# **Global Journalism and Impartiality**

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Polis Intern and LSE MSc student Pressiana Naydenova reports on the latest Polis Media Agenda Talk featuring Liliane Landor Controller, Languages, BBC Global

News

## "...language is never innocent" (Roland Barthes)

Liliane Landor thinks this is "an extraordinary time to be a journalist" and that "those who tell stories rule the world", which makes it important to have as many voices as possible involved in the narrative. But how in a major international news organisation like the BBC do you balance serving a global audience with a local one?



## Seeing and interpreting the world from the world's perspective

Landor highlighted how the BBC's new generation of international journalists report on topics spanning from cultural taboos to everyday life for middle class families in Syria. They are drawn from the regions where they report, but they also report across the BBC's platform – including the UK – and not just the BBC World Service.

All of the stories they told shared the benefit of having been curated by cultural insiders rather than by journalists looking through a Western analytical lens. Landor believes that in this way, the audience is offered an authentic and undistorted glimpse of how people in certain countries perceive themselves and the issues surrounding them.

In this way, the 'local' people can be transformed from objects to subjects of stories, challenging what sits in the centre of power and at the periphery. Landor went as far as to suggest that the BBC's mission for impartiality permits the erosion of the distinction between "us" and "them", revealing a more truthful image of reality, unconstrained by stereotypes. That is why she emphasised the need for the British Broadcasting Corporation to report from a "non-national" perspective, unlike say, Russia Today or France 24.

#### Global Journalism, dangerous but necessary

Landor did not deny that global journalism involves risks and that the safety of journalists, especially in conflict regions, is not guaranteed. Yet she expressed "a sense of pride" because she believes the BBC World Service is "uniquely global", "independent and impartial".

It appears her views are supported by popular opinion. BBC is one of the most trusted media services with an average age of 32 years among its audience. However, the BBC's position on the global news stage is not unchallenged. As she points out, it has its competitors, like CCTV, Russia Today and Al Jazeera, who may not have the same editorial freedom but have even greater resources to be global. A further problem is that the BBC has been banned in several countries for providing communication channels outside the mainstream. Thus, its reach within countries is constrained by their ruling regimes.

### **Zooming Out**

An important question raised by Landor's was who the target audience of international reporting is? Are foreigners within Britain or the citizens within the countries that are reported on, the primary consumers of this global news? Or is it the global public in general?

The third option leads to a further question: Why is news translated only in the local language and English, thus

assuming that the global public is Anglophone? Of course, practical constraints such as budgets, time and resources come into play, when considering the amount of languages material is translated in.

Also, news stories produced by the BBC differ between the local language and the English versions. The justification given for this is that journalists should provide different levels of analysis for the English speaking global audience than they do for locals, "zooming out" for the former. If a more superficial level of analysis is provided for the English speaking audience, a language barrier to accessing more detailed information could arise. Considering the evolution of news stories, how they commence as lists of facts and later evolve into contextual pieces of analysis, it seems difficult to justify reporting more superficially for the English version of news.

Landor showed why we need global journalists, but it also raised some interesting tensions between balancing a global audience with a local one. Impartiality, if we consider it synonymous with presenting a broad array of world views to a global audience is very ambitious and perhaps an ideal we strive for but can never fully attain. Thankfully, this is not necessarily problematic if stories are not considered final, but simply the start of a dialogue.

## This article by Polis intern, Pressiana Naydenova

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