

Global Connectivity Through News: Aspiration or Fantasy?

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Global Newsmakers

Here are some draft notes for a paper I am writing on how people in the UK use the news media in an age of globalised communication. It's taken out of context from the rest of the paper, but if it sparks any thoughts, or if you have any comments or ideas to suggest then please get in touch. Some of these ideas were discussed at [an IDS panel I chaired at the Royal Society](#).

The UK Public And International News

The idea that masses of people would ever consume substantial amounts of international news was always fanciful. There is no Golden Age when Britons sat down in their millions to watch challenging documentaries about climate change. So even before the Internet, mainstream media was seeking more subtle ways to bring the world to audiences by bringing international issues into non-news programming or

coverage.

More people will have got a dose of African cultural understanding through the BBC TV series *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* than through Channel 4 News. However, recent unpublished research [1] reminds us that fictional messages about distant people or places can also reinforce stereotypical images. Focus groups studied by Dr Shakuntala Banaji showed that viewers of the *Slum Dog Millionaire* film came away from the fantasy account of Indian life with a decidedly more negative and distorted sense of the reality.

Think Generously

Having more information about the world does not necessarily make people think more generously about other people. Indeed, it may make them more fearful and sceptical. A recent survey [2] seemed to indicate that the UK public is conscious of global interdependencies. The Institute of Development Studies-based research showed that over 71 per cent of respondents "considered the life of people in the UK to be dependent on what happens in other parts of the world." However, "the degree of dependency was considered by respondents to be greatest for the state of the economy and the level of terrorist threat".

The recent Polis report on international coverage in UK PSB [3] attempted to give other reasons why people may make connections apart from the dominant economic links in a globalised economy currently going through recession.

Some of these cut across class and are not dependent on a high income, cosmopolitan lifestyle: holidays, participation in the armed forces, sport, climate change, and above all, immigration: "know the world, know your neighbour". Being ethnic is a strong driver of a kind of global awareness with multi-cultural house-holds tending to have a greater range of international news sources. However, the actual range of interest might be relatively narrow. They will tend to consume only media from their own land of origin in addition to UK-produced material.

Understanding and Connections

So we need to think less simplistically about what we mean by 'understanding' and 'connections'. Should we value factual above fictional narratives, for example? Should we emphasise mediations that foster agency? What expectations should we have of media effects on audiences?

MSM tends to think in terms of two audiences for international understanding: one that is relatively expert and interested and another audience that doesn't care. Traditionally, approaches to engaging UK citizens in global issues

has framed the question in terms of how much do you want to engage the latter and how far can you extend the former?

Research suggests that partial knowledge of distant others can actually reinforce apathy and even hostility rather than promoting understanding. The UK Public Opinion Monitor survey [4] asked about coverage of the Haiti earthquake. A high proportion of the public said they trusted the media coverage and nearly 60% said they were 'fairly concerned' about what was portrayed. However, despite extensive and harrowing media coverage, only 20% were 'very concerned' and about a quarter were 'indifferent' or 'unconcerned'.

Although the majority was supportive of aid agency efforts they were sceptical about long-term change. Based on their past experience they 'considered long-term aid was likely to be ineffective in bringing about development'. 49% of the respondents had given to the Haiti appeal – a mean of £32. So even where people had connected themselves to a global event and acted, there were still considerable limitations on how much they wanted to empathise or feel positively about those in need.

[1] Banaji, S. (Forthcoming) "Seduced Outsiders" versus "Sceptical Insiders?": approaching *Slumdog Millionaire* through its Re/Viewers' in *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*

[2] UK Public Opinion Monitor Survey 2010 www.ukpublicmonitor.org

[3] Harding, P 2009 The Global Switch-Off (Polis Report)

[4] <http://www.ukpublicmonitor.org/>

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