

Viewpoint

SQUEEZED: TELEVISION AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Peadar King

The power of telling

In a speech to the United States (US) Radio and Television News Directors Conference in 1958, the late and revered broadcaster Edward R. Murrow (to whom a plaque bearing the inscription ‘he set standards of excellence that remain unsurpassed’ is still on display in the CBS headquarters in New York City) declared:

“I do not advocate that we turn television into a 27-inch wailing wall, where longhairs constantly moan about the state of our culture and our defence. But I would like to see it reflect occasionally the hard, unyielding realities of the world in which we live. I would like to see it done inside the existing framework, and I would like to see the doing of it redound to the credit of those who finance and program it. This instrument can teach, it can illuminate: yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends” (Murrow, 1958).

Edward Murrow need not have worried. There is very little danger of television turning into a wailing wall – unless one counts the copious tears that flow on programmes like *The X Factor*, the plethora of awards ceremonies that television and its sister industry film has spawned, or indeed the theatrics of overpaid professional footballers who end up on the losing side of major transnational tournaments. This is all a far cry from the hard unyielding realities in which very many people are living across the globe. Teach, illuminate and inspire? Not any more it would appear. The celebrated but now retired CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System), NBC (National Broadcasting Company) and PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) anchor Roger Mudd (2008) argues that the glory days of television (the 1960s and early 1970s) are now long gone. According to intellectual and activist Noam Chomsky, they have been

lost to the corporate interests that now hold the medium in their vice-like grip. Journalists entering the system, Chomsky claims, are unlikely to make their way unless they conform to the dominant and increasingly right-wing ideological pressures. Those who fail to conform are simply weeded out, (1989: 19), a view echoed by Julien Mercille's (2013: 9) study of the way in which major Irish print newspapers have endorsed Ireland's austerity programme.

Those who stay the course are left to graze on the margins and, along with some very committed colleagues, I have been privileged to do just that for the past decade-and-a-half. Despite the supposed democratisation of the media with instant texting/twittering, few people have even that level of access. Access, does not of course confer greater wisdom, insight or understanding any more than one might hear over a beer in a bar. 'The acquisition of knowledge', cautions Wendell Barry (1983: 65), 'always involves the revelation of ignorance – almost is the revelation of ignorance. Our knowledge of the world instructs us first of all that the world is greater than our knowledge of it.' Knowledge, however it is constructed, does not equate with sensitivity towards the people whose lives have been brutalised by the oppressive forces of the military-industrial complex and by a virulent and predatory form of capitalism. The opposite might even apply. There is in fact the very real danger that sensitivity gets sacrificed under pressure to bring the story home.

In his superb book *Poisoned Wells, The Dirty Politics of African Oil*, Nicholas Shaxson (2007) warns us that Westerners who tread on African soil should do so with care. This maxim certainly pertains to those who report from Africa or the so-called 'developing world'. The reality is that not all journalists/reporters have acquitted themselves with distinction in their coverage of the global South. The subservience of journalists, most notably from the US, to Washington's dominant political narrative has been well documented. Many who reported from the first (1990-1991) and second (2003-2010) Iraq wars and the conflict in Afghanistan were often lazy conduits of the dominant political view of the occupier who were content to rely on press releases from army command and other 'official' government sources. Philip Seib (2006: 14) describes these journalists in *Beyond the Front Lines* 'as [happy] simply to be a conveyor delivering whatever is dumped on it'.

Commenting on how news was reported during the first Iraq war, most journalists, Seib argues, were content to perform ‘their minuet with the Pentagon’ (ix). The embedded journalist with the US armed forces became a defining feature of the reporting of those wars. The reports were designed to justify the decision to go to war and their jingoistic ‘bring ‘em on’ exhortations were, at least in the early days, barely disguised propaganda that in no way challenged people’s deeply ingrained taken-for-granted ideas of Western superiority over recalcitrant Arabs.

Those reports fed into a larger drift in journalism that favours reductionism and dumbing down of content with a culture of the personality of the news reporter which links a celebrity figure to the story. Allied to the political shortcomings of many of these reporters are the pressures of deadlines and to be ‘first with the news’ which has become the norm in many media organisations. In a conflict or disaster situation news coverage rarely delves beneath the headlines or revisits the affected area after its Western newsworthiness has evaporated. While it was always the case, at least to some extent, news has become more of a commodified product than ever before. The commodification of people in the global South and their subservience to Western needs is nothing new: whether it be in the mines, the fields or the homes of the coloniser, African, Asian and South American people have for centuries suffered from Western paternalism, greed and a ‘West-knows-best’ mindset. One of the real challenges, if not dilemmas, for Northern-based news agencies is how can they presume to tell the stories of people in the global South when the gaze of the camera is held for the most part by white, Northern Hemisphere, middle-aged males?

While the dilemma is real I believe that it ought not to inhibit one from trying to tell these stories. There is a power in storytelling even if those stories are not one’s own story. That reality was very much brought home to me in 1984 when a broad coalition of people and movements including returned missionaries, the trade union movement, women’s groups and an assortment of left-wing political parties and concerned individuals came together to protest against US President Ronald Reagan’s visit to the Republic of Ireland and his policies in Central America. Street protests, public meetings, workshops and publications marked the period before and during his visit. At

one particularly memorable event, a nun recently returned from Guatemala talked in the most graphic and heart-rending way of the thirty-six year genocide that was at that time in full flow and continues to haunt many people (and resulted in the former President Efraín Ríos Montt being sentenced to eighty years in prison having being found guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity in 2013). Her talk exposed ‘the hard, unyielding realities of the world in which we live’ and her telling of that story was instrumental in my producing a documentary series for Irish state broadcaster RTE titled *What in the World?* on global development and human rights issues.

The space to tell

Finding space to address such issues has become increasingly difficult given the paradoxical situation where the growth of globalisation has resulted in a narrowing of television coverage in the Western world: the retreat into introspection and insularity has gone global. Philip Seib argues that media across the Western world has taken refuge in parochialism and the ever increasing infatuation with the foibles and idiosyncrasies of so-called celebrities and close-to-home scandals (2006:2). According to the prestigious Tyndall Institute (2013), which has been monitoring nightly news network broadcasts by US broadcasters ABC (American Broadcasting Company), NBC and CBS since 1988, key international events and developments have become increasingly marginalised in their coverage.

On average twenty-one million people watch these networks every night and virtually absent from their broadcasts is coverage of neighbouring Latin America, most of Europe and sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia (Afghanistan apart), and virtually all of East Asia with Syria being the only country to feature in any meaningful way. Out of nearly 15,000 minutes of Monday-through-Friday evening news coverage by the three networks, the Syrian civil war and the debate over possible US intervention claimed 519 minutes, or about 3.5 percent of total air time, according to the report (ibid). The issues that received most air time were: Nelson Mandela (186 minutes); Pope Francis I (157 minutes, not including an additional 121 minutes devoted to Pope Benedict’s retirement and the Cardinals’ conclave that resulted in Francis’ succession); and the birth of Briton George Windsor (131 minutes), which scored higher than the ongoing war in Afghanistan (121 minutes) and the

election of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme (104 minutes). The trial of South African athlete Oscar Pistorius at fifty-one minutes absorbed more time than all of the coverage of sub-Saharan Africa.

US residents, it would appear, are as preoccupied with the weather as are their Irish counterparts. Weather related stories were ranked fifth (tornadoes) and sixth (winter weather) in the newsrooms' top ten with a combined score of 576 minutes which collectively outscored all other stories. However these stories are featured as local phenomena and are rarely discussed in the context of accelerating climate change. Reviewing the Tyndall Report, Jim Lobe (2014) quotes the Tyndall director as follows:

“A major flaw in the television news journalism is its inability to translate anecdotes of extreme weather into the overarching concept of climate change. As long as these events are presented as meteorological and not climatic, then they will be covered as local and domestic, not global”.

News without context

Britain is not immune to this downward trend in news coverage. In a review of global affairs on British terrestrial television in the decade 1989 to 1999, Jennie Stone (2000) argues that the total output of non-news factual programmes on developing countries by the four UK terrestrial channels dropped by almost 50 percent. This downward trend continued into the new millennium. According to Dover and Barnett (2004: 11), between 2001 and 2003 there was a decline of 1,026 hours – a fourteen-year low – in combined factual international programming on BBC1, BBC2, ITV1 and Channel 4. Nor is Ireland immune to this trend with television schedules filling up with so-called reality programmes and talent competitions such as *The X Factor*, *Britain's got Talent* and *Strictly Come Dancing* together with a plethora of home improvement programmes. Reversing this decline in serious broadcasting about the lives of the poor requires finance but above all editorial commitment and some broadcasters are more committed to that work than others. The BBC, for example, has 200 foreign correspondents and approximately 400 part-time correspondents throughout the world. Leaving the latter aside, the BBC has

one full-time correspondent for every 305,556 persons within Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In an Irish context, TV3 has no foreign correspondents so audiences rely exclusively on RTÉ for Irish correspondent-generated news coverage. RTÉ has three full time overseas correspondents, two based in Brussels and one in Washington. In 2009, RTÉ decided to close down its Beijing office and closed its London office in 2012.

As it currently stands, RTÉ has a ratio of one foreign correspondent per 1,529,666 citizens, and even before the current financial crisis, the broadcaster did not have an African correspondent, despite 54,419 people living in Ireland listing their nationality within the African continent in the 2011 census. In addition to this significant number, 17,856 people listed their nationality as Indian, 13,833 as Filipino, 11,458 as Chinese and 9,298 as Brazilian. In total 766,770 people (17 percent of the total population) living in Ireland were born outside the country.

News in confined spaces: Ideological space

The absence of the global South from our television screens is the result of editorial decisions taken by people in powerful positions and is not accidental. These decisions are often informed by ideologies and political agendas like the Fox channel's unabashed support for the political right in the US (Greenwald, 2004). Although the public will often assume that all broadcasters are politically and ideologically neutral and that in some way the foreign correspondent gives us a balanced neutral account of what is happening, this view is often wide of the mark. Political neutrality is not the same as ideological neutrality. The former is relatively straightforward – each political side is given equal billing and the viewer decides. Ideology, however, is much more subtle and nuanced and we all carry some level of ideological baggage. 'The informed decision', Barry (1983: 66) reminds us, is 'as fantastical a creature as the disinterested third party and the objective observer'. In a very amusing anecdote in the opening chapter of his book, *Ideology: an Introduction*, Terry Eagleton states: 'nobody would claim that their own thinking was ideological, just as nobody would habitually refer to themselves as Fatso. Ideology, like halitosis (or bad breath), is what the other person has' (2007: 2).

Some editors are very upfront about their position. In an insightful interview with broadcaster Jeremy Paxman, Kelvin MacKenzie, the former editor of *The Sun* newspaper railed against foreign news reporting. ‘Does anybody care anymore?’ he asked rhetorically going on to describe foreign news reporting as ‘TV dross’ (BBC *Newsnight*, 2014). He added:

“Look at the Middle East. Look at the battle between the Sunnis and the Shias. They have been fighting for a thousand years. What is the point of covering this stuff? Why don't we look at Channel Four's fantastic reality show *Benefit Street*? What on earth has the Central African Republic got to do with our lives? What are you going to reveal that people from different tribes hate each other, that they are trying to kill each other and in some cases bizarrely are trying to eat each other.”

MacKenzie may inhabit one extreme of the ideological continuum but as Julien Mercille argues most political commentary in the media is informed by a right-wing ideology that favours austerity and opposes socially beneficial government interventions. In short, he argues that most journalists are apologists for the neoliberal agenda which opposes the role of the state in providing social protections and welfare programmes for the poor. The positioning of the media on the right of the ideological spectrum is not surprising, he argues, given that mainstream news organisations are part of the corporate world and thus have similar vested interests to the economic and political elites.

In an interview with the *This Week* radio programme on RTÉ in December 2013, Mercille extended this analysis to two Irish newspapers – *The Irish Independent* and *The Irish Times* – in which he argued that right-wing views dominate and the newspapers give overwhelming support for fiscal consolidation with only about 10-12 percent of articles opposing austerity and government policy (Mercille, 29 December 2013). If Mercille is correct in his analysis of print media then it is likely that an analysis of Irish television would draw similar conclusions.

Mercille's analysis was echoed by academic and HIV/AIDS activist Father Michael Kelly whom I interviewed in Zambia in 2011. During that interview he said:

“A couple of years ago one of the British medical journals in an editorial used the very striking phrase ‘people who are dying of AIDS don't matter in this world’. My concern is that that is still the position. Just take us here in Zambia, and Zambia is not as bad as South Africa or some of the other countries around us, where about a hundred people are dying every day of HIV and we hear nothing about it. We don't hear anything about this. There's no sense of outrage, there's no sense of urgency. If this were a bus accident and ten people were killed, it would hit the headlines and if the next day there's another bus accident and twelve people were killed, it would hit the headlines and if, on the third day, there was another bus accident people would be up in arms. What is the government doing they would demand. Why can't we stop the needless death of our people? We have the needless death of over 100 people a day and we are carrying on as if it didn't matter” (KMF Productions, 2011).

Shanta Shina, Professor of Political Science in Hyderabad University in India and children's rights activist, made a similar point about the West's indifference when I interviewed her in 2004. ‘The West doesn't care’, she simply stated. ‘Child labour exists because people find it acceptable’ (KMF Productions, 2004).

But perhaps more than any other story, the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been squeezed into invisibility. According to studies by US-based aid agency the International Rescue Committee (IRC) some 5.4 million people died in the DRC between August 1998 and April 2007 from violence and war-related hunger and illness in what many commentators have claimed is Africa's First World War. The IRC estimated that as many as 45,000 people died every month in 2007 in what is the deadliest conflict since World War Two. The reality is that very few in the Western world are familiar with this conflict and its consequences. By contrast there were reports in all Western media of a plane crash in the DRC on 8 July 2011 in which forty-eight people were killed. This reflects how the media can

ignore the protracted crises and issues that beset many of the world's poorest countries. That is not to downplay a tragedy like a plane crash but to highlight the scant attention paid to the 5.4 million victims of Congo's conflict.

The reality is that when it comes to the media there is no such thing as an independent commentator. We all bring some subjectivity to our discussions and reporting. During an interview for the *What in the World?* series I was asked if it was polemical (i.e. ideological). I replied by suggesting that if 'polemical' was arguing for a more equal distribution of the world's resources and drawing attention to the plight of the world's poor then yes it was polemical. The question was pertinent to the practice of journalists and broadcasters but how often had other reporters from around the world been asked the same question? And if others were asked what would their reaction be? It is a question that goes to heart of journalistic practice.

Time and money

Increasingly those reporting from the global South are under significant pressure to produce in neoliberal parlance 'a marketable product' within very tight budgetary constraints and within very tight timeframes. These constraints are not without their consequences and one of those consequences is the absence of context in reporting. Paddy Coulter, a specialist in media and development, has long commented on the 'frequent absence of proper context for developing country news stories' (2002: 50).

Context is key to understanding global issues and without it we are far from the truth however that is constructed. We are increasingly receiving news reporting without context and in its place, stereotypes and caricature provide quick fixes for easy consumption. Some commentators (Griebhaber, 1997; Opoku-Owusu, 2003) claim that the prevalent discourse on television points towards a widely accepted, dominant perspective that views the majority world as inferior, dependent and thus colonised. Television is not unique in that respect and it is not just a recent phenomenon. The great Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe was a longstanding critic of Western writers, most notably Joseph Conrad, author of *Heart of Darkness*, for the way in which he portrayed Africa as 'the other world', the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation;

a place where man's 'vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality' (1977: 251).

In television as in other media, as Wendy Quarry and Ricardo Ramírez (2009) remind us, the North and South are represented using a range of enduring dichotomies: donor/recipient; developed/underdeveloped; knowledge/ignorant. Not only are these dominant images limiting people's understanding of global issues, they also create damaging and stereotypical perceptions of Africa and Africans, not least for first and second generation Africans living in the West. As a consequence many tend to disassociate themselves from their place of heritage.

Quarry and Ramírez further argue that if we are serious about our work in representing people in the global South we must move from presenting people as objects to presenting them as subjects. They challenge the objectification of people where the nearly always white television presenter covers a heartbreaking story from Africa – the camera is close up on the reporter and then gradually goes wide revealing the reporter surrounded by anonymous passive black people. The emphasis in reporting should be on the personality rather than just the issue and people should have some control over how they are portrayed. Ideally, Quarry and Ramírez argue for self-representation in the media and self-representation is very different from representation by others. Because of the way Western broadcast media is currently constructed that is well nigh impossible. All of which poses profound challenges for us in the field, challenges with which we struggle in our highly pressurised world. The reality is we are far away from self-representation squeezed as we are by time and money.

We in the media are in control of representation. We hold the camera, we are the editors and we even select the mood music. While we always strive to send back the edited version to all those who participated in our films for contractual reasons we can only do that after broadcast. Our hope is that in doing that we at least offer some kind of acknowledgement to the people featured in the documentaries.

Conclusion

For all its limitations, television still holds the gaze of the public. Survey after survey indicates that television remains by far the most influential medium in shaping people's understanding of the world. A British survey commissioned by the Department for International Development identified mainstream media 'as the single most powerful force shaping the climate for public awareness-raising on issues of sustainable development' with television outscoring all other media (Stone, 2000). In Weafer's 2002 study conducted in Ireland, 92 percent of respondents reported that they find out what is happening in developing countries through television.

These findings are supported by a study of post-primary students' knowledge of development issues in which I was involved with researchers from the University of Limerick and the Shannon Curriculum Development Centre (Gleeson et al, 2007). Eight out of every ten teachers identified television as one of their main sources of information on the 'Third World'. Television is also the primary source of information for students. Seven out of ten students stated that television was influential in informing their view of the world. Interestingly, we also found that television also plays an important part in school pedagogy. After textbooks, DVDs constituted the second most important teaching resource.

In T.S. Elliot's epic poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (2007) he uses the image of the universe squeezed into a ball and perhaps that's as good as any metaphor for the way in which the global world is represented on television. Squeezed in by producers and directors as they seek to give visual expression to quite complex issues for what is essentially a reductive medium. Squeezed out by corporate interests who would rather not know and would rather the rest of us did not know either. And just in case the awkward and unpalatable get through the net, they are further squeezed into margins of the broadcast schedule where only the brave graze. Rather than accept this as an inevitable outcome of the world in which we live, perhaps it's time for television and those who dictate its content to return to the wailing wall, at least occasionally.

References

- Achebe, C (1977) 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'', *Massachusetts Review*, 18.
- Barry, W (1983) *Standing by Words*, Berkeley, California: Counterpoint.
- BBC *Newsnight* (2014) 'Who really cares about foreign news?', 15 January 2014, available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ivk2XcfvK5c> (accessed 10 February 2014).
- Chomsky, N (1989) *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, London: Pluto Press.
- Coulter, P (2002) 'Scope for Development on television: A Media perspective from Britain' in J Weafer, *Attitudes towards Development Cooperation in Ireland*, Dublin: Irish Aid.
- Dover, C and Barnett, S, (2003) *The World on the Box: International Issues in News and Factual Programmes on UK television 1975-2003*, London: 3WE.
- Eagleton, T (2007) *Ideology: An Introduction*, London: Verso Books.
- Elliot, T S (2007) *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock and The Wasteland*, Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks.
- Gleeson, J, King, P, O'Driscoll, S and Tormey, R (2007) *Development Education in Irish Post-Primary Schools: Knowledge, Attitudes and Activism*, Dublin: Irish Aid.
- Greenwald, Robert (2004) *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*, a documentary on reported Conservative bias of the Rupert Murdoch-owned Fox News Channel (FNC), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0418038/>.
- Griebhaber, D (1997) *Challenging Perspectives: The Majority World on Irish Television*, Dublin: Comhlámh.
- International Rescue Committee (IRC) (2000-07) 'Congo Crisis', available: <http://www.rescue.org/special-reports/congo-forgotten-crisis>, accessed 20 January 2014.
- KMF Productions (2011) *The Millennium Development Goals*, Cork: KMF Productions.
- KMF Productions (2004) *Child Labour in India*, Cork: KMF Productions.

Lobe, J (2014) 'Major parts of the world ignored by US in 2013', *truthout*, 14 January 2014, available: <http://truth-out.org/news/item/21170-major-parts-of-the-world-ignored-by-us-tv-news-in-2013> (accessed 20 January 2014).

Mercille, J (2013) Interview on RTÉ, 29 December 2013, available: <http://www.rte.ie/radio/radioplayer/rteradiowebsite.html#rii=9%3A10238984%3A72%3A29%2D12> (accessed 20 January 2014).

Mercille, J (2013) 'European Media Coverage of Argentina's Debt Default and Recovery: distorting the lessons for Europe', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 8, pp. 1377-1391.

Mudd, R (2008) *The Place to be: Washington, CBS and the Glory Days of Television News*, New York: Public Affairs.

Murrow, E R, 'Wires and Lights in a Box': speech to the Radio and Television News Directors Conference on 15 October 1958', available: http://www.rtdna.org/content/edward_r_murrow_s_1958_wires_lights_in_a_box_speech#.UtzwtJFDMo (accessed 20 January 2014).

Opoku-Owusu, S (2003) *What can the African diaspora do to challenge distorted media perceptions about Africa?*, London: African Foundation for Development.

Quarry, W and Ramírez R (2009) *Communication for another development - Listening before telling*, London: Zed Books.

Santos, B de Sousa, Nunes, J A and Meneses, M P (2007) 'Introduction: Opening up the canon of knowledge and recognition of difference' in B de Sousa Santos (ed.) *Another Knowledge is Possible*, London: Verso.

Seib, Philip (2006) *Beyond the Frontlines: how the news media cover a world shaped by war*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Shaxson, Nicholas (2007) *Poisoned Wells: The Dirty Politics of African Oil*, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stone, J (2000) *Losing Perspective: Global Affairs on British Terrestrial Television 1989-1999*, London: Third World Environment Broadcasting Project.

Tyndall Institute Report (2013) '2013 year in Review', available: <http://tyndallreport.com/yearinreview2013/> (accessed 20 January 2014).

Weafer, J (2002) (ed.) *Attitudes towards Development Cooperation in Ireland*, Dublin: Irish Aid.

Peadar King has been making documentaries on human rights violations, poverty and social justice in Africa, Asia and The Americas for the past decade-and-a-half. He presents and produces the RTÉ series *What in the World?*