

# International News – it's connection not quantity that counts

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A [new research study](#) out today tells us something we already knew: that international coverage in UK newspapers is declining.

We know why. Market forces, cost-cutting and a lack of interest on the part of owners in the public value of international news in mass media.

We also know, as the [report](#) acknowledges, that newspapers are not the main source for international news and never have been. TV and radio are more important. As the Media Standards Trust notes, [Polis published a report](#) on the threat to international news coverage in UK PSBs. Concerns in that sector have been renewed by recent changes to BBC World Service, of course.



Nor does this report really deal with online coverage. The fact that we can access a vast range of international sources is acknowledged but then dismissed as marginal at best and dangerous at worst. Apparently we still need newspaper correspondents to tell us what is really going on.

I feel this report is much too idealistic about newspapers' records on foreign coverage. I agree that they have shown that in real terms, despite increasing pagination, that the number of international news stories has fallen. But it claims:

*“There was a time when British correspondents would almost always be there, witnessing: George Orwell in Berlin in 1945, James Cameron in Korea in 1950, John Pilger in Cambodia in 1979.”*

Surely the point is that those colourful literary correspondent figures were hugely exceptional? If you look at the bulk of stories that the report lists being covered in the past, they were often the kind of routine reportage of elections and conflicts that do still get covered today. Much of this is immediately accessible online and, even better, from much better informed international sources.

Nor does the report mention the incredible increases in the efficiency of international reporting thanks to cheap flights, mobile phones and other digital technologies. Of course, this makes it all the more surprising that there's not more international coverage, not less.

For some newspapers such as the FT and the Economist, they have made more profit out of producing more foreign news. This is because their audience is a global, economic and political elite who spend more time in Heathrow Terminal 5 than they do in their local High Streets. As I have [written elsewhere](#), the danger is that we end up with a super-served cosmopolitan minority and the majority are left “watching terrorist bombings flash briefly among a barrage of commentary, crawls and celebrity gossip.” (Pamela Constable, Washington Post).

At the point where the report deals with solutions it takes an interesting turn which seems to undermine the whole premise of what has gone before. Namely, that traditional newspaper coverage of international news by their correspondents and written up in a paper is what counts.

First off they make a half-hearted suggestion in the hope that newspapers can sort this out. Why not they put foreign news at the front of the paper? Even if this happened – and it won't – I doubt it will have much effect.

But then they quite rightly turn to other ways of accessing international news – which can involve newspaper

newsrooms working online in a [networked journalism](#) way.

*“as international reporting by UK-based news organisations declines we will increasingly need ‘curators’ who can help us find good news reports from foreign outlets, and to give those reports context. Global Voices Online, for example, has 300 bloggers who ‘aggregate, curate, and amplify’ the voices of those who are not normally heard in international mainstream media”*

So the report accepts that newspapers are simply not able to fill the gap and we should welcome other suppliers of international coverage. I agree with this next recommendation about how those ‘new’ media organisations should do it:

*“Extend the principles of journalism to NGOs, bloggers, and ‘accidental journalists’. NGOs need to be aware that they now have a responsibility to report fairly from the ground when they are the only witnesses. And they should realise that with that responsibility comes an opportunity. If they embrace journalistic values and strive to be accurate, independent and fair they – like the BBC in the Second World War – stand to gain a much greater following than those who just do propaganda.”*

Of course, I would agree with that as it’s exactly [what I said in this paper](#) and [this article](#) a few years ago.

The Media Standards Trust report also makes sensible recommendations about maintaining the requirement of UK PSBs to produce international coverage.

But in the end, I would suggest the real problem is not simply to increase the supply of international news in mainstream media. The real challenge is to better connect people who want or need to know certain types of international news to the international news they need. It is to think more creatively about the different ways that people do feel interested in international issues. I think that social media and a much more networked journalism is the way to do this, not simply by increasing the foreign story-count in our newspapers. As it happens, MST are doing interesting work in that area, too.

Check out [our report on International News Coverage in UK PSBs published jointly with IBT and Oxfam by Phil Harding](#). I will be publishing a new report on this too soon.

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