

Imagining ‘the other’ – can the media challenge our assumptions?

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We tend to think of ourselves as part of the majority, the mainstream. We tend to regularly associate with people who think and act like us and who, more or less, share our sense of values. But what if we took ourselves outside of the popular opinion?



What if we thought of ourselves as the ‘other’ for a change?

In April 2016, a survey conducted by Channel 4 sparked major controversy in the British media. The channel claimed that it undertook one of the most extensive and rigorous surveys to comprehensively understand British Muslim’s attitudes towards living in Britain and pivotal social issues. But while the survey examined the responses of roughly 1,000 Muslims across Britain, the one hour documentary aired on Channel 4 received major backlash. Other media outlets like *The Guardian*, *BBC*, and *The Spectator* cited skewed methodology, misleading statistics, and made-for-television reporting that would ultimately result in increasing division between Britain’s different communities rather than bringing them together.



Trevor Phillips, presenter of ‘What British Muslims Really Think’ (c) Channel 4

But, what does Channel 4’s authoritative reporting show us about the media’s influence in an ever-globalizing world? Dorothy Byrne has been working in the field of journalism for years- serving as Commissioning Editor for Dispatches, overseeing Unreported World at Channel 4 News, and producing key films for World in Action. Her experience in the media has allowed her to probe at curbed societal issues and provoke emotion and action in her audiences. Talking to a group of students at the LSE, Byrne explained, “If I don’t affect you, you won’t care and if you don’t care, you won’t do anything.” So, how do controversial media productions allow its audiences to care and, furthermore, to change an initial emotional response into an effective one that responds to society’s problems and leads towards practical solutions?

The bridge, I believe, lies with the audiences, themselves. The media will never be the definitive savior in alleviating and eradicating social, political, and economic injustices. But its authoritative and ever prominent global voice allows it to spark controversy, to enable conversations with people of differing opinions, radically different upbringings, and an otherwise divisive set of values.



Dorothy Byrne, Head of News and Factual at Channel 4

In fact, the backlash surrounding Channel 4's program reinforces the lasting relevance of the media in everyday life. For instance, even if Channel 4's program, 'What British Muslims Really Think', further segregated British society, like some critics suggest, it still donned an active power on its audiences- issuing the recipients of their programming the authority to act upon these statistics, to challenge social norms, to have tough conversations with friends and families, and to ultimately bring taboo topics out of a confinement they never belonged to in the first place. "The single biggest message that I would give to you," Byrne asserted, "is that we have to talk about absolutely everything without fear or favor, and we must debate all these subjects for our democracy to work properly."

The media challenges people's perceptions of themselves as they view the world through another lens. Even if it covers controversial topics or makes controversial statements, the media allows us to question our sense of 'otherness'.

Byrne strongly encouraged the idea that the media ought not to merely "report what people see, [but] that they properly examine and investigate what people see so that [media audiences] can all make up [their] mind." Through that venture, the media will go even further beyond reporting and will remain culturally relevant as it continues to take important and provoking social issues out of the taboo.

By Tessa Venizelos

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