

Television and development education: the lobbying agenda

Don Redding suggests that more and better programmes about the majority world will only appear on television screens in the UK if there is public pressure for changes in the system which regulates and provides them. He challenges the development education movement not just to lament the failures of the media to cover development but to do something about it.

This is a key moment in the history of the broadcast media. There are both threats to, and opportunities for, the spread of high quality information and education about the majority world, its people and environment. Only one thing is certain – public pressure will be absolutely vital to shaping the way our legislators and regulators direct the future communications industry.

In 2005 the BBC's Africa season, as well as similarly themed programming elsewhere, showed that it is possible for national broadcasters to be ambitious and to have impact with programmes on international or developing country themes. What they were responding to was *organized pressure* from our part of the voluntary sector: the co-ordinated push around making poverty history; 'insider' lobbying from personalities associated with Comic Relief; and 'outsider' lobbying from the International Broadcasting Trust (IBT) and the Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project (3WE).

But is that it? Will there ever be another such moment? Or have the broadcasters 'done Africa' for the next decade in the same way that they 'did the environment' around the Rio Earth Summit? The answer will depend on whether the development sector can continue to present an organized, cohesive front, with powerful arguments, a sophisticated knowledge of the regulatory environment for television, and the active backing, where necessary, of our supporters and members.

3WE is the campaign arm of IBT, and has been promoting better television broadcasting on international issues since 1989. Our experience is that, in our lobbying, we need to go beyond the level of individual programme ideas. Any individual idea, however compelling it seems to us as development enthusiasts, is prey to the shifting whims and fashions of the fast-changing TV market, and to the subjective preferences of individual commissioning editors or channel controllers. Even if commissioned, it can all too easily fall victim to the dislike of schedulers and get shunted to the margins – transmitted after 11 pm or on a minority digital channel, for instance. Finally, even the best ideas that make it through will create an aftermath in which there is unwillingness to commission on similar themes for a period of years.

Over time, as the TV market has become ever more competitive and ratings-driven, these factors have caused a long-term, continuous decline in factual international programming. In 2003, each of the five main national public

service TV channels showed its lowest level of such programmes since monitoring began in 1989. This trend cannot be countered by single programme ideas, however brilliant. Long term, sustained dividends in the form of more and better programmes will only be achieved if we attack the television system on three levels.

The three levels of campaigning

First, we need an evidence base. Since 1989 this has been provided by 3WE's biennial monitoring research, which examines both the amount and the type of non-news factual international programming provided over a year by the main free to air TV channels. The most recent report, *The World on the Box* (www.ibt.org.uk/3WE), looked at 2003, and we are now working on 2005.

Second, there is a need for continuous constructive dialogue with the broadcasters themselves, particularly those with the strongest public service obligations. This dialogue needs to be 'structural' – that is, not dependent on the personal commitment of individual broadcasting staff, and able to outlast their rapid 'churn'. It therefore must base itself on the defining nature of the broadcasters' social and cultural role – their 'purposes'.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, we must go above the level of specific channels or broadcasters to influence the *framework* within which broadcasting is conducted – that is, the legislation and regulation that condition what the TV companies will and will not do.

In recent years there have been some breakthrough successes on all three levels. Our research has provoked both the BBC and Channel 4 to re-examine their approach to commissioning on international themes. As a result, at the second level, structural dialogue has been established with the BBC and is beginning with Channel 4. The BBC has been sending its senior staff to a series of private seminars where they meet international experts, development workers and grassroots activists, to spark ideas about integrating international themes into BBC programmes and services (see Joe Smith's article, p24 in this edition for more details). A similar first event is being planned with Channel 4.

At the third, regulatory level, two particular victories are worth noting. In the Communications Act 2003, which re-regulated all broadcasting, 3WE persuaded the government to insert a requirement for public service TV to provide programmes on 'matters of international significance or interest'. And in relation to the BBC, the government agreed

to make it one of the core ‘purposes’ of all BBC services for the next decade to ‘bring the world to the UK’.

The implications of communications ‘convergence’

But these hard-fought gains are under continual threat, because of the unpredictable nature of the future regulation of television broadcasting. This is due to the digital ‘convergence’ of broadcasting with other forms of communications services, a process which the BBC director general recently warned is ‘happening much quicker than we ever thought’, forcing ‘the virtual reinvention’ of broadcasting (speech to the EU AudioVisual Conference in Liverpool, September 2005, www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/speeches/stories/thompson_presidential.shtml)

To put this in a nutshell, television is no longer in short supply. Digital technology means anyone can produce and transmit television-quality pictures, at ever decreasing costs. It can come to us not just through aerials and satellite receivers but through broadband internet – already being used in 25% of UK households – or by mobile devices such as phones and iPods.

This means the ‘traditional’ broadcasters face new competition from all sorts of new providers, many of whom, such as the mobile phone companies, have massive investment power. It is creating a new market – the communications market – in which broadcasting is losing its ‘special place’. Most dangerously, this market is being regulated, by Ofcom, not with a view to the cultural and social purposes of broadcasting, but with a view to maximizing competition and minimizing regulation, ‘freeing’ the market and the industries who profit from it, and emphasizing benefits to consumers rather than citizens.

In this environment, we have to think again. New strategies are required. The battle by an interest group to protect any specific type of programming – such as development organizations supporting programmes on ‘matters of international significance or interest’ – cannot be fought alone. It immediately merges into a wider, principled fight to protect, promote and extend the concept of ‘public service’ in communications.

There are enormous opportunities here – for example, to combine the power and impact of mass television broadcasting with the personalized and participative nature of the internet; to create new forms of exchange and new content sites for audio-visual content about the developing world; and to encourage the emergence of new forms of public service communications. Some existing examples of the latter are the Community Channel, a national digital TV channel serving the voluntary sector, and the very local community media which already run 48 licensed radio stations across the country.

But the threats are also huge, with the BBC under constant attack, Channel 4 facing an uncertain financial future, and ITV1 and Five drifting ever further from any public service mission; while from the other side, nakedly

commercial channels are now vying to be called ‘public service’ and to get a slice of public funding.

The lobbying agenda

So what should be the lobbying agenda for the development sector? 3WE is currently renewing its strategy, and looking for dialogue both with and beyond its current membership, but the following objectives are now emerging.

First, we will need to join in the wider campaign for public service broadcasting. This means supporting broad coalitions campaigning for ‘citizens’ interests in communications’, such as the voluntary sector’s Public Voice coalition.

Second, as part of that campaign we will need to mobilize our supporters to help defend the existing public service broadcasting institutions. With the BBC, this means helping it through the remaining process of Charter review to mid-2006, against the concerted might of the commercial lobby which wants the BBC cut down. Bolstering parliamentary support for the government’s position is central to this. With Channel 4, over the next three years we should give our cautious and conditional support to its case for new funding arrangements. Neither broadcaster should be unconditionally supported. They need to demonstrate that they will stay true to their public service missions, and keep international programming alive within their mainstream output. That means continuing our constructive dialogues, and monitoring their performance through research.

A third priority is to pressurize and influence the regulator, Ofcom, positively to protect and strengthen public service broadcasting and to promote the emergence of new forms of public service communications. Its record has been poor in the first two years of its existence, but there are signs of a rethink. A key test case will be its proposal to establish a new kind of public service provider, combining the power and impact of ‘traditional’ broadcasting with an extended broadband internet service that can create wide interaction with the programme content. We will want to see that this is driven by social, not market, purposes, and that a strong international element is included.

Broadcasting policy is often decided in a restricted public policy sphere with little reference to civil society. Nevertheless there are many and frequent public consultations and reviews. So far the public has not woken up to these and they remain dominated by industry. That can be changed. The third, and underpinning priority, therefore, is to mobilise and involve supporters and the voluntary sector to stand up for the kind of media we want and deserve – one that supports us, as citizens, to achieve our full potential within the global information society.

All this means we need to raise our game significantly. If we want high quality programming on the wider world to be available to the widest UK audiences we need to band together, organize, and deliver a campaign punch backed by an active and informed individual supporter base.

Can we do it? It’s down to you.

Background information

1. BBC Charter review

The BBC exists by the grant of a Royal Charter, which must be renewed every ten years through the mechanism of making an Agreement with the government, which includes the detail of the BBC's core activities. The next Charter starts in 2006, but the process of review has already been going on for two years.

3WE, and its allies in Public Voice, were concerned that the BBC had lost touch with its public service mission, and have argued that there must be a much clearer specification of the BBC's purposes in the next Charter, together with a tighter, clearer framework for regulating its activities.

The BBC and the government have now agreed that all of the BBC's services must 'build public value' rather than chase audience ratings, so the next Agreement will, for the first time, codify a set of five main social and cultural 'purposes' which all the BBC's output – TV, radio and online – must serve. One of these purposes, as stated in the government's Green Paper, is 'bringing the World to the UK'.

The BBC promises to 'build public value' through forming strategic partnerships with others, including the voluntary sector. Its new 'partnership code' sets the terms of such relationships, making it a more equally balanced exchange.

These gains must be defended. There is a vociferous anti-BBC lobby which brings together commercial rivals from telecoms, broadcasting, the internet and publishing, and the regulator, Ofcom. Their agenda is to separate off the BBC governing body and make it an Arts Council for all broadcasting, which could then distribute the licence fee to other channels, including commercial channels that want to provide 'public service' programmes. Meanwhile the licence fee would be capped or reduced, and the BBC would be made to turn some of its services over to subscription funding.

3WE argues that the new 'purposes' are at the heart of the next Charter, bringing benefits to all citizens; that the licence fee is required to fund them; and that the BBC should keep its own (much tightened) system of governance in order to ensure their delivery.

A White Paper was due by the end of 2005, followed by parliamentary debate in both Houses and the signing of the new Agreement; while the level of the licence fee is also being debated. We need to engage development sector supporters and allies in boosting parliamentary support and

thereby strengthening the hand of the government to defend the Green Paper gains.

For BBC Charter review including the Green Paper go to www.bbccharterreview.org.uk

For the BBC's partnership code governing its 'strategic partnerships' with external organizations see www.bbc.co.uk/partnerships/

2. Channel 4

Channel 4 is a crucial element in public service broadcasting, with its brief to provide diversity and distinctiveness, and a core commitment to integrate 'global and international issues' into its programmes. But it competes for TV advertising with ITV and Five, both of which have now been freed from most of their public service commitments in order to become more commercial and competitive in the wider market.

Channel 4 therefore fears for its future survival. Like the BBC in the 1990s it drifted away from its public service mission, but has now set out a manifesto to return to that role, which includes more factual international programming. In return it wants the government and regulator to help it find new funding support to protect its survival. Channel 4 executives lobbied 3WE for support to this cause. 3WE made it clear that such support is conditional on seeing real programming improvements, and talks are continuing on ways to do this.

3. Ofcom

Ofcom is the Office for Communications, a 'convergence' regulator that covers not just broadcasting but also telecommunications and the internet. It was created by the Communications Act 2003. That Act initially gave it duties to the market, to competition and to consumers, but nothing to protect the public interest. After vigorous campaigning by 3WE and Public Voice, the Act was amended, giving Ofcom a 'principal duty... to further the interests of citizens in relation to communications matters'.

In spite of this, Ofcom has regulated consistently in favour of a 'markets' approach, losing the trust of civil society organizations. As a result of criticism by 3WE and Public Voice, Ofcom is reviewing its approach to 'citizens' interests'. We have to keep up pressure through numerous reviews, consultations and operational decisions, otherwise the whole future of 'public service' in communications will be jeopardized.

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3WE (the Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project) is part of the International Broadcasting Trust and lobbies for better mainstream TV coverage of development. For full details of 3WE's research and lobbying and campaigning activities see www.ibt.org.uk/3WE

3WE is in turn part of Public Voice, a wider voluntary sector coalition which campaigns for citizens' interests in relation to communications: www.politics.co.uk, search for 'Public Voice' under 'opinion formers'.