

Media Research, Development and Identity

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Media Research, Development and Identity – a Polis lecture by Dr Gerry Power, BBC World Service Trust

Report by Mary Burris



Dr. Gerry Power's lecture on "Media Research, Development and Identity" problematized questions of identity in terms of audience research projects carried out in developing countries. As Director of Research and Knowledge Management at the BBC World Service Trust, Dr. Power is regarded as an authority on media and audience research in a global context. The BBC World Service Trust is the BBC's international development charity, funded entirely by sources external to the BBC, including bi-lateral and multi-lateral funding agencies and private foundations. He began his talk by playing a music video created by the organization [Playing for Change](#) where music is presented as a common language shared across ethnic, linguistic and national identities. With this backdrop and recognizing the potential for music to be a universal language, Dr. Power also stressed the value of drawing on the academic literatures on globalization, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism and diasporas, when addressing issues of identity and media research in developing countries,

From a policy perspective, The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provide a strategic context for the work of the BBC World Service Trust, whose remit is to use media and communications to improve the lives of people living in poverty. Dr. Power acknowledged that it is widely recognized that many countries will not reach the MDG targets by 2015. As an illustration of the extent of the challenge to reduce global poverty, Dr. Power made reference to the proportions of various populations around the world living on less than one dollar per day. This example also served to identify countries like Myanmar, where no socio-economic data are available, a situation faced by researchers in many developing country contexts.

Dr Power stressed the multiple challenges of conducting research in developing countries and the imperative to build in strict quality control mechanisms. In the case of the Trust, these quality control procedures are largely implemented by local research teams on the ground. Dr. Power then outlined the four phases of research (formative, pre-testing, monitoring and impact evaluation) as well as the multiple levels (system, organization, practitioner and individual) of engagement employed by the BBC World Service Trust.

The expressions of identity in audience research were illustrated by three Trust research projects: [Africa Talks Climate](#) – a ten country study in Africa to understand the public's perceptions of climate change a gender-based violence study in the IDP (internally displaced people) camps in Darfur, and a study of the Bangladeshi Diaspora in the UK.

Language emerges as a key element of identity in the *Africa Talks Climate* project, where the Trust spoke to 1,000 citizens and 200 opinion leaders in 25 languages, including multiple indigenous and tribal languages across urban rural locations in 10 African countries. The identity of the research participants becomes defined in terms of the ways in which they express their understanding and experience of climate change – the vocabulary, the metaphors, the conceptual frameworks emerging from the research process. Power comments:

"Language is key in terms of identity... people understand(ing) themselves ...and explaining how they interpret how their environments are changing..."

Context also emerges as an important aspect of identity. The gender-based violence study with IDPs in the camps in Darfur consisted of in-depth interviews and discussions with older and younger men and women. Notable in the transcripts of these conversations was the strong association people made with violent behavior and the context of living in the refugee camps. Rather than classifying violent behavior as a function of gender and/or status, the focus of people's explanations was on the circumstances in which they were living. According to Dr. Power:

"People identify problems not as individual attributes but rather in recognizing the context of conflict... not just how individuals engage in certain behaviour. Tensions emerge for everyone in the camp environment and people understood violence in a contextual sense not as a function of individual identity."

The multi-layered nature of identity is illustrated in the study of the British Bangladeshi diaspora, which was based on interviews with 300 people of Bangladeshi origin living in the UK as well as in-depth interviews with 10 Bangladeshi community leaders. Part of the study was to understand the potential value of media as a method for English language learning. The findings of the study suggest that within the Bangladeshi diaspora community, identity as it relates to English language learning is multi-layered – generationally (grandparents, parents, children), by gender (girls having more flexibility to access classes) and as a function of language of origin (Sylheti, Bangla or Bengali). Dr. Power's explains:

"In regard to attitudes and practices concerning English language learning, the Bangladeshi community in the UK is very fragmented in terms of how gender, age and language interact with each other..... identity is multi-faceted."

Underlying these examples is a set of assumptions that guides the Trust's approach to research in relation to identity, in general. Power summarized these assumptions as follows: (1) audience research facilitates how issues are defined and communicated, (2) audiences are regarded as heterogeneous in terms of demographic, psychographic and media/technographic characteristics. The most salient demographic attributes are age, social class and location (urban/rural). However, demographic categories in less developed countries are not equivalent to those in the North and the West, where, for example, life expectancy is relatively young, men and women marry at a relatively younger age, social class is defined according to very precise set of context-specific criteria and urban/rural distinctions vary and shift; (3) audiences understand the expectation to draw on their experience, knowledge and a sense of preference in order to respond to questions; (4) audiences will ultimately benefit from the application of the research findings to development interventions. This final assumption is not always so explicit in research practice or articulated in such terms to research participants.

Dr. Power elaborated on how assumptions about identity were reflected in the study design and methodology employed in the research studies conducted by the Trust. He cited the following impacts: because of low literacy levels, particularly in rural areas, all research was conducted face-to-face, with few exceptions; because of the variety of languages and dialects spoken, research instruments were customized to resonate with specific sub-groups; permission to speak to research participants is often granted not by the individual themselves but by others, in the case of some females by their husbands or fathers and among some rural communities by tribal or village elders; the social hierarchy will often dictate who can speak and who cannot; matching the identity of the interviewer with all of the salient characteristics of the interviewee will minimize experimenter effect and social desirability.

Finally, Power cited other research approaches that can be considered to offer an alternative perspective on identity. These include the work on participatory methodology of Robert Chambers (2007), the framework developed by the Communication for Social Change Consortium (Rockefeller Foundation, 2003), and in particular, the work on indigenous cosmologies (Hodgetts, 2009). The practice within Social Science of asking questions of people according to an established set of protocols that are based on a set theoretical principles, is grounded in a particular socio-cultural tradition. This approach may not be the most appropriate to capture the essence of non-Western peoples. As an alternative, Hodgetts (2009) suggests that indigenous cosmologies pose such questions as Who am I? Where do I fit in? Where am I going? What are important things to do?:

"For many Europeans of the old world, these questions were answered through Judeo-Christian beliefs in one God,

who created heaven and earth and all that is between including mankind.” (Hodgetts, 2009)

Power concluded with a number of challenges and related questions to address the relationship between media research, identity and development:

First, reliance on theories and methods that have their origins in a Western social science tradition are repeatedly applied in non-Western contexts.

– How do prevailing paradigms in the West limit the understanding of non-Western contexts and thinking?

Second, as a source of influence in a society, media do not exist in a vacuum but rather as part of a complex environment of conflicting and contradictory sources of information and belief systems.

– How can these sources of influence be integrated into a framework that is attempting to understand the role of media.

Third, field research capacity and technical research skills can often be limited or non-existent in many developing countries.

– How can quality control of data gathering, data entry and analysis be ensured in order to achieve international standards of good practice?

Fourth, sampling and the construction of sampling frames, from which research participants can be drawn, is complex in the absence of accurate and up-to-date census data and maps.

– What are meaningful and relevant criteria for selecting those to include in any research effort?

Fifth, while the conceptual and critical arguments abound in the academic literature, there is a dearth of empirical research on many of these issues.

– In many cases there are no established research instruments or scales designed to capture valid and reliable data.

Finally, while participatory research methods, such as those advocated by Chambers and others are grounded in well established theory and practice regarding empowerment and sustainability of change, their adoption at a mass or population level rather than a community context is extremely challenging.

Dr. Power’s lecture raised a number of important questions for both academics and practitioners interested in the relationship between media research and identity, particularly in less developed country contexts.

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