

Viewing the World

A study of
British television coverage
of developing countries

Summary

Executive Summary

In a multi-media age television is the foremost provider of information about international affairs to the British public. Repeated surveys confirm this¹. And in this globally integrated age, television's role in shaping people's understanding of the world takes on a greater significance than ever.

So what kinds of images and ideas from around the world are British viewers being offered? What impact are they having on the viewers? And how do television decision-makers approach the global content on their channels?

This research project addresses these questions, in three distinct studies, focusing on programming about the developing world. The **content study** analysed news and feature programme output over a three-month period. The **audience study** looked at viewers' responses to this programming. And the **production study** examined the broadcasters' approach to their international output.

The content study found a marked imbalance in the way developing countries are portrayed, especially on news where coverage was generally limited to disasters, bizarre events, or visits by prominent westerners.

The audience study found that television was a strong source of beliefs and impressions about the developing world. Viewers generally perceived the developing world in a negative way, blaming this on television images. This study identified a serious problem with audience understanding of development issues, especially on news programmes.

The production study pointed to a dilemma. Television policy-makers all recognise the importance of television's role in informing people about the world. But most doubt that viewers want to watch programmes about the developing world, so this output has come to be regarded as a ratings risk.

Together, the studies highlight existing problems, but also point to new approaches that could be taken with television's global coverage. The research points to programme formats and genres that have both attracted and informed their audiences, which should be placed more prominently in the TV schedules. It points to the need for continued work on making global issues comprehensible to viewers. And it reveals the concern of television programme-makers and policy-makers that the portrayal of the wider world should be turned into compelling viewing.

¹Harris 1989, RSGB 1993, MORI 1997, ONS 1999



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Introduction to the Three-Part Study

Definitions

The terms 'developing world' and 'developing countries' appear extensively in this document. They are used to cover the low-income countries of the world, as defined by the World Bank according to Gross National Product and per capita income.

In the audience and content studies, the Glasgow Media Group defined the developing world as all those countries outside of Europe, North America, Japan, Australia and New Zealand and the countries of Eastern Europe formerly within the Soviet ambit. These are listed at the end of the full audience study report.

In the production study, participants generally assumed the term also included the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Purpose of the study

This research project was commissioned by the Department for International Development (DFID) in order to examine the role of television in public understanding of international affairs.

With its concern to raise public awareness of development, the Department acknowledges the huge influence exerted by the media on our knowledge and attitudes. The influence of television in particular was confirmed by a recent national survey which showed that over 80% of the British public were informed about developing countries by television, far more than by the print media, radio or any other source (ONS Omnibus Survey, July 1999).

In 1998 DFID decided to work with the major British television companies on a research project designed to review attitudes to international coverage within the television industry, analyse current coverage, and test audience attitudes.

Conduct of the study

A steering committee of senior broadcasters was set up for the project, and first met in January 1999. This consisted of representatives from the BBC, ITN, the ITC, Channel 4, Channel 5, and Discovery Channel.

DFID invited the Glasgow Media Group at Glasgow University to conduct the audience research and content analysis, and the Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project (3WE) to carry out the production study reviewing attitudes within the television industry.

Context of the study

The study is a timely undertaking for a number of reasons.

The changing face of television services

With the rapid development of digital, multi-channel technology and media convergence, there is currently widespread uncertainty and debate about the implications of these changes for television programme content. UK television output is still regulated, and still dominated by a handful of channels imbued with public service principles. But as internet, broadband and multi-channel services transform viewing practices into a far more personalised and market-led activity, the question of maintaining programme content quality and diversity will arguably become all the more pressing.

The public service and quality debate

The competitive, commercial climate now dominating the television industry has put pressure on television's traditional public service ideals: to inform and educate as well as to entertain, and to provide breadth and diversity in programming alongside predictable mass audience favourites. The drive to increase audience share has favoured programme genres like game shows, sport and popular drama, but not those such as news, current affairs, education, arts, science and religion which have been the key providers of television's foreign coverage.

The deregulation debate

Television's regulatory framework is currently under review. A white paper due in the Autumn of 2000 is set to redefine the regulation of all the main terrestrial channels. At the moment these channels are all obliged, under their licence or charter terms, to meet certain public service requirements, which include the inclusion of international news and current affairs coverage. But most broadcasters are pushing for more relaxed regulation in order to operate more competitively.

The decline of international programming

In an age of undoubted global integration and interdependence, when most people still look to television to help them make sense of the world, easily accessible foreign coverage is arguably a vital necessity which should not be dismissed as a minority specialism.

Yet quantitative research shows that, apart from news output, there is substantially less international factual programming on British television screens now than there was 10 years ago. And whereas 10 years ago, developing world output concerned human rights, development, environmental, religious and cultural topics, these categories have tended to be replaced by travel and wildlife programmes, which give a more partial view of these countries (*Losing Perspective* report, 3WE, January 2000).

Such considerations raise questions not simply about the quantity of global programmes on British television in the future, but also about the quality of representation of other countries on our screens, the impact of this output on the audience, and the outlook of the television policy-makers who decide what goes out.

This unprecedented three-part study tackles these questions from both 'sides' of the screen, examining the issues from the perspectives of both the broadcasters and the audience.

I. Content study conducted by the Glasgow Media Group

I.1 Television news profiles

The Glasgow University Media Group examined the coverage of the developing world on the major British news channels in the first three months of 1999 (1 January to 31 March), in order to produce data on routine patterns of coverage.

The sample included the three main daily news programmes on both BBC1 (*The One, Six and Nine O'Clock News*) and ITV (*Lunch Time News, Early Evening News and News At Ten*), plus Channel 4 *News*, BBC2's *Newsnight*, and the two main news programmes on Channel 5.

The researchers compiled their account from the computerised commercial sales archives of both the BBC and ITN, searching under the names of 137 developing countries (listed in the Appendix of the full version of the report), as well as conducting searches on stories relating to developing countries, but which may not have been mentioned or filmed in developing countries. The key criteria for inclusion in the sample were whether the news report included material filmed in developing countries or whether the item contained explicit discussion of developing countries.

The analysis had two key dimensions. Firstly, they analysed which countries were covered over this period. And secondly, they noted which issues and types of events were covered.

I.2 Television news case studies

From this analysis of three months' coverage the researchers selected a number of case studies for detailed analysis which were representative of the coverage more generally, and typical examples of the most frequent categories of TV news story about the developing world.

The major categories (with the case study stories indicated in brackets) were:

- Conflict / war / terrorism (Ugandan Tourist Killings)
- Politics (Nigerian elections)
- Disasters / accidents (Colombian earthquake)
- Trade / finance (Banana war)

They also studied in depth some other items which were exceptions to the type of reporting generally found on routine news coverage. These included a *Newsnight* special on education in Tanzania, and BBC and ITN

reports on the long-term effects of, and responses to, Hurricane Mitch in Central America.

The method employed in these detailed content studies is called Thematic Analysis. It consists of a detailed examination of the language and visuals of news reports. The purpose is to examine how key themes emerge in television news reporting and how they are used to structure and develop stories. The researchers break down the news text into separate phrases or sentences, which relate to the range of themes covered in the story. They also give a numerical account of these, which allows some judgements to be made about the dominance of specific themes. For this study they also identified explanatory and contextualising references in order to assess how much the content might assist audiences in understanding development issues. For the purposes of comparison, they also identified 'explanatory accounts' in other areas of news output such as newspapers or web-sites.

I.3 Other television genres

During the same period of time (January to March 1999) the Glasgow University Media Group studied a sample of programmes from other areas of output on the main terrestrial channels:

Children's programmes (notably *Newsround* and *Blue Peter*)

Documentaries, current affairs and news features (including *GMTV, Snapshot, Panorama, South Bank Show* and *Correspondent, Lagos Stories*)

Comic Relief

Comedy (*The Mark Thomas Comedy Product*)

Holiday, travel and adventure (including *Holiday, The Rough Guide, The Travel Show, Wish You Were Here, The Edge of Blue Heaven*)

Wildlife (including *Champions of the Wild, The Really Wild Show, Defenders of the Wild, Champions of Nature*)

Cookery (including *Rick Stein's Seafood Odyssey, Ready Steady Cook, Dishes, The Food and Drink Programme*).

Since the audience study indicated that cookery programmes are an important source of images of the developing world, they also looked at *Ainsley's Big Cook Out*, broadcast in August and September 1999, which covered parts of Latin America.

In addition to this output from the terrestrial channels, the researchers also recorded one week of programmes on **Discovery Channel** (2–9 March 1999),

and examined programmes relating to the developing world that included *Great Escapes*, *Time Travellers*, *Trailblazers*, and *Walker's World*.

II. Audience study conducted by the Glasgow Media Group

The audience study used focus groups to investigate how media messages about the developing world are received and understood by the public.

The researchers set themselves two key objectives. First, to identify patterns of understanding and belief, and to trace the origin of these in, for example, media output or other sources such as schooling or peer group influence. And second, to examine how television programmes work to compel audience attention, to entertain and to create lasting images.

Twenty-six focus groups were convened (14 in England and 12 in Scotland), each involving six to eight people. The groups were 'naturally occurring' (people who knew each other through work, school, friendships or family connections) in order to preserve elements of the social context within which people actually receive media messages. A total of 165 individuals took part, aged between 10 and 74. The sample was 56% female and 44% male. They included groups of 10 year-olds, 15 year-olds, low income, middle class, ethnic minority and retired people. 87% of the sample watched at least one news programme daily.

Each session lasted between one and two hours and was audio-taped and transcribed. Within each session respondents were required to:

- fill out a general questionnaire
- complete a 'news exercise' or watch video material
- participate in a 'focused discussion'

The questionnaire asked for general biographical details and television consumption patterns.

In each exercise, group members were either shown a story about the developing world to discuss, or invited to construct their own short programme, using photographs from actual news, wildlife, holiday and travel programmes. The images were selected to represent major themes in these areas of programming, and to highlight key issues which were later pursued in discussion. The researchers then examined how the group members interpreted the stories, and the sources of information which they used to construct their own items.

Five separate exercises were developed, with five or six groups allotted to each one (Fig.1).

Each exercise was chosen to highlight different parts of the developing world, specifically China, Africa, Latin America and Asia. The fifth exercise was devoted to *Comic Relief*, as this was identified as potentially a key source of popular imagery in this area. *Comic Relief* and *Shanghai Vice* were also chosen for their innovative content, so that researchers could examine audience response to this.

Following the exercise, each group took part in a focused discussion. Questions were put to all of the groups, including:

- What does 'development' mean? What comes to mind when people hear the words 'developing world' or 'third world'?
- Do the groups distinguish between disasters in the 'first world' and disasters in the 'third world'?
- What difference do presenters make?
- Do viewers remember any appeals? If so, which? Which programme formats/genres and approaches compel attention and entertain?

One group of 10 year-olds was also interviewed to explore issues in children's television.

Fig.1: List of groups and exercises carried out

Africa Ugandan tourist killings	Caribbean Holiday/Dominican Republic	Latin America/Asia Adventure holiday/natural history	Comic Relief	China Shanghai Vice/student demonstration
(5 Groups)	(5 Groups)	(5 Groups)	(5 Groups)	(6 Groups)
				10 year-olds
15 year-olds	15 year-olds	15 year-olds	15 year-olds	15 year-olds
Low income	Low income	Low income	Low income	Low income
Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class
Ethnic Minority	Ethnic Minority	Ethnic Minority	Ethnic Minority	Ethnic Minority
Retired	Retired	Retired	Retired	Retired

III. Production study conducted by 3WE

The purpose of this study was to conduct interviews with key decision-makers within the British television industry in order to understand the industry perspective on television coverage of the developing world.

The study selected 38 interviewees from the five British terrestrial channels (BBC1, BBC2, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5) and from four satellite/cable channels (Sky One, Sky News, Discovery, National Geographic). A full list of participants is given at the end of this chapter.

The interviewees were drawn from across the television hierarchy, from programme-makers to directors of programmes. The majority were in the upper commissioning levels, since these have the most influence on programme output. The programme-makers worked in news, current affairs, documentaries and features programmes, the areas most likely to cover the developing world. For collation purposes the interviewees were broadly divided between policy-makers/commissioning editors on the one hand, and programme-makers on the other (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Levels of 'decision-makers' as classified in the study	
Policy-makers	LEVEL 1
	Director of programmes or channel controller
	LEVEL 2
	Department heads or commissioning editors
	Schedulers
Programme-makers	LEVEL 3
	Programme editors or executive producers
	LEVEL 4
	Correspondents and producers

Interviews generally lasted for about an hour, and they were all audio-recorded. They were based on a questionnaire that pursued the following areas:

- The nature of their output about the developing countries: broad questions including the quantity and positioning of programmes in the schedules.
- Detailed examination of their criteria used in pursuing programmes or news items on the developing world – and the rationale behind the relevant criteria.
- Features associated with successful output on the developing world (such as style, scheduling, content, size of budgets).
- Representation issues: interviewees' perception of the accuracy and fairness with which their programmes depict the developing world, and problems relating to this.
- Personal programme preferences and opinions, including beliefs about television's role to inform and the protection of public service ideals.

The interviews took place between March and July 1999, which happened to be a time of considerable public debate about television regulation and public service obligations², as well as an exceptional time for television's foreign news staff covering the NATO offensive on Kosovo.

In addition to the 38 broadcasters interviewed, the survey included interviews with two directors of programme sales and three advertising directors, in order to gain perspectives on the broader commercial context within which the broadcasters operate.

²The BBC licence was under independent review. The BBC was also seeking a new Director-General, which led to much speculation about its future. And the ITC was putting pressure on ITV to continue to meet its news and current affairs obligations as it dropped News at Ten and rescheduled its evening news programmes.

Fig. 3: List of participants in the 3WE production study

Policy-Makers/Commissioning Editors (25)

All programmes

Alan Yentob, Director of Television, BBC
 Peter Salmon, Controller, BBC1
 Jane Root, Controller, BBC2
 Adam MacDonald, Head of Scheduling, BBC TV
 Bill Hilary, Head of Independent Commissioning Group, BBC TV
 David Liddiment, Director of Programmes, ITV Network
 David Bergg, Director of Planning and Strategy, ITV Network
 Peter McHugh, Director of Programmes, GMTV
 Tim Gardam, Director of Programmes, Channel 4
 Rosemary Newell, Head of Programme Planning and Strategy, Channel 4

News

Richard Ayre, Deputy Chief Executive, BBC News
 Vin Ray, Executive Editor Newsgathering, BBC TV
 Steve Anderson, Controller, News, Current Affairs and Religion, ITV Network
 Nigel Dacre, Editor of ITN News on ITV (and Executive Producer of *Tonight*)
 David Lloyd, Head of News, Current Affairs & Business, Channel 4
 Chris Shaw, Controller News, Current Affairs and Documentaries, Channel 5
 Nick Pollard, Head of Sky News

Features and documentaries

Anne Morrison, Head of Features and Events, BBC
 Jeremy Gibson, Head of Features, BBC Bristol
 Joanna Clinton Davis, Factual Commissioning Editor, BBC TV
 Grant Mansfield, Controller Documentaries and Features ITV Network
 Peter Dale, Commissioning Editor, Documentaries, Channel 4

Nick Comer-Calder, Senior VP and General Manager, Discovery Europe
 Giselle Burnett, Head of Programmes, National Geographic
 Mo Joseph, Controller of Editorial and Factual Programmes, Sky One

Programme-Makers(13)

News

George Alagiah, BBC TV News
 Al Anstey, Acting Head of Foreign News, ITN
 Robert Moore, Head Foreign Affairs Correspondent, ITN

Features and documentaries

Jannine Waddell, Editor, *Holiday*, BBC TV
 Alex Holmes, Editor, *Modern Times*, BBC TV
 Ian Stuttard, Producer, Documentaries and History, BBC
 Jacqui Stephenson, Producer, *Holiday*, BBC
 Steve Hewlett, Director of Programmes, Carlton TV
 Charles Tremayne, Controller of Factual Programmes, Granada TV
 David Boardman, Researcher/ Producer, ITV
 George Carey, Director of Programmes, Mentorn
 Barraclough Carey
 Ali Rashid, Real Life TV
 Andre Singer, Café Productions

Programme Distributors

Jane Balfour, Jane Balfour Films
 Paul Sowerbutts, Director of Programmes, ITEL

Advertising/Advertising Sales Directors

Bjarne Thelin, Planning Director, Carlton UK Sales
 Tony Hopewell Smith, Head of Audience Research, Carlton UK Sales
 Graham Hinton, Chairman, Bates UK



Research Findings

I. Content study by the Glasgow Media Group

I.1 Television News Profiles

Of the 137 developing countries defined, there was no coverage of 65 of them. Of the 72 countries that were mentioned, 16 were covered only in the context of reporting visits from westerners, wildlife events, sport or bizarre/quixotic stories (such as a round-the-world balloon travelling over them).

The main categories of story were:

- Conflict/war/terrorism
- Sport
- Western visitors to developing countries
- Politics
- Natural disasters or accidents

These accounted for more than 80% of coverage on both BBC and ITN (ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5) news programmes.

The countries which received the most coverage in the period were either those in which long-running stories occurred during the period of our sample (civil war in Sierra Leone, tourist killings in Uganda, earthquake in Colombia, British hostages in the Yemen, and the bombing of Iraq) or were countries in which British television companies have a significant journalistic presence (South Africa, India and Israel were among the countries featured the most in this sample). Overall the structure of attention of British television news is skewed towards the richer and more economically powerful countries. For instance in Asia, coverage focused on the south-east Asian 'tiger economies' rather than the poorer nations like Bangladesh, Vietnam, Laos, Mongolia, Bhutan and Nepal. Most of the poorest and least developed African countries in the Sahel and across central sub-Saharan Africa were not mentioned. The exceptions to this related most noticeably to political conflict and natural disasters.

Channel 4 News carried many more stories on the developing world than other programmes. *Channel 4 News* and *Newsnight* were also much more likely to cover stories outside the limited and negative coverage of disaster, conflict and western visitors. *Newsnight* had a specially high proportion of political coverage. Some news programmes did make an effort to produce longer and more contextual special reports giving the background necessary for understanding, and

sometimes providing positive stories, including *Newsnight*, *News at Ten* and the *Nine O'Clock News*.

However, most of the news was concerned with recent events and tended to be limited to reporting visible activities. About 80% of Channel 5's news coverage featured conflict, disasters, western visitors and the bizarre. ITN's lunch-time news was only marginally different, with over 75% of its coverage on the same topics. The high level of sport on Channel 5 was also noteworthy in the context of its generally minimal level of coverage of the developing world.

BBC news tended to include less populist coverage than the mainstream ITN bulletins. *The One O'Clock News* did however broadcast twice as many disaster stories as the other BBC news programmes, but did not provide contextual reporting of the aftermath of the events (in contrast to *The Nine O'Clock News*), in the period of this sample.

I.2 Television News Case Studies

Banana War

The main focus of the coverage was on potential consequences of the dispute, with most emphasis placed on possible effects on British and European industry, and the potential for damage to relations between the two western (United States and European) trading blocks. The potential for devastation of the economy of several Caribbean countries was a lesser concern.

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) was referred to as the arbiter in the dispute, but there was very little discussion of the history or role of this organisation. Only Sky News referred to the possibility of job losses on both sides of the Atlantic. The power of multinational companies was referred to by Channel 4 and both BBC news channels in relation to the role of the American banana company Chiquita. No link was made between the power of the multinationals and their influence in the WTO.

Following the initial coverage of the dispute in March 1999, the story was not followed up, though a final decision had not been made by the end of that year.

Nigerian Elections

Channel 5 and ITN broadcast only very brief statements on these elections. While BBC1 covered the elections most frequently, BBC2 and Channel 4 provided more in-

depth coverage of competing interests within the country.

BBC1, BBC2 and Channel 4 included interviews with local people, particularly focusing on those groups like the Ijaws and Ibos who feel they have been marginalised and exploited either by successive military governments and/or by the oil companies. Although Nigeria only obtained independence from Britain in 1960, there was only one reference to the legacy of colonialism in the country. *Channel 4 News* referred to the imposition of boundaries which cut across the different cultures and traditions of North and South of the country. While the oil company Shell was linked to conflict in the Delta Region, there was little discussion of the interdependence between Nigeria and the interests of the West.

Killing of tourists in Uganda

The BBC, Sky News and ITN all featured the 'slaughter', 'massacre' and 'horror' of the events.

Most news reports provided little in-depth analysis of the reasons behind the attack or related it to developments in central African politics.

On most channels, explanations subscribed to the idea that adventure travel is by nature precarious and this was a dangerous area. Although some news reports provided explanations of the events and their historical causes, many of the accounts given were very brief and move little beyond traditional accounts of Africa, some of which suggested crude views of 'tribal' behaviour.

Colombian Earthquake

Reports were mostly composed of accounts of destruction which focused on the effects of disaster more than its causes. These descriptions of 'effects' appear more often than any other aspect of the crisis, appearing almost nine times more often than explanation of the situation.

Almost half the coverage was subsumed by scenes of destruction. Other main themes were the rescue effort and public disorder. Little of this was put into any social or economic context. The relationship of coffee to cocaine was not explored. Many farmers planted coffee instead of cocaine in a bid to stamp out the drugs trade, yet there was no discussion of what would happen if the coffee crop had been destroyed.

The focus of television on pictures and extraordinary visual moments which illustrated the crisis, led to a neglect of context and explanation. But if Colombia is to be seen and understood as anything more than a disaster area, then it is important that its people be shown as having a history, politics, economy and everyday life

which both pre- and post-date the visual images of an earthquake.

Education in Tanzania

This individual report by the BBC's *Newsnight* explored the relationship between development, education and debt cancellation in Tanzania. The report included positive images of the educational achievements of an African country. This included reference to the movement towards almost universal primary education under the former president, Nyerere. It also included footage of the first graduation ceremony of Tanzania's open university. The report included interviews with local people, politicians and IMF representatives, and combined clear explanation with a sympathetic account of the difficulties facing local people.

Hurricane Mitch Retrospective

Hurricane Mitch, which hit Central America in October 1998, was one of several environmental disasters to take place in the developing world in the year previous to the study. Unusually for a disaster story, two channels returned to the scene of this disaster to report on progress. The BBC's *Nine O'Clock News* in February 1999 and then ITN in March 1999 reported on the progress made by the government and people of Honduras in recovering from the devastation caused by the hurricane.

Both channels included images of children returning to school for the first time in the months since the hurricane. They also ran interviews with government ministers in the country, with local people describing their experiences.

BBC1 broadcast two reports on successive nights. The first of these focused on the necessity of debt cancellation for Honduras to have any prospect of full recovery. This was particularly apt given that the hurricane's devastation of much of Central America had escalated Jubilee 2000's debt campaign.

I.3 Other television genres

Children's television: BBC's *Newsround*, *Blue Peter*, and wildlife programmes

On the BBC's *Newsround*, a total of 21 reports featured issues in developing countries, ranging from wildlife conservation in China and natural disaster in Colombia, to aid and development in Latin America and Africa, and cultural celebrations in Brazil.

The key areas of coverage are significantly different from mainstream national news. Environmental issues predominated, with six reports, four of these on wildlife conservation. There were five reports on

aid/development projects, and four reports on natural disasters. Conflict in Africa and cultural news received proportionately less coverage, with three reports in each case.

Reports on Africa mainly focused on aid and charitable projects organised by western countries. In the language and visuals of some of these items, Africa was shown as a place of poverty, disease and destitution. Other reports on development in Africa encouraged children to participate. A report on the Jubilee 2000 campaign used celebrity links with the appeal to capture the attention of viewers. Rather than representing Africa as simply the passive recipient of western charity, it explained the concept of world debt, and African children were given the opportunity to explain what development means to them.

Other items offered an alternative view of developing countries, focusing on positive topics (festivals and celebrations). By explaining other cultures, they conveyed cultural diversity. *Newsround* has developed a very positive approach to much of its coverage of the developing world. It has combined this with explanations of complex issues, a fact commented on and appreciated by some members of the adult audience groups.

However, coverage of developing countries on children's programmes, excluding the educational slots and *Newsround*, was scarce.

Blue Peter ran the 'New Future Mozambique Appeal' over the period of the sample. This aimed to collect aluminium cans and donate the funds raised to building and equipping a school in Mozambique. The programme was strong on the issue of collection but offered less in terms of understanding the nature of the country or its people. This point was made explicitly in one of the audience study's focus groups by children who had watched *Blue Peter*.

From the general sample outside *Blue Peter* and *Newsround*, there were only four programmes which featured developing countries. These were mostly wildlife shows. One of these did, however, explore some preconceptions about Africa amongst children who were visiting an African wildlife park.

Documentaries, current affairs and news features

SOUTH AFRICA

Three programmes in the sample featured South Africa.

For a week in January GMTV broadcast live every day from South Africa, with film inserts. It presented very positive imagery of life for white residents of the country and emphasised the appeal of South Africa as a holiday

destination or relocation site for British viewers. It included two alternative features on township life and on the escalating crime statistics of the country, but it discussed the effect of crime only in relation to white people.

Two documentaries, *Snapshot* and *Panorama: The Search for Cynthia Mtshabe*, focused entirely on township life. White people featured only occasionally, either as aid workers or, in one case, to highlight the continuing contrast between black and white lifestyles in the country. The second of these was later identified in our audience groups as having a powerful impact because of its focus on the struggles of everyday life.

ASIA, AFRICA AND LATIN AMERICA

Coverage here focused on:

- Arts and cultural features in India, Africa and Mexico
- Historical items on China-U.S. relations during the Cold War, Chile under the rule of General Pinochet, the Biafran War in 1968, Vietnam and South Africa in 1990
- Current affairs in Sri Lanka, Guatemala, Brazil, Sierra Leone, and Indonesia
- Features on snake hunting in Malaysia and archaeological finds in Egypt

Three of the four arts programmes focused on artists of Indian origin and their work in post-colonial India. Presented in the first person dialogue of the artists themselves, they were often critical of British imperialism. Cultural encounters were also an important theme. One programme began with the artist exploring his own fears of other cultures and going on to discuss the psychological 'baggage' which we accumulate in our attitudes to other cultures and peoples.

Historical documentaries also offered a radically different perspective of the developing world and its relationship with the industrialised West. These were often critical of Western involvement in the politics of these regions and especially of U.S. foreign policy.

Other reports offered a different perspective of developing countries by focusing on cultural differences and the unusual. BBC's *Correspondent* ran a feature on a two year-old boy thought to be the reincarnation of the former President in the 'mystical island of Sri Lanka.'

BBC's *Lifeline* focused on images of under-development, poverty and disease. It featured the charity War on Want in Brazil, and showed how money raised in the past has been used to make a difference.

The strength of such features is that they combine key source interviewees with clear explanations and strong visual moments.

A short series of films, Channel 4's *Lagos Stories*, gave voice to five Nigerians from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. This short series of films resulted in a portrayal which was distinct from most television programmes in our sample. Each individual was allowed to give a personal account of his/her life and hopes without additional commentary.

Comic Relief

Much of the appeal was generated by the humorous build-up to Red Nose Day. BBC1 featured a series of short programmes embracing cookery, comedy and documentaries, which slowly built momentum towards giving on the day.

Comic Relief's *Great Big Excellent African Adventure* featured television comic celebrities journeying across Africa to collect videotaped messages from the locals. The show highlighted the social and economic hardships which affect the continent and showed how money raised by Comic Relief had been used to support local development projects.

The interplay of extremes is a key ingredient of fundraising. The juxtaposition of humour with pathos, glitz with destitution accentuate the contrasts between the developing and developed world in a way that suggests that imbalances in the world economy, political turbulence and conflict can be rectified through the giving of money. A positive focus on negative issues was a key ingredient in the films reporting on how the money raised in previous years *has made a difference*. Some of the audience groups suggested that they would like regular updates on this.

In presentations on Rwanda, Comic Relief challenged popular images of Africa as a place of 'people at war' and 'warmongers' by focusing on the lives of ordinary people, 'just like you and me'. This became a key theme with 14 references to this. The word 'genocide' was used in the films, but was not explained or contextualised by reference to the historical or political catalysts of the conflict.

The difficulty which faced Comic Relief, along with other news and documentary film-makers, was how to convey both the enormity of the tragedy, and the humanity of the victims, without engendering despair in the audience about the problems of Africa and its future.

The strength of Comic Relief is that it can use comedy and the high profile of its performers to present issues such as the debt crisis to a mainstream mass audience.

The difficulty is that the need to sustain audience attention through humour means that there are limits to how much a complex issue can be explained. An attendant problem is that the need to summarise and provide shorthand explanations might mean that an issue becomes distorted or unclear and that the audience ends up understanding little more than when the programme started. But *Comic Relief: World Debt* did go some way to resolving the explanation problem and it was commented on favourably in our audience groups.

Comedy: The Mark Thomas Comedy Product

This comedy series adopted a mischievous approach to political interviewing. While much of the subject matter concerned domestic issues, the first two programmes focused on the arms industry and its exports to developing countries. The programmes investigated the importing of arms by oppressive regimes, and British legal loopholes in arms export controls. Mark Thomas used a combination of practical jokes and filmed interviews, some involving concealed recordings and assumed identities, to highlight injustices, or seek the truth from political and corporate decision-makers.

Holiday/Travel

This section of the sample formed the largest representation of the developing world on terrestrial television, with all five channels running at least one holiday show, including *Holiday*, *The Travel Show*, *Wish You Were Here*, *Was It Good For You?*, some of which are broadcast through much of the year. The 19 holiday shows and two travel/adventure programmes shown in the sample period covered a total of 33 features from a range of locations in the developing world.

Most holiday programmes covered a number of destinations in each programme, their agenda in this sample largely dominated by an emphasis on bargain-hunting and consumer concerns. Local people were usually only referred to as service providers, or in relation to 'authentic ethnic' entertainment. There was little information given in most holiday shows on the ethics of tourism, in terms of damage caused by tourism to local communities or to the environment. Some later programmes outside our sample did explore these issues (notably *The Travel Show* on BBC2).

Travel and adventure programmes, on the other hand, tended to focus on a single country or city, with a deeper focus on the people and culture of the area. Both BBC's *The Edge of Blue Heaven* and *Rough Guide to Bolivia* showed activities and exchanges with people outside the tourist zones, and the latter programme gave

background information on the history, culture and contemporary politics of the country, with contributions from the Bolivian people themselves.

Wildlife

The programmes provide one-off discussions on a wide range of animals ranging from the foxes of the Kalahari Desert to tigers in Taiwan.

The species most often featured were the primates of Central America, Africa and south-east Asia. These mainly appeared on Channel 5, where they were featured four times compared to once on BBC2. Comparison of primates and humans was a pervasive theme. *Champions of the Wild* remarked that they focused on primates because 'the similarities attract people, it is a good way of getting people to be more concerned about conserving them'.

Conservation was also a key theme in the sample. Eleven of the 15 programmes focused on this. Six of them discussed the threat of habitat destruction where a combination of population pressure and market demand for natural resources have pushed humans and animals to compete for land. Africa was the most frequent focus in our sample. In four of the programmes, wildlife was depicted as being 'endangered' by the political turbulence of the continent.

Cookery

Both holiday and cookery programmes provided viewers with what could be seen as positive images of the developing world, in contrast to the negative images dominating other programme genres. *Rick Stein's Seafood Odyssey* (BBC2) included two journeys to south-east Asia and *Ainsley's Big Cook-out* (BBC2) was shot partly in Latin America. These international cookery series tended to resemble the more informative and thoughtful travel programmes. They were filmed amongst local people, communicating with those connected to the local food industries. The second of the two programmes was effectively a celebration of South American culture, including comments on the history and ecology of the countries featured.

Discovery Channel

During the week of programmes examined on Discovery Channel, there were ten programmes which featured developing countries, most of which could be categorised as travel/adventure series. They varied in terms of style and content, ranging from the picturesque but less informative to the more adventurous and explanatory series. The travelogues covered a single

destination in each programme, in contrast to the two or three countries covered on the terrestrial channels' holiday shows, and they tended to be far less orientated towards consumer angles.

Two documentaries stood out from the rest of the output for the quality of detailed information offered, placing countries in a global context. The first, *Pinochet and Allende*, presented an analysis of the events of the 1973 Chilean coup. The second, *Time Travellers: The Lost City of Zimbabwe*, focused on the damage caused by colonialists over the last century and the reasons they claimed that the city was a Western construction.

II. Audience study by the Glasgow Media Group

II.1. Group Exercises

The results of the five exercises undertaken by the 26 focus groups are as follows:

Images of Africa: Ugandan tourist killings

Groups were given pictures taken from a TV news story (the killing of tourists in Uganda). The stills included a map of Uganda, a newscaster presenting the Uganda story (Edward Stourton), a picture of a safari homestead, a military-style meeting, as well as other images such as animals in the wild and Africans at a border point in grass skirts. On the basis of these photos, each group wrote a TV news story. Some of these paralleled very closely themes in actual news stories, and group members were able to reconstruct both the original story line as well as the style of news reports.

Images of the Caribbean: holidays/hurricanes

The groups were given photographs of the Dominican Republic, taken from a TV news item and a holiday programme. The photographs included images of holiday pursuits such as people relaxing by a pool, hotel complexes, restaurants, children playing and people enjoying water-sports. To these were added photographs of damage caused by the hurricane (flooded homes, collapsed bridges) to see how respondents might use these very different images of the region. In practice, the stories produced by the audience groups highlighted the twin themes of consumption and destruction/devastation which we had shown to be key themes in mainstream TV output.

Images of Latin America and Asia: travel/natural history

For this exercise each group was divided into two sub-groups of three people each. One of these reconstructed

a natural history programme and the other a travel programme, using appropriate photographs from TV programming. The travel/adventure photographs were from Latin America, specifically from the *Rough Guide to Bolivia*, including a map of Bolivia, various landscapes, tourist scenes, local people working in mines, local musical entertainment and night-life. Some groups used the images to make critical points on economic disparities within developing countries, but most groups lacked detailed knowledge.

The photographs for the natural history theme were taken from a programme on the Indian sub continent (*Land of the Tiger*) including images of animals in their natural environment, local village scenes, and people interacting with both domestic and wild animals. The natural history stories constructed by the groups mostly focused on the danger to natural habitats and animals from man.

Comic Relief

Groups were shown sections of the *Comic Relief* programme from 1999. They then discussed the material in relation to possible changes in attitudes or beliefs. We also asked specifically whether the act of donating gave the audience an increased interest in the programme.

Some of the respondents enjoyed the programme, particularly the younger groups. The respondents who watched it most were the 15 year-olds and a group of 26-30 year-olds. These groups had been involved in *Comic Relief* at some level – the children within the school context and the 26-30 year-olds all had given money (via credit cards) on the night the show was on.

The features which held attention and entertained people differed between age groups. Those who did not watch stated that they did not like the telethon format, it was ‘too long’, and more specifically, they did not accept the programme’s way of attempting to make them give money. Some respondents said that they disliked being made to feel guilty (which they believed this type of programme did) and being pressurised to give money. Others said that they could not watch because it made them feel too sad.

Presenters were seen as an important element of the *Comic Relief* programme. Some were seen as being successful in the role while others seemed less credible. The groups were clear that the most successful presenters were those perceived to be taking the causes they were highlighting seriously.

Images of China: Shanghai Vice and student demonstrations

This exercise involved showing each group three separate pieces of video offering very different images. The first was a news item showing the student demonstrations following the bombing of the Chinese Embassy by NATO. The second was from *Shanghai Vice* and showed a group of Chinese people ballroom dancing and singing western songs. The third extract was also from *Shanghai Vice* and showed the impact of an earthquake on a local community.

The 15 year-old group had no interest in the programmes and claimed that they would not watch this type of programme on television. They had little comprehension of China at any level. Having been shown a section of film reporting on rioting they could not give any clear explanations as to why it was happening. The ten year-olds were, however, very interested in the references to drugs in China. There were differences between those respondents who saw China as a ‘poor’ country and those who viewed it as being highly industrial. The ten year-olds saw it as a ‘rich’ country because that was where their toys came from. It was easier for the respondents to discuss China in relation to fictional programmes or films they had seen (rather than factual news or documentaries).

The Chinese group of respondents differed sharply in their opinions on this area. They thought that many of the images shown of China were perhaps dated, and they did not consider British television images of the country to be conducive to understanding. This latter view was perhaps reinforced by the fact that none of the other groups in this section could discuss China, its problems or potential solutions to them. The Chinese group did, however, have a very high opinion of *Shanghai Vice* because of its representation of ‘everyday life’. This programme had also appealed to some participants in other groups who had been surprised and interested by its content.

II.2 Group Discussions

Images of the developing world

The developing world was perceived very negatively in almost all of the groups. In the initial stages of the discussion, group members were asked ‘What comes to mind when you hear the words *developing world*?’ Their replies focused largely on poverty, natural disasters and war, with a strong emphasis on the problems of Africa. Other negative views expressed included familiar images of corrupt governments and the opinion that nothing ever changes in such countries.

Most people said that their impressions came from the media (though school children said libraries and school were more relevant to them). In some groups there was criticism of what was seen as the constant flow of negative images from television.

A small number of people had been in developing world countries either on holiday, to live or work for extended periods of time. There were variations in the attitudes of those who had experienced different cultures first hand. Those who had been on holiday (independent holidays as opposed to a package holiday) had a desire to 'experience' different cultures and had watched relevant programmes and read about the countries they were planning to visit. Only those respondents with an active interest in international development could spontaneously discuss issues around world economies, debt and both international and ecological/environmental politics.

Lack of explanation and the 'half way through' problem

Television and other media were a strong source of beliefs and impressions about the developing world.

But it was also clear that there was a very low level of understanding in this area. It is very significant that group members themselves realised this and frequently commented upon it. Television in general was not seen as offering enough insights into the outside world. While described as a 'window on the world' there was agreement within most of the groups that in-depth contextualisation of situations did not really exist.

Respondents said that television coverage enhanced notions which they held about certain problems being 'too far away' to be concerned about. Another criticism was that the focus by the media on disasters in the developing world lead to a constant flow of images in which one catastrophe followed another, but without any sense of what had happened before or after each one. There was a desire to have stories followed up.

The strength of television news was its immediacy but its weakness could be that it is superficial. A number of respondents referred to the usefulness of the children's programme *Newsround* as a way of getting simple background information on issues. This programme was seen as offering the viewer an explanation that did not assume background knowledge of an issue. The '5 points' bullet system of *Channel 5 News* was also commented on favourably.

There was much discussion in the groups about why television news offered very limited explanations about events in the developing world. The short length of some

bulletins was pointed to as a possible issue and these were compared with the longer and more in-depth coverage of programmes such as *Channel 4 News* and *Newsnight*. These programmes are however shown at relatively marginal times in the television schedule and only a minority of people watched them.

Some in the groups commented on the strong focus in news programmes on stories from Britain and America, which lead to viewers not getting a 'proper' look at the world. Some of the groups also identified a key issue in the organisation of television journalism, which might be termed the 'half-way through problem'. This is that when journalists cover a long- running story, they tend to assume that their audience has watched the full sequence of reports, and that background issues mentioned in earlier reports need not be repeated. But in practice audiences come into stories at different points in the sequence, and may not have the full picture.

Questions were also raised in the group discussions about the understanding of major institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank which are frequently referred to in news bulletins. We found that there was almost no knowledge at all about what these institutions were or how they operated.

Debt Relief

In the initial groups none of the respondents knew anything about the campaign to cancel debt in developing countries, and claimed to have seen nothing about it on television. In later groups this changed as a number of programmes and news items appeared which could then be discussed.

The general attitude of all the respondents was that they did not understand what the issue was about, but they agreed that writing off debt was a good idea if particular conditions were attached. For instance, debts could only be cancelled once, and the institutions controlling loans would have to ensure that certain countries would not fall into extreme debt again.

There was very little discussion about the underlying causes of the debt problem, indicating a lack of knowledge of the issues involved and of the basis of international economics.

It was also felt in the groups that there needed to be more media discussion of the implications of writing off debt. This raises important questions about how television presents the current debate on debt relief. For example, on BBC 1 recently it was reported that 'cancelling the debt will cost British taxpayers £640 million over 20 years'. (BBC1, 1800, 21/12/99). To a great many people with little knowledge of how the national

economy or international finance works this may sound like a significant personal cost. But another way of expressing the same amount might have been that it will cost each person in Britain around 50 pence per year for the next 20 years: not actually a great deal of money when spread over a long time period.

Documentaries

The majority of respondents believed that documentaries could be both informative and interesting but there were not many of them. Dislike of documentaries centred on how 'dry' or 'boring' their presentation was and discussion centred on how formats could be altered to make programmes more watchable. Some suggestions were offered such as mixing political situations with the reality of that situation for 'ordinary' people.

Holiday/Travel, Wildlife and Cookery

Respondents commented that mainstream **holiday** programmes focused on holiday complexes and safaris, selling a 'sanitised' version of reality where you could actually be almost anywhere in the world. Some respondents found greater appeal in **travel** programmes, which were perceived as offering a more realistic notion of what countries were like. These types of programmes were seen to be informative because they offered insights into both the cultural and political backgrounds to countries visited.

Wildlife programmes were seen as offering a positive image of the developing world. Most respondents liked wildlife programmes, and there was a positive response to programmes like *Land of the Tiger*, which showed how animals and humans impact on another, and which featured local human communities. They liked the fact that animals could be seen in their natural habitats, and that these programmes, more than any other programme type, showed the effects of environmental damage or the impact of the destruction of species. Some respondents became involved emotionally with the animals and concerned for their welfare. A number of them gave money regularly to animal charities, a few stating that they would give money to animal charities before human ones. Wildlife programmes were seen by some as an important vehicle for ensuring that animals were being protected.

Cookery programmes seemed to bring out the most positive responses about the developing world. Respondents who watched these particularly liked to see food of different cultures. Some suggested that this was probably the only time they saw 'good' images,

presenting these countries in a positive light. They also felt that this genre could be used to offer more information on cultural or political aspects of a country. It was also mentioned that this genre was the 'only one' apart from holiday/travel programmes which covers regions like the Caribbean or Latin America.

Variations between groups

The purpose of the group work was to examine processes of interpretation and understanding in television audiences. The sample size was not large enough to make quantitative generalisations. However, there were some variations in the responses of the groups which it is useful to note.

AGE VARIATIONS

The 15 year-olds were, with few exceptions, not interested in the developing world. Their negative responses seemed to be influenced by their forced participation in charity events about which they had little understanding. They did not typically watch news or documentary programming on developing countries, other than wildlife. They were however attracted to comedy programmes and specifically to *Comic Relief*.

The 10 year-olds showed more interest, and used *Blue Peter* as a source of information. Some wanted more information on countries which were featured, particularly in areas with which they could identify.

Amongst the other groups there were relatively low levels of interest in development issues, with the exception of a middle class group aged 20–30 years and the ethnic minority groups. In all of the groups, perceptions of the developing world drawn from the media were predominantly negative. Individual exceptions occurred where people had direct experience of specific countries.

INCOME VARIATIONS

There were some differences between groups on the basis of income levels. Respondents in all the lower income groups had a problem with charitable giving to the developing world. It was commonly stated amongst these groups that they were being made to feel 'guilty' in order to give money. They argued that they did not have much to give, and it would be more appropriate to collect money to sort out problems in Britain itself before helping the rest of the world. This is not to say that these respondents did not give to charity, but they did see problems with the way organisations attempted to compel their attention and concern.

In most of the groups the lack of understanding and inability to discuss a particular country or perceived problem in detail meant that they could only discuss the developing world in relation to whether they could or should give aid and what offering help meant to them.

GEOGRAPHICAL VARIATIONS

The groups were carried out in Glasgow, London and Bath. There were small north/south differences in attitudes, particularly in relation to the role of government in relation to dealing with the developing world. In Scotland there was more criticism of governments being responsible for world problems. This reflects existing knowledge of differences in political belief between the north and south.

ETHNIC VARIATIONS

Ethnic minority groups were the only ones, apart from the 15 year-olds, who discussed issues of racism in television programmes. While other groups said that the news, for example, highlighted negative images of countries, the groups containing ethnic minorities claimed that this was because of innate racism.

There was a good deal of discussion about whether there could be positive programming about development which gave context to particular issues. From the respondents point of view the major problem was that programmes were always going to be made from a 'western' point of view. This particularly applied to coverage of political unrest. Respondents in these groups said that when they saw or heard something about their own country of origin, they immediately thought, 'what's really going on, we're not getting the real picture here' (Afro-Caribbean, London) and would go in search of alternative sources of information to 'fill in the gaps'. These groups clearly wanted the television audience to be told why things were happening and to be given more detailed and 'honest' explanations.

Suggested improvements to coverage

There was much discussion in the groups about how television coverage of development issues might be improved both in terms of making it more interesting as well as more informative.

Suggestions included:

- The populations of the developing world should be seen to have a more active role in stories. They should speak more (preferably in English) and should be seen to be actively helping themselves. Some group members who had already seen stories on these lines gave a very positive response to them.

- While the 'exotic' and 'strange' could obviously attract attention, the everyday lives of people in the developing world should also be shown. The 10 year-olds in our sample wanted to know what a school playground was like in Africa, while adults were interested in how parents dealt with problems such as drugs.
- The follow-up of stories, to show what happens after disaster stories. This might include the process of rebuilding and reconstruction. In the absence of such coverage people were left with a view of the developing world as not much more than a series of catastrophes. As one group member put it, the sense of it happening so often, without any follow-up, leads to viewers being desensitised.

It seemed clear that to produce lasting images which 'worked' with viewers, the issues needed to be clearly understood, and viewers needed to be able to identify with subjects. If viewers can identify with people in the developing world in their ordinary everyday lives, it may be easier to relate to them in times of disaster, when they are more usually featured. But identification is not enough without context and explanation. If the problems of the developing world are seen as having political and economic causes, then it can be understood that new policies and new approaches may improve the situation. But without such understanding, the developing world is likely to be seen as a suitable area for our sympathy but still a hopeless and inexplicable mess.

III. Production study by 3WE

III.1 General trends

The consensus of opinion among the participating 'decision-makers' indicated that the following assumptions prevail within the television industry. (For a breakdown of opinions, see **Fig. 4.** on page 19).

Mainstream television is the right medium for developing world coverage

The consensus was that television is still the appropriate medium for informing people about the developing world. And most felt that the popular terrestrial channels as well as the specialist niche channels should be doing this. The great majority of policy-makers interviewed, most of them from the mainstream channels, claimed to have a place for coverage of the developing world on their channels, even hard, issue-based output.

This outlook could partly be explained by the fact that public service regulations are still widely adhered to. Some of the strongest expressions of this came from the commercial sector:

“We are a public service. ITV is the most regulated of all. Being the most-viewed channel in Britain gives us a responsibility to our audience to reflect and debate the world we live in.”

David Liddiment, ITV

BBC comments included:

“We have an obligation to inform a wide-ranging UK audience, and to bring to people’s notice what many think they don’t care about” Richard Ayre, BBC News

“I have always felt committed to programmes that bring the world to people” Peter Salmon, BBC

Only one of the 25 took a contrasting line:

“We can’t afford to have a public service ideal. We have no particular obligation to cover development. The traditional notions of broadcasting ‘what’s good for you’ have changed”

Chris Shaw, Channel 5

People do not want to watch developing world output

At the same time, a clear majority in this survey also believe the greater part of the viewing public do not actually want to watch output about the developing world. This is largely understood from ratings and audience research. As a result, this area of programming is constantly described as “difficult” and “challenging”.

“Only the very up-market and well-educated audience say ‘We’re really interested in issues in the developing world’. Most people say they like decorating, gardening, or really good drama” Alan Yentob, BBC

“Ratings indicate there is a more limited interest in international programmes” Tim Gardam, Channel 4

Some feel that people have been conditioned to think this way by the television industry itself.

“People don’t know what they want until they see it! Programmes are supply-led not demand-led. Decision-makers in the television industry are drawn from the same small social world, with the same world view. At the very heart of producers and broadcasters is the belief that the general audience is not interested in foreign stories. You could say it’s a failure of the education system.” Ali Rasheed, Real Time

Apart from news programmes, output on the developing world is generally positioned in the margins of the schedules

The apparent lack of audience interest has resulted in what many see as the marginalising of non-news output on the developing world in the schedules. Many on the commissioning side of the fence said that it does not matter where this type of output is placed, its audience will find it.

“The same numbers will watch it wherever it is: they’ll watch it three hours later if it’s moved three hours later”.

David Lloyd, Channel 4

But producers tend to feel that late-night slots hide their programmes from sight, and that even when they go out earlier on Channel 4 and BBC2, they tend to go in the “Saturday night death knell slot” (8 or 9pm), not midweek.

Greater interest can be cultivated

Five of the policy-makers say emphatically that the real issue is to improve the *quality* of this type of programming, not increase the *quantity*.

“Good and innovative programming, not more programming, will engender greater interest” Bill Hilary, BBC

But a large number of both policy-makers and programme-makers believe that more coverage of the developing world could engender greater public interest in the subject area.

“More coverage will create more interest. And if we stop reporting the developing world, people will stop thinking about it.” George Alagiah, BBC News

“It must be interesting, or people will switch off. But interest breeds interest. Just as garden centres have boomed as a result of interest in gardening programmes” Anne Morrison, BBC

Fig. 4 General trends of opinion among television decision-makers

DOES TELEVISION STILL HAVE A ROLE IN INFORMING PEOPLE ABOUT THE DEVELOPING WORLD?

Response from 25 policy-makers and commissioning editors and 13 programme-makers:

Yes	No	Don't know
38	0	0

IF SO, WHERE SHOULD THAT ROLE BE PLAYED OUT: MAINSTREAM POPULAR CHANNELS OR NICHE CHANNELS?

Response from 25 policy-makers and commissioning editors and 13 programme-makers:

Mainstream and niche	Niche only	Should be mainstream, but expect it to move to niche
29	5	4

IS THERE A PLACE ON YOUR CHANNEL/IN YOUR OUTPUT FOR PROGRAMMES MADE IN OR ABOUT THE DEVELOPING WORLD?

Response from 25 policy-makers and commissioning editors:

Yes	Very occasionally	No
23	2	0

IS THERE A PLACE FOR HARD DEVELOPMENT ISSUES IN YOUR OUTPUT?

Response from 25 policy-makers and commissioning editors:

Yes	Just possible	No
17	3	5

DO PEOPLE WANT TO WATCH OUTPUT ON THE DEVELOPING WORLD?

Response from 25 policy-makers and commissioning editors, and 13 programme-makers:

Yes	No/probably not
10	28

HOW IS THIS OUTPUT GENERALLY POSITIONED IN THE SCHEDULES?

Response from 23 policy-makers and commissioning editors, and 12 programme-makers:

Prominently	Marginally	Both
9 [mostly news and Channel 4 staff]	15	11

WOULD MORE PROGRAMMING ABOUT THE DEVELOPING WORLD ENGENDER MORE PUBLIC INTEREST IN THESE PROGRAMMES?

Response from 24 policy-makers and commissioning editors, and 13 programme-makers:

Yes	Possibly	No	Don't know
17 [if done well]	10	5	5

DO YOU THINK THERE ARE MORE PROGRAMMES/ITEMS ON THE DEVELOPING WORLD IN YOUR OUTPUT NOW THAN 10 YEARS AGO?

Response from 26 policy-makers and commissioning editors, and 13 programme-makers:

More now	Fewer now	The same amount	Don't know
10	12	11	6

IS YOUR CHANNEL/COMPANY LIKELY TO INCREASE OR DECREASE COVERAGE OF THE DEVELOPING WORLD IN THE NEXT 5-10 YEARS?

Response from 23 policy-makers and commissioning editors, and 11 programme-makers:

Increase	Decrease	Same amount	Don't know
9	7	14	4

REGULATION: HOW LONG WILL THE ITC AND BBC CHARTER CONTINUE TO PROTECT THIS TYPE OF PROGRAMME AREA?

Response from 20 policy-makers and commissioning editors, and 11 programme-makers:

Indefinitely	Gradual erosion	ITC 5-10 years, BBC longer	Don't know
16	1	5	9

III.2 Editorial Criteria

Criteria given by policy-makers

The main criteria by which directors of programmes, commissioning editors and department heads judged programme proposals concerning the developing world are as follows. Programmes must be able to:

- Draw an audience
- Meet corporate policy/ the channel remit
- Follow standard editorial values used for all types of programming
- Use current (if not trend-setting) styles and formats
- Draw good press coverage/reviews/peer feedback and be noticed
- Be affordable
- Have high quality production values
- Meet regulatory obligation

AUDIENCE INTEREST

By far the major concern of all 25 policy-makers/commissioning editors was audience interest. In the age of multi-choice, all TV channels are competing to hold viewers' attention.

"In the end people watch television for value for time. Broadcasters are competing for their time" Tim Gardam, Channel 4

All 25 referred to Barb ratings and audience research as their main guide to what audiences want, although 12 said that personal experience and instinct were just as important, if not more so. If high ratings are not achieved, a programme needs at least to make its mark by being widely 'noticed' and well-reviewed. For ITV in particular, ratings are a pressing concern.

"We are less able to ignore the commercial imperative than ever before, although we're not running an audience delivery service for advertisers. Our job is to provide a service for viewers that serves the advertisers at the same time"

David Liddiment, ITV

Coverage of the developing world is clearly vulnerable in this climate.

"We backed off international cookery series because it was too expensive for the low amount of interest they were attracting" Anne Morrison, BBC

"If we do well at maintaining our audience scale, that will protect our ability to go with the loss-leader programmes. Without that, developing world output is not absolutely secure" David Liddiment, ITV

However, generally the logic is not that clear cut, and the 'ratings risk' factor means not dropping 'difficult' programmes altogether, but seeing how to make them interest the audience.

"We are ratings led, but it's a cop-out to say that dependency on ratings excludes us from doing Third World stories. People should sit down and think: how do we get more people to watch?" Peter McHugh, GMTV

"On BBC1 the big challenge is: how on earth do you tell stories that reach the lives of millions of people?" Peter Salmon, BBC

And in news, the developing world is not always viewed as a ratings risk.

"People don't distinguish between domestic and foreign news – but between what is interesting and not interesting" Nigel Dacre, ITN

"Our News Review showed that people want foreign news as long as we tell them why a far-away story matters and how it links to them. They want solutions rather than problems. And they like follow-ups on 'old' stories." Vin Ray, BBC

EDITORIAL VALUES

These are of course very much dictated both by the concern to grab the audience and by the particular remit of the channel concerned.

Feature and documentary commissioners referred to the importance of:

- a good, engaging story
- human interest, relating to viewers
- a well-told narrative
- something new, or presented in a new way
- timeliness
- suitability for a particular, available slot in the schedules
- the ability of a producer/director to deliver
- the ability to gain credit for the channel even if not high ratings

"A vision of a programme should contain a new way of seeing life: it must provide some new insight" David Lloyd, Channel 4

"Everything must be surprising, whether it's applying wild comedy to the developing world, or crossing genres like INTO AFRICA" Jane Root, BBC

"Human, personal stories work. Issue-led ideas don't work on ITV" Grant Mansfield, ITV

“We want programmes that leave a stamp of the year on the schedule, with a reason for going out now” Tim Gardam, Channel 4.

The satellite/cable channels stress the need for programmes to be enjoyable, pacy, upbeat, not dealing with problems and gloom. **The main popular channels** stress the importance of big, blockbuster ideas. **News editors** naturally see their role as distinct from that of general programme editors responsible for documentaries and factual features. And yet one can see similarities of approach when they stress:

- the new and the important
- relevance to a UK audience
- same editorial judgements as for any other news story

Programme-makers’ criteria in proposing stories on the developing world.

Many of the criteria supplied by programme-makers echo those listed in the previous section.

But the biggest difference, of course, is that their major concern is to get a commission. This applies in both non-news and news programming.

“My proposals are based on pragmatism. I self-censor because I know what stands a chance of a commission. We have to second-guess the department head and controllers all the time.”
Ian Stuttard, BBC

“You instinctively relate to the requirements of the organisation you’re with - you pick up on what the senior editors want.”
Al Anstey, ITN

The key factors influencing the programme-makers’ choice of programme ideas were:

- Pragmatism: the need to interest the commissioning editor
- A good story
- Audience interest
- Budget
- The reliability and availability of good programme source material
- Regulatory/moral obligation
- Producer passion

Problems with coverage of the developing world on television

The overwhelming perception of most policy-makers and some programme-makers is that TV programmes about the developing world are dull, depressing, unpleasurable and therefore unpopular. The reasons why they are thought to be dull include:

- They are made because the subject is important, not because they make good viewing.
- They are sometimes made to put over a message, and viewers feel preached at.
- They have tended to be based on issues rather than stories, events or characters.
- Approaches have often been old-fashioned, tired and unimaginative.

Other practical reasons given as to why this can be a ‘problem’ area of production include:

- Shortage of airtime, particularly on news programmes, causing problems in covering complex stories and in competing for space with domestic stories.
- The cost of foreign programme making and funding foreign bureaux.
- Shelf-life. Cable and satellite channels in particular avoid topical programmes that will date too quickly and be of less use for repeats and sales.
- Physical distance: problems getting to far-flung places in time, and operating without familiar journalistic networks.

Some interviewees blamed diminishing interest in world affairs on certain global changes, like the end of the Cold War, the weakening of Britain’s colonial ties, and the bewildering speed of globalisation. Others spoke of a natural insularity in the British, extending to journalists and editors, who do not want to know about unfamiliar people’s problems, especially if they cannot do anything about them.

THE PROGRAMME-MAKERS’ PERSPECTIVE

While some of the points above are endorsed by programme-makers, a number of producers view the issues of ‘dull’ programming and viewer insularity very differently.

“Anything can be made to work if enough imagination is used. Debt cancellation could be tricky. But even then, a good film relating debt to village life could work”
George Carey, Mentorn Barraclough Carey

“How can we assume that people are not interested in foreign output? It may be that we haven’t been telling it properly”
George Alagiah, BBC News

For many programme-makers the main deterrents in this area include:

- The creation of a kind of developing world ‘no-go zone’ by commissioning editors.

“Producers do not put forward proposals concerning the developing world because they know the commissioners will turn them down. One commissioning executive said to me “We don’t want programmes about little black people who live far away and don’t speak English’.” Ian Stuttard, BBC

- The structural separation of production from commissioners in television, which exacerbates the ‘no-go zone’ factor. Many programme-makers feel frustrated that commissioning decisions have become ever more centralised at the most senior level, so they cannot negotiate an idea with the person making the final decision. In news the blocks in the commissioning process were identified lower down the hierarchy, where there can be tension between ‘parochial’ programme editors and the correspondents or producers in the field.

Making coverage of the developing world ‘work’

The consensus of opinion was that coverage of the developing world should be a naturally integrated part of mainstream television, and as such it should be judged on the same basis as all other programming. It is not a ‘protected’ area, like news or religious programmes, made simply because it is important, but follows the editorial criteria listed above.

However, certain features were highlighted, by both policy-makers and programme-makers, as being particularly helpful to this type of programming:

- An unpredictable approach: new angles and more upbeat ideas
- Engaging, personalised stories that involve viewers at an identifiable, human level
- Stories that link to British concerns like food prices or travel
- The presence of a celebrity, or well-known reporter, for the viewer to ‘identify with’ in their travels
- Strong promotion of programmes, especially on-air trails

III.3 The representation of the developing world on television

Interviewees were asked whether they considered coverage of the developing world on their channels, in general, presents a fair or an imbalanced picture of these countries to viewers. Is there a tendency to cover only the wars, disasters and problems, and dwell on stereotypical images? Is enough background context given to explain what is going on in these countries?

11 interviewees felt the picture given is **reasonably balanced**

26 interviewees felt the picture is **not balanced**

Of those 26 who thought the picture is unbalanced:

19 thought the picture is **inevitably not fair**

7 thought the picture is **not fair, but they are trying to redress the balance**

Those who thought imbalance was inevitable generally attributed this to universal journalistic values that focus only on the big, negative events in far-away places and prefer to report the local and familiar. This was broadly assumed to be what viewers want and expect: a cultural inevitability and so not a general concern.

A number of practical factors were suggested, especially in news, to conspire further against balance, in particular the brevity of news programmes, the distance for correspondents to travel, budgets, and reliance on international news agencies with a Euro-American agenda.

A couple of interviewees considered how their own outlook comes to be shaped. One notes the paradox that, since television is his main source of information about the developing world, it is hard for him to judge whether the balance on television is right or not! Another points to the fact that the senior policy-makers in television all come from the “same small social world” and share the same world view, which inevitably influences the outlook of the whole industry.

III.4 Commercial considerations

The advertisers

The advertising directors interviewed gave their perspective on the way in which commercial pressures influence television programme output, in particular output on the developing world.

In their view the commercial channels are driven ultimately by the sales agenda of their advertisers, who finance the channels and who demand mass audiences or ‘volume’. They describe the influence of advertisers on television programmes as indirect but powerful. ITV, as the largest commercial channel, is arguably under the greatest pressure of all from advertisers. In recent years the advertisers have criticised ITV for producing a diminishing audience share and have called for increased advertising minutage. The Independent Television Commission regulators (ITC) have turned down this proposal, but the advertisers have kept up pressure on ITV. The ITC provides a sometimes conflicting pressure to protect programming ‘in the public interest’ like news and current affairs, but the commercial pressures predominate.

This makes for an atmosphere in which the principal concern is programmes that draw an audience, and programming risks are avoided. All three interviewees

agreed that programmes about the developing world are not watched in large numbers, so they cannot be placed at peak times in the schedules of commercial channels. These programmes are seen as the preserve of the BBC, Channel 4 and niche channels - unless a way is found of making them more involving and accessible.

The distributors

Two major British programme distributors gave their opinions on programming about the developing world, and the television industry's attitude towards it.

In their view, few programmes about the developing world are now made or wanted by British broadcasters, outside news and current affairs. Broadcasters have marginalised this output, driven single-mindedly by the ratings imperative.

By doing this they believe broadcasters are eliminating audiences for international output. The main channels still have the opportunity to surprise an audience with programmes the viewers may not have realised they would like. Britain is getting increasingly insular and the television industry is not in tune with the international marketplace which wants more global, universal output. This is a potentially strong area for sales.

Niche channels are flourishing but they do not tell the tougher, more difficult stories. They tend to be bland and non-controversial, so they are not filling the void left by the mainstream output.



Key Findings

I. Content study conducted by the Glasgow Media Group

- In news output most developing countries were either not covered, or were mentioned only in the context of visits by westerners, sport, or bizarre/exotic stories.
- Disasters and terrorism were also main categories of news story, but there was little explanation or context given in most news accounts.
- *Channel 4 News* and BBC 2's *Newsnight* gave the most in-depth coverage of issues such as elections and trade in the developing world.
- The most positive and well-explained coverage was on the BBC's children's news programme *Newsround*, and in documentaries.
- Comedy programmes (*Comic Relief* documentaries, *The Mark Thomas Product*) also managed to combine explanation with new formats designed to hold audience attention and interest.
- Holiday programmes were mostly about what tourists could obtain cheaply from the developing world, but travel programmes and some cookery programmes went beyond this to explain local cultures.

II. Audience study conducted by the Glasgow Media Group

- The developing world was perceived very negatively in almost all of the focus groups, and media images (especially news) were cited as the major source of this view.
- More positive images came from cookery and wildlife programmes, and from innovative documentaries.
- There was a serious problem of audience understanding of development issues, especially in relation to news programmes.
- Some programmes on development could engage a strong interest. The commitment of presenters was important. It was also important that viewers understood the issues and identified with the problems and lives of people who were featured.
- Documentaries were seen to offer well-informed accounts, but there were complaints about their accessibility, and requests that they should be more prominently promoted.

- People with direct experience of developing countries (including the ethnic minority groups) were the most critical of media coverage.
- About 25% of the sample had no interest in development issues, while around 10% claimed an active interest. Amongst the rest there were varying levels of interest.
- Young people were apparently put off development issues by forced participation in charitable events at schools. The 15 year-olds showed very low levels of interest. The 10 year-olds were more interested, wanting to know more about the lives of children abroad.
- There were variations between groups of different income levels. Some low income groups thought that charity should begin at home. Middle class groups were more likely to be critical of the poor quality of explanations offered in programming.

III. Production study conducted by 3WE

- All the interviewees said that television still has an important role to play in informing people about the developing world. And almost all believed this role should be played out on the popular, mainstream channels, not just the niche channels. They all claimed to have a place for coverage of the developing world on their own channels.
- However, most (28 out of 38) did not believe viewers *want* to watch programmes about the developing world, an assumption generally based on ratings and the sense that a domestic agenda makes more attractive viewing. This area of programming has therefore come to be regarded as risky and 'difficult', even (though to a lesser extent) in some news areas.
- The majority of interviewees thought that more programmes/items about the developing world could engender greater public interest in this area, if done in the right way.
- The majority of interviewees did not think that the portrayal of the developing world on television is well balanced, but most of these considered that imbalance to be inevitable.
- Most policy-makers and commissioning editors thought that non-news programmes in this area need to be exceptionally arresting, innovative and well-related to the viewers. They looked to the programme-makers for this input, and some

suggested there was a dearth of good programme ideas.

- Most programme-makers identified deterrents to good programming in this area, including: the commissioning structure, the cost of developing ideas abroad, and the reluctance of commissioning editors to consider programmes about the developing world.
- Commercial pressure from advertisers discourages global output. But programme distributors would like to see more of this output, and fear that broadcasters may be eliminating audiences for international programming.



Conclusions

Television plays a crucial part in influencing public understanding of world affairs. This role has become ever more important in a globally interrelated society. But these studies raise doubts as to whether television viewers are being adequately informed about, and engaged in, the world at large. The three separate studies outlined in this summary examine developing world coverage on television from three different angles. But they all indicate that this area of programming demands new attention and debate.

The content study pointed to an imbalance in the portrayal of the developing world. It showed a tendency, especially on news, to focus on a narrow range of countries and stories, with inadequate explanations of events like disasters, war or terrorism. However, programmes like children's news and certain documentaries provided better context and more 'positive' images of the developing world, and some cookery, travel and comedy programmes achieved this too.

The audience study found that the developing world was perceived very negatively in almost all of the focus groups. Media images, especially on news programmes, were seen as the major source of this view. There was a problem of audience understanding development stories on news. Yet 75% of the sample had some sort of interest in the developing world, including 10% who claimed to have an active interest. Many wanted more background information, more positive images of lifestyles in developing countries, and more time given to hearing from the people themselves, who should play a more active role in stories. There seemed to be a strong appetite for seeing the ordinary everyday life of people in these countries, not just the unusual or exotic. The most important keys to engaging audience interest in global programming appeared to be making the issues explicable to viewers, and allowing viewers to identify with the lives of the people featured on the programmes.

The production study found that this area of programming is struggling in the fiercely competitive television marketplace. While all the decision-makers endorsed the idea that television should inform people about the developing world, most of the non-news participants regarded this type of output as a ratings risk and therefore not a priority. Although a majority thought that more coverage of the developing world could in itself engender greater public interest, there was little willingness to put this to the test. In non-news programming there appeared to be a kind of impasse between those on the commissioning side and the programme-makers, the former claiming they are not being offered enough engaging, exciting global ideas, while the latter claim they self-censor and refrain from offering ideas in this area because the commissioners are reluctant to consider them.

It would appear from all three studies that further debate on some of the issues raised would be valuable and timely. Broadcasters still consider this to be an important area of programming. A good proportion of the audience sample claims an interest in looking beyond a domestic agenda. And technological and political changes have made the world ever more accessible to media coverage. But the market pressures are formidable, impacting on programme policy and output as never before. At a time when commercial imperatives threaten to eclipse the public service ethos of television, the question of how television presents the world to its viewers remains a pressing concern.



Recommendations

Recommendations arising from the content and audience studies

1. Broadcasters should continue to **examine closely the issue of audience understanding** and how this relates to the current structure and content of news output. The audience study shows that there is a serious problem relating to viewers' comprehension of news items about the developing world. For news to be informative and to make sense to audiences, broadcasters may need to rethink their approach. They are already aware of this and some changes are being made.
2. Some programme formats have shown that it is possible both to attract audiences and to go beyond the negative and limited images of the developing world which are frequently offered. These include *Comic Relief*, cookery and travel programmes. Broadcasters should **further develop these innovative formats**.
3. There should be **clearly identified strands for global documentary programming with regular and accessible slots in the schedules**. Documentaries were widely judged to be the most informative of all programme formats. But viewers complained that such output is inadequately promoted, and often stumbled upon by chance. Continued marginalisation of documentary programmes on the developing world will have serious consequences for public knowledge and understanding.

Recommendations arising from the production study

1. **A bold gesture of encouragement to producers interested in this area, on the part of senior commissioning editors**. This could, for instance, take the form of creating an experimental strand for films with a global perspective, a showcase for new and arresting approaches. Commissioning editors could also recommend existing slots or strands that could be targeted with global ideas. There could even be a well-publicised cross-channel initiative, in which commissioners from various channels agree to promote a more global agenda. If producers are being called on to be innovative perhaps commissioning editors need to demonstrate support in surprising, new ways too.

2. **Discussion and training seminars for producers specifically designed to interest new talent in this area and encourage some inventive approaches**. These could include: global perspectives and networking, accessing ideas abroad, practicalities of filming in developing countries, questions of narrative interest and production style, and critical analysis of previous global output. These would be geared to documentary and feature producers, but sessions could also be designed for news producers, to encourage inventive approaches to the coverage of development issues.
3. **Research to explore additional indicators to ratings for measuring a programme's worth**. What other ways could be used to measure the value and impact of programming identified as important, watched by a great many, yet not drawing a mass audience? When ratings are the only measure of a programme's value there is reduced potential for the diverse or unpredictable on television screens, and audiences for whole areas of more challenging programming can be eliminated.
4. **The encouragement of interaction between UK media policy-makers and producers, and those from parts of the world beyond Europe and the United States, so that new areas of programme making interest could be identified**. Greater use could perhaps be made of existing forums, such as MIP, the Edinburgh International TV Festival or Newsworld, to expand discussion of programme content in the global age and stimulate fresh approaches to international coverage.
5. **An informal forum for British producers interested in this field to meet**, in response to producers who feel there is little chance to exchange ideas now that few producers are in-house. It would provide an opportunity to network, maintain broader global perspectives and perhaps encourage new production partnerships.
6. **Funding to help with the researching of documentary and feature projects - or of special news features - from developing countries**. This would encourage producers to explore fresh ideas from less-covered parts of the world, and improve the quality of programme ideas. The process would need to be structured so that funds could be accessed either by commissioning editors for

particular projects, or producers whose projects have been 'rubber-stamped' by a commissioning editor, so that funding goes to programmes with a strong chance of being commissioned.

7. **A bursary to enable mainstream British programme-makers to work in the television or film industry of a developing country.**

This would give journalists or producers the opportunity to have first-hand knowledge of a country, experience the media industries of another culture, make contacts and collect programme ideas. It could build up a core of producers with heightened awareness of international and multicultural issues, and with direct access to ideas and programme-makers around the world.

Greg Philo for the Glasgow University Media Group

Judi Conner for 3WE

April 2000

Department for International Development

The Department for International Development (DFID) is the British government department responsible for promoting development and the reduction of poverty. The government elected in May 1997 increased its commitment to development by strengthening the department and increasing its budget.

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