

## The media and Africa: doing bad by doing "good"?

By Charlie Beckett,  
Created 2007-06-18 13:26

One of the high points of my journalistic career was standing next to Jon Snow in Makerere University's (empty) swimming-pool as we broadcast live from an evangelical rally to promote sexual abstinence in Kampala. At one point Jon waded into the cheering, swinging crowd and asked a Ugandan [0] youth: "Are you celibate?" "Oh yes!" said the happy young Christian, "I wasn't last week but I am now". An hour earlier Jon had done an interview with *Richard & Judy* on the same subject, bringing an audience of millions of daytime TV viewers in touch with the surreal and depressing reality of Africa and Aids in the week before the G8 summit at Gleneagles [0], Scotland in July 2005 which attempted to "put an end to poverty" in Africa.

Gosh, I thought, we really are giving them the *News From Africa*. But does it make any difference at all? I fear that the harder journalists try to be good, the worse the result often is. Let me try to explain.

First of all I should say that Jon Snow and Channel 4 News [1] is about as good as it gets in TV news. They have the time and resources and an editorial brief to be thoughtful and counterintuitive. But the failure of the news media to report complex issues like Africa particularly well is as much about the "quality" of liberal media as it is about the rightwing tabloids or twenty-four-hour news channels.

The realisation that this is so seems to be taking root in surprising quarters: witness the report [2] of the BBC Trust - the corporation's new oversight body, which replaced its board of governors in January 2007 - into the issue of impartiality in the BBC's coverage of politics and current affairs. Seesaw to Wagon Wheel: safeguarding impartiality in the 21st century [3], published on 18 June 2007, speaks of the need to recognise "new complexities" and proposes twelve "guiding principles to inform the BBC's approach to ensuring impartiality in the face of rapid technological and social change".

The evidence of a problem, one that crosses broadcasting boundaries, is not hard to find. Take Unreported World [4] on Channel 4. Each week, brave young independent journalists are seen in some unpleasant part of the globe contradicting the title of the programme. From Haiti to Darfur they dodge bullets and meet up with intimidating guerrilla leaders. Their commitment and courage is evident. Sometimes they display excellent language skills and sometimes good local knowledge. But it can end up feeling like breathless travel journalism with flak-jackets because the formula becomes dominant over analysis, reflection or context. Just because the subject is Sri Lanka or children in Côte d'Ivoire [5] doesn't mean that it is a "progressive" or even valuable programme. By emphasising a narrative-driven structure it can become as predictable a formula as the two-minute piece on the BBC's 10 o'clock news.

This is part of a well-intentioned conspiracy to report Africa, in particular, and the developing world in general, in a formulaic way. It is a formula that privileges a knee-jerk morality over real

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journalistic ethics. Take one example of how the news media completely lost its editorial bearings. What on earth was the BBC thinking when it became a partner to Bob Geldof's Live8 [10] campaign? Whether one agrees with Live8's aims is irrelevant here. What we saw - and it is a criticism echoed in the BBC Trust's report on impartiality - was the supposedly impartial national broadcaster getting in bed with a political campaign that overtly sought to change (or support) British government policy. How was the BBC supposed to broadcast acres of Live8 [11] and at the same time give space to the perfectly valid counter-arguments about how aid has failed Africa for the last forty years?

The same phenomenon is at work at the G8 summit in Heiligendamm, Germany, held on 6-8 June 2007. Greenpeace and other NGO activists were given a privileged space within TV news reports and much of the written press where they are allowed to criticise [12] governments for not doing what the pressure groups want. The spokespeople are a useful way for journalists to add drama to what is otherwise a pretty complicated and boring story. Phrases like "but Greenpeace/Oxfam denounced the initiative as too little too late", allow the reporter to imply some deep divide, some dramatic debate without having to go in to details, let alone analysis or argument.

It's rare to hear anyone mention that the NGOs are fundraising, unelected sloganeers who simplify their messages to raise profile as much as to raise arguments. Behind the scenes they are working hand-in-glove with the same governments. It is unusual for anyone to ask the NGOs why aid has failed in the past, or whether the market might actually help deliver limits on global warming. And yet journalists feel a kind of moral certitude in giving the NGOs an easy ride, because who can be against giving poor Africa more money or saving the planet?

This is part of a wider problem about the way that journalism - and TV journalism in particular - falls victim to its own physical and temporal limits. TV journalism works with limited resources and very limited time to produce and broadcast information, so quite rightly, all information must be packaged. And packaging involves creating a formula we can understand. Unfortunately the pressure to reduce all information flows to an industrialised process makes journalism - especially the liberal journalism that dominates TV news - prey to a kind of moral entrapment.

There is a strand of thought in media and communications studies that seeks to get journalists to be more moral. The late Roger Silverstone [13], my former colleague here at the LSE's media and communication department, was one great theorist of this tendency. His early work, Why Study The Media [14] showed how more reflection about the news media might encourage the public and the press to support more thoughtful journalism and how that would, in turn, encourage a more thoughtful public discourse. In his last work Media and Morality: On The Rise Of The Mediapolis [15] he wrote in quite a visionary [16] vein about how complex threats like global warming and international conflict can only be countered by a greater mutual understanding mediated to a large degree by global journalism.

### **The route to diversity**

But this can only be achieved with more editorial diversity and media literacy among journalists themselves. As the outgoing British prime minister pointed out in his speech [17] on 12 June 2007 at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism [18], there are increasing commercial, technological and political pressures that make reflective and original journalism harder. I describe it as a problem of a lack of editorial diversity. In the newsroom context this can be reinforced by media cultures which tend to reward efficiency and conformity rather than innovation and reflection. In the wider political culture there is a similar unthinking coziness. How many of the OneWorld media awards [19] for 2007 went to journalists who had actually challenged the liberal consensus on aid and development, for example? This is not a simple

ideological issue. If the consensus was rightwing then it would be equally important to look for political alternatives to that.

The concern expressed here seems to be shared by the authors of the BBC Trust report on impartiality. Richard Tait [20], one of the twelve BBC trustees and a member of the steering group which guided the project, said on its release [21]: "New technologies and changes in society have given rise to a spread of opinion which goes way beyond the traditional divide of left versus right...to safeguard impartiality in the 21st century, the BBC must strive to provide the full breadth of views in all their complexities so that a complete picture is offered to audiences to make up their own minds."

There are always examples of great journalism at any time. I happen to believe that there is as much good informational journalism around as ever before. But the pressures are driving the commercial mass media towards formula. And this is occurring precisely at the time when new technology should give us the opportunity for a more sophisticated journalism. This is not just about journalistic bias, prejudice or ignorance. The great journalist - and Jon Snow [22] is an example - tries to break out of that by looking the other way, by running in the opposite direction to the herd. But that becomes much harder when the general circumstances or trends in terms of resources are tightening.

One set of solutions to this is offered by new technology and the opportunities afforded by a more "networked journalism" of the kind advocated by the BuzzMachine blogger Jeff Jarvis [23]. By this I do not mean that online journalism is innately virtuous. It can be as good or as bad as any other kind.

Joe Trippi [24], the internet campaign manager for various Democrat presidential candidates in the United States, including Howard Dean and John Edwards, recently told me that:

"New Media opens up the possibility of 'an army of Davids creating bottom-up internet politics to take on the Goliaths. The choice for the politicians is not to fight the Davids but to try and provide them with the right slings'."

It is the same for the media. Instead of fighting off bloggers [25] and posters and online journalism [26] they must embrace the new footsoldiers in the army of information reporters, analysts and commentators. No-one is talking about surrendering to the supposed wisdom of crowds. But all that variety and volume of information and opinion from around the world and around the corner offers a chance to challenge formula.

By allowing journalists to interact with other sources of information and by allowing the audience to critique and contribute surely we now all have a chance for a more insightful, more relevant and more sophisticated news media? And surely the opportunities are the greatest where physical distance is the furthest? Take the case of Zimbabwe [26] - where email and the internet have allowed journalists within the country, who are subject to repression and censorship, to broadcast their analysis and information beyond Mugabe's pale [27]. And where the complexity of the story is greatest, surely new media with its ability to link and to source and to refer can provide a more attenuated, more informed and more intelligent rendition of the situation? Instead of endless headlines about icecaps melting and capital cities drowning, the internet allows a multilayered reportage of climate change, from the scientific data [28] to the implications for each family's household.

But can you trust the bloggers and the wiki websites? What authority do they have? And don't a million voices all talking about something as complex as climate change simply guarantee

confusion? Well, that is exactly the challenge for the new networked journalism: "sort it". Journalists must continue to be the filters, but they can never rely on formula again.

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**Links:**

[1] <http://www.channel4.com/news/>

[2] [http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press\\_releases/2007/impartiality.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press_releases/2007/impartiality.html)

[3] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/research/impartiality.html>

[4] [http://www.channel4.com/news/ontv/unreported\\_world/](http://www.channel4.com/news/ontv/unreported_world/)

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[6] <http://www.lse.ac.uk/polis>

[7] <http://www.charliebeckett.org/>

[8] <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/pressAndInformationOffice/newsAndEvents/archives/2007/POLISMarch07Conference.htm>

[9] <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/pressAndInformationOffice/newsAndEvents/archives/2007/POLISMarch07Conference.htm>

[10] <http://www.live8live.com/datareport/>

[11] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/thelive8event/>

[12] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/6720291.stm>

[13] <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/media@lse/whosWho/rogerSilverstone.htm>

[14] <http://www.sagepub.com/booksProdDesc.nav?contribId=505212&prodId=Book209833>

[15] <http://www.polity.co.uk/book.asp?ref=9780745635040>

[16] <http://news.independent.co.uk/people/obituaries/article1186985.ece>

[17] <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page11923.asp>

[18] <http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/>

[19] <http://uk.oneworld.net/external/>

?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.owbt.org%2Fpages%2FAwards%2FAwards2007%2FAwards2007\_winners.f

[20] [http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/en/school/156/87.html?staff\\_id=1&n=Richard%20Tait](http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/en/school/156/87.html?staff_id=1&n=Richard%20Tait)

[21] [http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press\\_releases/2007/impartiality.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press_releases/2007/impartiality.html)

[22] <http://www.channel4.com/news/authors/jon+snow/106040>

[23] <http://www.buzzmachine.com/about-me/>

[24] [http://joetrippi.com/?page\\_id=1374](http://joetrippi.com/?page_id=1374)

[25] <http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/about/>

[26] <http://www.ojr.org/>

[27] <http://www.zimonline.co.za/default.aspx>

[28] <http://www.realclimate.org/>



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