

The Big Tent: Global Media must invite the public inside

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People power

This was weird. I was in a hot sticky tent pitched on a car park in West London next to the M40 with the BBC's Deputy Director General, the Executive Editor of the International Herald Tribune, the head of news at Al Arabiya and David Plotz from Slate.

Here was the global news elite in search of a saviour from the marauding hordes of ignorant and distracted world citizens who would rather consume celebrity news from a blog than pay attention to proper Grown Up International Affairs.

As this BBC festival of international news, it took veteran BBC hack Frank Gardner to suggest that perhaps there is a limit to the number of people who want to devour detailed reports and analysis from far flung corners of the globe. There is certainly a limit on our time.

The truth is that we have more international news than ever before. Thanks to new media we can also make it and access it by ourselves. Events like the current turmoil in Iran remind us that big foreign stories have significant reach. They also remind us that the public should be allowed to help set that agenda and make those connections.

It is not up to the big media executives to tell us what to think or know. The evidence of today was that they still find that uncomfortable.

This is partly because they still feel threatened by new media taking away their business model. That's understandable, because it is doing just that. But a new one awaits.

They make all the right noises about trying to go online and engage. All of the organisations represented in the tent today have excellent online offerings. The quality of their work is still high.

But I felt that there is still something missing. I can't put my finger on it exactly, but there was a sense amongst the media grandees that International News is a precious flower that must be kept in the greenhouse and nurtured. I would argue that the evidence from Iran at the moment is that freedom of expression is, indeed, a fragile bloom. But the greatest protection for global connectivity and trans-national communication is to empower the people to participate.

Don't get me wrong. I am not looking to replace the BBC World Service with a bunch of bloggers.

Polis has itself researched into the quality and quantity of international coverage in UK public service broadcasting. You can access our report on [The Great Global Switch-off here](#). We think there are good reasons why we should all know more about the rest of the world and why we need good mainstream media to help do that job. Immigration, the economy, holidays, climate change etc are all international issues that benefit from expert narration.

In their own ways all of the media titans assembled in the tent today are doing great work at reaching international audiences. The International Herald Tribune is America's thinking paper for on the road. Slate is a high-brow, thoughtful magazine that at least attempts to distract the US liberal elite from its obsession with Washington. Al Arabiya does a superb job of bringing wider regional news to the Middle East and it has more global news than CNN USA. And as for the BBC, well it still finds a few quid from the licence fee to produce more diverse and more comprehensive international news than the world has ever seen before.

So why worry?

Well, it's still early days, but I am still not convinced that the big media organisations have really got to grips with the ways that we can open up journalism to these new forces. And by media organisations, I include Google and Twitter who now have a responsibility in all this. They have empowered people in a way that the news media organisations have been reluctant to do. But once you facilitate all this expression, you have a duty to attend to its impacts.

I still think that we are just at the beginning of working through what this means for International news coverage. I personally have no doubt that we are going to get more international news, but probably much less on the mainstream platforms.

I think that the kind of news will change as well. It will be more diverse. We will have more choice. But we will all have to learn how to interpret and assimilate what is on offer.

We may find there are fewer white middle class men with Oxbridge accents reporting from 'foreign' places for the BBC. You may turn to YouTube rather than CNN rather more often. I will still want those editorial brands with their experience, expertise and insight. But I will want them to be facilitators not guardians of the news. I want them to invite the public into their big tent.

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