

Can Foreign Reporting Survive?

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How on earth can foreign coverage by mainstream broadcast media survive the current economic downturn, budget cuts and competition from the Internet? About a year ago Polis published a report called [The Great Global Switch-Off](#) by Phil Harding which sought to argue for the value of international coverage and to find new ways to sustain it.

This week top TV executives gathered with Phil Harding to update us on the debate at the [Frontline Club](#). This personal report by Polis intern Louise McGough shows that the broadcasters have not given up yet, although times are getting tougher for those who believe in the public service value of bringing the world to British viewers.

“Digital does not kill the foreign journalist. It makes it possible for him or her to work in a way that was never possible before”

– Ed Braman, Channel 4

“We still need professional journalists”

– Steve Barnett

“The BBC is not complacent, and is committed to protecting public service broadcasting”

– Clive Edwards, BBC

Is International News on its Death Bed?

Earlier this year, Polis, Oxfam and the International Broadcasting Trust published a report by Phil Harding called *The Global Switch Off* on the future of foreign reporting on television – the most used media in Britain. It looked at the future of public service broadcasting – and with it international news coverage and foreign affairs programmes in the face of technological advances and economic constraints.

Knowledge of international affairs is more important than ever, if only to understand domestic events. Can the two be reconciled?

In a talk at The Frontline Club on Tuesday October 13th, Harding put his concerns to panellists Clive Edwards (Executive Editor and Commissioning Editor for TV Current Affairs at the BBC), Ed Braman (commissioning editor for News and Current affairs at Channel 4) and Steve Barnett (professor of communications at the University of Westminster).

In America's Footsteps?

Harding voiced his fears of British television going the American way, with little or no serious reporting from abroad. Currently, the BBC shows fifty-six episodes of Panorama a year, over a quarter of which have an international focus. Channel 4 puts out forty episodes of Dispatches, again, over a quarter of which are international in content and twenty of Unreported World.

British coverage is still today superior in quantity and quality to many – the BBC, and by association other British channels, still commands respect – and while Braman and Edwards admitted there were challenges ahead, they were nevertheless positive regarding the future of foreign affairs on both the BBC and Channel 4.

The BBC would continue to bring the UK to the world and the world to the UK (the fifth of its six official purposes as defined by the BBC), to report “everything of significance to the audience and of significance generally”, said Edwards.

Braman promised that Channel 4's international coverage would continue to challenge people to see the world differently (Channel 4's mandate), give the audience an “alternative view of the world”, and “challenge orthodoxies”. The audience was less confident.

Lose touch with the audience or dilute. Is it that simple?

Many in the audience felt that the internet provides ever more opportunities to select what news the public consumes, inevitably at the expense of foreign affairs programmes. The implication is that Britons don't care about what is happening abroad, and given the choice, would rather watch Big Brother than learn about the plight of African farmers or South American slums. A generalisation, certainly, but not entirely wrong. Both the BBC and Channel 4 are aware of this.

Braman admitted that foreign affairs programmes with “cuddly subjects” such as babies and young children, or undercover, and therefore exciting, stories do better in the ratings. Indeed, the BBC's Blood, Sweat and T-Shirts, and later Blood, Sweat and Take- Aways, drew in the younger audience who otherwise, according to Edwards, would not have been watching programmes about globalisation.

Are foreign affairs programmes now reliant on audiences responding to a particular format, rather than the content, or indeed a celebrity presenter, to elicit any interest? The audience worried that they did.

Unlike many in the audience, I don't see any relation between the need to pull in viewers with a celebrity or an exciting format and the digitalisation of the media.

Teenagers and young people aren't forsaking Panorama and Dispatches for Facebook and Youtube. If the latter didn't exist, they would be listening to their walkmen or playing Mario Kart. If anything, the internet makes it more likely for teenagers to stumble across information that they otherwise would have had to get from sitting at home and watching the news with their parents – a rare occurrence I'm sure.

So what of celebrities presenting serious foreign affairs programmes?

Quite clearly, it all depends on the celebrity. Admittedly, Ross Kemp on Gangs was mainly about watching Ross Kemp, nevertheless it attracted a particular constituency that would otherwise not have been interested by street kids in Rio or Polish neo-nazis. While not a career journalist, he has brought the world to the UK and challenged orthodoxies.

Let's be pragmatic: with a plethora of channels and programmes in competition fighting for the top slots, giving the edge to a programme that still informs the public is not necessarily a bad thing. We need different types of programmes for different types of viewers. As long as it doesn't kill off the purer version of foreign affairs programmes, there is nothing wrong with celebrity reporting as an alternative.

Are bloggers and corporate pressures killing the foreign reporter?

In Flat Earth News, Nick Davies bemoans the shutting down of foreign news bureaux and the financial pressures that make keeping foreign reporters on the ground too expensive. Certainly, reliance on press agencies means that many news outlets recycle the same stories.

At this point, however, we must distinguish between the news and foreign affairs programmes, which are not reliant on reporters on the ground for up to date information, send out their own reporters and operate on a longer time-scale. Most news outlets are under pressure to get stories out fast. This may cause them to use agency copy rather than use expensive reporters who have the time to check a story properly and find a new angle.

On the other hand, while the professional journalist on the ground in his new bureau – “an outpost of Empire” according to Braman – might be dying a speedy death, he is being replaced by millions of bloggers who, they too on the ground, can provide information from different sides of the debate, illuminate different arguments and generally enrich the news we consume.

Neither are foreign affairs programmes being killed by the internet

For example, when Unreported World episodes were pirated onto Youtube, Braman recounted, within hours they had millions of hits. The internet is merely a technology through which content created by traditional news providers

can be disseminated – often to people abroad who trust British programmes to tell them about the countries they are living in. Both the BBC and Channel 4 have clearly understood this, both are well prepared for what the future brings with huge investment into BBC iPlayer and 4 On Demand. There will still be demand for TV to provide the content for is watched on the internet, said Braman.

It is a cultural fight

The future of international coverage and foreign affairs programmes depends on British culture. Despite financial constraints and expansion into different media, if the public sees a role for public service broadcasting and there remains an imperative for the likes of the BBC and Channel 4 to provide international coverage and foreign affairs programmes, then Britain need not slide down the slippery American slope.

In my opinion, the only problem with leaving the decision to the public, is that it doesn't seem to buy the notion that public service broadcasting has a duty simply to inform. I am not being puritanical.

Both the BBC and Channel 4 are subject to pressures and need to draw in audiences. However, the public pays a license fee, so in a sense it has a right to watch what it wants. Moreover, the license fee also acts as a tax in exchange for provision of a public service, and a part of this is to receive information about the world in which we live, regardless of whether it only interests a small proportion of the country.

The BBC faces challenges ahead with potential top slicing of the license fee and public funding cuts whether Labour or the Tories win the next election. Channel 4 is in the middle of one of its Creative Renewal processes and Braman was unable to say for sure but foresaw that foreign affairs could come out as strong or stronger. Pessimists argue that leaving the future of international coverage up to the public spells disaster. Indeed, much of the debate around the future of international coverage on television rests on the rather bleak, but potentially true, assumption that the British public doesn't care about foreign affairs.

Nevertheless, Britons are culturally attached to the BBC and do not want to scrap the license fee. If the BBC is not on its death-bed, then there is hope for the future of international coverage. It may only be watched by the few, but the BBC has a duty to keep foreign affairs available to the many, and largely, the British agree.

We could see a future, therefore, in which BBC foreign affairs programmes keep being produced, not because people watch them, but out of a sense of duty. However, the depressing belief that Britons are insular and apathetic is laid to rest by Channel 4's consistently high level of international coverage since its inception. A commercial channel – with all the financial constraints and reliance on ratings that that entails – foreign affairs programmes have continued to pull in viewers. Somewhere, therefore, there is still demand for good reporting on foreign affairs.

The digital age and the “death of distance” (Thomas Friedman) will only increase that demand. Youtube and blogs provide news information and may harm demand for international news from television but people, both in Britain and abroad, still look to household names to provide good quality foreign affairs programmes. The reporter need not

start digging his grave quite yet.

This report is by Louise McGough

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