveats I have left out and shining examples I have not included but I have tried as hard as I could to give a true overall picture of what I have seen and been told.

***Phil Harding January 2009***

### **About The Author**

Philip Harding is a journalist and media consultant. Previously he was a senior executive and editor at the BBC.

Recently he has undertaken a number of projects including a study of how digital media will affect coverage of development issues in the U.K. and has worked with the launch team of the new morning public radio programme on WNYC in New York. He has worked in Argentina lecturing and conducting workshops on public broadcasting and political independence.

He has also lectured at Wharton Business School on open media and innovation.

He writes for the Guardian newspaper on the media and on politics. He also lectures at the BBC's College of Journalism.

He is a Trustee of the Press Association and of the One World Broadcasting Trust. He is a Fellow of the Society of Editors and sits on their Advisory Committee; he is also a fellow of the Radio Academy.

Before that, Phil had held a variety of senior editorial jobs in BBC radio and television. From 2001-7 he was Director of English Networks and News at the BBC World Service. Before that he had been deputy editor of Panorama, editor of the Today programme, the founding editor of Five Live News programmes, the BBC's chief political advisor and Controller of Editorial Policy.

On Panorama he won an Emmy in the U.S. for his investigation into the death of the Bulgarian broadcaster, Georgi Markov. Phil has also led teams that have won numerous Sony Gold awards.

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