

Maintaining The Relevance Of International Journalism – BBC’s Peter Horrocks POLIS Perugia Speech

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This is the text of the speech given by Peter Horrocks, the BBC’s Director of Global News, as the POLIS keynote speech at the International Journalism Festival in Perugia on April 14th. It was chaired by POLIS director Charlie Beckett.



Peter Horrocks

[During the recent uprisings in North Africa and across the Middle East we saw] remarkable and brave coverage by the BBC’s teams. And many news organisations have had impressive records in their response to the recent crisis. But striking as the personal bravery has been, it is not that I wished to draw your attention to.

I hope you noticed the prominence in much of that material of the BBC’s non-English language teams – in particular the work of the teams from BBC Arabic, as well as BBC Persian. Those two new TV services, just 4 years and 2 years old, are now not just reporting to their own language audiences, but working cheek by jowl with the BBC News English teams. So you saw Assad Sawey in Egypt appearing, injured, alongside Lyse Doucet. But not only were Arabic correspondents appearing when they had been involved in trouble, but they appeared regularly on air, giving eye witness accounts of

what was happening in Egypt and providing in depth analysis in London studios, as you saw.

And more recently in Libya our Arabic service teams were operating as joining newsgathering units with BBC News. (And of course exposing themselves to significant risk as you saw with the clips of Feras Killani and Goktay Koraltan, who were held and brutalised by Gaddafi forces)

It means that we have individuals who come from the countries we are reporting and speaking the relevant languages fluently, working with our globally known English News teams. We have an increasingly bilingual workforce, able to operate in English and their own language. They are encouraged to report for TV, radio and online. So we ask them to be multimedia and multilingual. Those are the new watchwords for the heart of the strategy for BBC Global News in the years ahead. We believe it is one of the most ambitious and innovative undertakings ever in international journalism – with some fascinating opportunities and risks. Today I want to set out why and how we are going about becoming more global in a multimedia era.

Why would the BBC be going to the trouble of ensuring its teams can work multilingually and making massive organisational changes to ensure we have the technology and culture for that to work smoothly? There are some potential efficiencies, but that is a minor reason. Of course we are operating in a tight financial environment. BBC World Service has been undergoing a deep restructure following the UK government’s Spending Review which cut our funding by 16%. (We have made decisions to stop programmes and services that were valued by our audiences. We closed 5 language services, and stopped radio broadcasts in 7 languages.)

But the key reason for the culture change is not financial- it is because the BBC's global and impartial perspective is our greatest competitive advantage. Despite the fact that we still have the largest audience and highest reputation globally of any international news provider, we cannot be complacent. In fact we face more competitive threats than ever before. But we believe the unique advantages we have in having a workforce drawn from 27 different language groups supplementing our renowned English language newsgathering operation, gives us an advantage that no other international news organisation possesses. It is a network that will build on that operation and enrich it but not replace it. So it is an advantage we must maximise and make relevant to our audiences. I believe that any international news organisation is going to need to think very hard if it is to be competing in a genuinely global manner, rather than just exporting a single national news culture to the world.

Let me turn to that tough competitive environment. Whilst all the major international news organisations may look impressive at a global level (for instance, the BBC's current global news audience reach we estimate is at 241m) when you look in most individual markets we are relatively small. The strength of local news providers whether in the US or Europe or in the markets of Africa or Asia means that international news sources are increasingly seen as secondary. Our reach ranges from 2% in India (although large in numeric terms) to over 30% in Nigeria.

We know that in the bulk of our markets, audiences get their primary news from local providers, whether commercial or state provided. Even places like Afghanistan are now rapidly growing media hubs. It is estimated that there are now about 175 radio stations and 75 terrestrial television stations operating across the country.

However in markets where there is a shortage of reliable locally-provided news a significant minority will turn to international news sources and a larger number will use sources like the BBC as a second source. And across all markets there is a strong audience niche that has a confirmed interest in international news. These are not solely wealthy members of elites. Instead they tend to be characterised by their curiosity, their outgoing mindset and their awareness that international events increasingly impact on their lives. The younger audiences are typified by their optimistic outlook, seeking to understand their place in the world whilst they may never have the opportunity to travel widely themselves. They are enthusiastic users of technology.

To fully understand our increasingly globalised world requires all of us to be aware of and understand trends, themes and events from across the globe. In recent months the BBC has reported many surprising examples of how global stories can be directly relevant to audiences many miles away from where stories happened.

When the fighting started in Libya, one emerging story for our south Asian services was the plight of thousands of migrant workers stranded there. While the government of Bangladesh was unable to mobilise efforts to get its citizens out, the BBC Bengali service told the story of those migrant workers, looked at their experience and challenged government ministers. The BBC Afghan output spoke to those who returned to Pakistan, who found that their Libyan dinars were useless and would not be accepted by money changers.

The economy is the classic global story that has immense local relevance. Only last week, our Africa service team explored how the economic recession in America is affecting people's lives in Africa. And we are not talking about micro-economic developments, trade and exchange rates. But how it's really affecting their individual lives. The

reports told the story of African migrants who cannot find jobs and as a result are turning their back to their unfulfilled American dream.

And society, as well as the economy, is ever more global – for instance care provision for the elderly .

BBC Russian service shared stories of Russian and Georgian pensioners and the challenges they face; BBC Mundo brought to a global audience a vivid picture of the status of pensioners in Latin America. BBC Arabic talked to pensioners across the Arab world, some of whom told heartbreaking stories about a life of hunger and humiliation. They also talked to young people about their plans for their old age. Last week, we explored the “business of growing old” in China—a country that is looking to make and attract investments to build retirement villages to cope with a growing elderly population.

So, if relevant global content is increasingly the editorial mainstay and purpose of the BBC’s journalism, how do we set ourselves up to provide that effectively and how do the various international news organisations compare in their ability to deliver?

There is an explosion of state-funded international news at the same time as there is a dramatic cutting back in resources by many commercial news organisations. China announced a \$7bn expansion programme for its overseas media operations, including an increase in foreign bureaux for its global English news channel CCTV from 19 to 56 over the next three years.

The traditional international public service broadcasters make noble efforts to retain global newsgathering and broadcasting. But of them only Voice of America and its sister US broadcasting organisations have truly global scope. VOA has 44 languages, 17 more than the BBC, although its audience reach is lower. It is disadvantaged in comparison to the BBC as it has no alliance with a US-based news partner of scale. National Public Radio in the US has made impressive investments in international journalism in recent years and PBS makes a commitment as best it can afford. But they are entirely separate organisations from VOA. This lack of coherence across US public broadcasting hampers the US from bringing the strengths of its global language services together with a properly funded domestic news organisation, the particular advantage that is available to the BBC.

The new entrants into international state broadcasting, from Russia and China have the muscle to be global in their distribution and reach. However they hardly have the intention of being global editorially. Their purpose so far seems to be to develop news services that allow them to put a distinctly national slant on coverage. CCTV’s stated purpose is “to voice a Chinese perspective on world affairs and to break the Western voice’s monopoly on the news”. This may well have appeal for audiences who want to understand a variety of perspectives and in parts of the world where Chinese influence, for instance, is increasing, there may be a growing market. But I doubt that many people around the world will want to rely for a global view from broadcasters who are fundamentally one-sided.

The other key news broadcasters with a genuinely global perspective are obviously CNN and Al Jazeera and each of these are making efforts to move from their nation-specific roots to be broader. CNN still reflects in its production

style and its editorial preoccupations its US origins – and for many around the world that is an attractive offer. It has over the years increasingly developed news partnerships (e.g. in India and Turkey) where its global content is adapted locally and some content flows back from partners. CNN's marketing tag "go beyond borders" pinpoints well the importance of globalism in their editorial approach.

Al Jazeera naturally started from a particular Middle Eastern perspective, but has since made great strides in becoming more global with the launch of Al Jazeera English. Its editorial agenda and its talent recruitment has been diverse and they are making strong efforts in throwing off the burden of the initial reputation that Al Jazeera Arabic attracted. Al Jazeera now broadcasts in Arabic, English, and has plans for the Balkans and Turkey.

Of course there are other truly international news organisations beyond broadcasters. The New York Times and the UK's Daily Mail and Guardian have genuinely global ambitions. However none of those organisations has set out to produce a fully global agenda, in the way I am defining. The Daily Mail's approach is to make dramatic personalised news appeal to a global English audience. The Guardian has set out, in its words to be the world's "liberal voice". In other words it is a distinct liberal take on the world. Certainly it is designed to have widespread appeal, but by definition it is coming from a particular perspective. The New York Times' vision of its own impartiality would reject the idea that it addresses the world from any particular perspective and it certainly retains strong international newsgathering to allow it to report from multiple perspectives. However its readership, both print and online, is still overwhelmingly US dominated, whereas only a small proportion of the BBC's total news audience comes from the UK.

So how do the BBC's efforts to produce journalism that is from the world and to the world compare to that competition? Of course our efforts to produce journalism that is relevant for as large a proportion of the world as possible are not new, but the model we are using is now changing rapidly.

The BBC's global English service, the called the Empire Service, was founded in 1932. In 1938 our first language services were founded. But the language broadcasting of news was not then built on reporting from those countries or primarily reflective of those countries. The production process was a centralised one where news bulletins and features were written in English then faithfully translated into the vernacular and broadcast by announcers.

It was a World Service but it was a service to the world not from the world.

It was not until well after Britain shed its empire that the External Services became the World Service, just over 20 years ago. And around that time an internal revolution took place. The language teams increasingly recruited journalists and expected teams to find and report their own stories about their part of the world, as well as translating the international stories from the English newsroom.

At the BBC we believe we now have an unrivalled internal network to be able to relay global stories. By making sure we have the right skills, the right languages and the right internal culture to ensure we share our knowledge, we can create a global network – a combination of the English newsgathering operation enhanced by the contribution of

language services journalists- where stories from all our teams and all corners of the globe are part of a uniquely diverse mix of stories.

But we can no longer do it within our own walls. We need to network with our audience and we need to network with our partner news organisations. We can no longer be fortress BBC. And that requires some dramatic changes in our mindset. We need to change to serve our audiences better and we need to change, as we can no longer afford not to. That change will be personified in the new BBC news centre in central London that we will move into in less than a year's time. New Broadcasting House, attached to the BBC's historic domestic radio headquarters near Oxford Circus, will house the largest broadcast and online news operation in the world – home to around 2000 journalists. For the first time the BBC's greatest dual strength – its UK news operation and its international news operation will be housed under one roof.

But we won't just be sticking the two teams together and leaving things as they are. Instead we are working on imaginative plans to blend the teams together to get the most out of them. So experts and programme makers in areas, like the arts, sciences or business will sit together, working on breaking news as well as in depth documentary. They will be able to share knowledge and ensure that the best editorial talent has the widest range of outlets to broadcast and publish to. And our newsroom will be full of a mix of talent from around the world.

This is what becoming more global is about.

This year we are creating a pioneering video production unit which will be staffed by producers from many languages – Russian, Arabic, Spanish, Persian, Urdu, Portuguese and English. They will take the best stories from around the world and make videos in their native language and in English. That material will be adapted and translated by their colleagues. That way the very best stories will not just be seen in one part of the world, but will be available to everywhere. And of course that will work both ways. Material produced for English speaking audiences will be rapidly adapted for use in several languages.

This exciting new way of working is likely to prove a model for how much of our global news is produced in the new HQ. Not only will it be cost effective but, much more importantly, it will mean that our agenda which already strives to be truly and even-handedly global, will be driven further by our multinational, multilingual teams.

But is an attempt to achieve a truly international news agenda a naïve and impossible one, particularly at a time when competitors are providing news that is more tailored or more slanted to a particular viewpoint? And, in the age of the internet, is there any need for a news organisation, like the BBC to aspire to do what the internet itself can do – be both the source and the distributor of the news?

There is no doubt that the internet, whatever the debates about how it undermines business models, is brilliantly-conceived for news. It is inherently open to information and perspective, the lifeblood of news. The BBC certainly doesn't see the internet as a competitor. Instead we exploit its every advantage and try to make sure that we respond to its challenges.

The great potential of the internet lies in its global scale – in information and in viewpoint, but that also creates its weakness. While you can obtain a truly global viewpoint from the web, most users do not have the time to search out that information or its range of perspectives. Indeed there is some evidence that news sources and opinions sought are narrowing, as users focus instead on quick and easy headlines and/or views that fit their own preconceptions.

In the drawbacks of internet news, the BBC sees an opportunity. By using our own internal network of journalists and partnering with audiences in providing us with rich sources of information, we believe we can synthesise our own original journalism together with the best information that is out there. We can provide what we have always aspired to – the most accurate and authoritative account of global events.

In an era of a myriad of voices and views on the web and airwaves, is the BBC's attachment to impartiality – hovering above the globe in an attempt to have no viewpoint – now outdated or philosophically impossible? The achievement of absolute impartiality may be impossible, but the attempt to achieve it still motivates us and brings us our vast audiences. We realise that some audiences want news from particular perspectives. But why just inform yourself with one view on a story? The ability of professional non-biased news organisations to bring a range of views to bear is still valued by audiences and is an essential complement to the cacophony of the internet.

[This approach is not about excluding a range of views. The BBC's airwaves are more open than ever, whether hearing from the Taliban in Afghanistan or the BNP in the UK. But when these voices appear on the BBC, they appear under rules we have established over years in conjunction with our audiences and they are subject to challenge and inquiry. One of our most successful programmes is World Have Your Say, an award winning, global interactive multimedia programme on radio, BBC World News TV and online. The agenda is set by audiences and the programme offers them an open forum to discuss what matters to them, according to house rules co-created with the audience.]

So in the offices and cafes of the new BBC News HQ there will be a multitude of faces and languages from all over the globe. They will all be given a chance to contribute to setting the BBC's news agenda. Within our own walls and outside it we want to create a network that respects all views, that tests all information and that always strives to tell the world the way it is. We know we don't always get it right, but that aspiration motivates thousands of the BBC's journalists, whether they come from Manchester or Mumbai.

We will be blending those great teams together, delivering on our mantra of multimedia and multilingual. We believe it will be one of the greatest experiments in international journalism that London and probably the world have seen. We will be opening our doors in a year's time. I hope that all news organisations and members of the public who have a passion for reporting the world as independently and thoroughly as possible will come to see how we are doing. And I am sure you will let us know whether it works.

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