Learning from African School

Helen Yanacopulos and Giles Mohan reflect on the commissioning and impact of the television series ‘African School’, which sought to challenge stereotypical images of Africa while informing and entertaining.

Introduction

Too many films about Africa adopt a tone of either callous mockery or of Richard Curtis-style, puke-inducing sentimentality, but this excellent series thankfully avoids both traps. Victor Lewis Smith, Evening Standard, 16th November 2005

In the popular media Africa is usually represented as exotic, full of natural beauty, or a basket case continent filled with dying babies, war and disease. The series African School, which was part of the BBC’s Africa Lives Season in 2005 subtly challenges this image. This paper outlines the different groups involved in the series, some issues around programming and Africa, and explores ways that publics engage with these issues.

Of years and seasons: critical times for Africa

The year 2005 was significant for Africa and development. During this year the Commission for Africa reported on the need to embrace globalisation and improve governance. Similar issues were raised during the G8 meeting in Gleneagles in July where a significant part of the agenda focused, amongst other things, on Africa and debt. The broadly based campaign Make Poverty History and the Live 8 concert revolved around issues of development, again with a particular focus on Africa. In light of this the BBC had the Africa Lives Season, which aimed at ‘a broader representation of life across Africa’. As Lorraine Heggessey of BBC1 noted ‘People will hear the continent being discussed and dissected. Their overwhelming impression is of Africa ‘the problem,’ but that is only part of the story. There is a vibrant, diverse continent waiting to be discovered.’ (www.bbc.co.uk/africalives/about.shtml).

Part of this ‘discovery’ was the African School series. African School originally aired in June – July 2005 on BBC4 and is being rebroadcast in November – December on BBC4 and BBC2. The series’ ten episodes try to capture the daily lives, concerns and personalities of young Africans and their teachers in the Ugandan town of Masindi. The series was filmed in two of the town’s schools – Kamurasi Demonstration School (primary) and Masindi Secondary...
School. Uganda itself was chosen because the government has recently introduced free universal primary education, and because a number of the issues which affect other African countries can also be found here – high levels of debt, HIV/AIDS, a civil conflict, and a history of development initiatives.

Besides the BBC’s desire to enrich their viewers’ knowledge of Africa, there were various reasons for different stakeholders becoming involved in African School. For Lion Television, the series’ producers all have a personal commitment to development and have experience of working or living in Africa. For the Open University, the primary funder of the series, it was part of a larger commitment to educate the public, as well as the responsibility of the university to be involved in social justice issues.

In the rest of the paper we will focus on two related themes. First, we will outline the importance of such programming as part of development education initiatives and how the African School series sought to inform and entertain. Second, we reflect on the commitment of the Open University, and more specifically, on the work of the two authors of the paper as Development Studies academics.

**Challenging norms and unsettling difference**

In this section we discuss why it is so important to be involved in such work and how African School sought to challenge norms about Africa and development. In Jonathan Crush’s (1995) seminal *Power of Development* a collection of academics sought to critique and destabilise a series of taken-for-granted theories about development. Theories, they argued, are part of a discursive repertoire that seeks to normalise particular world views, which in turn have powerful effects. The gauntlet was thrown down to continue this project of destabilising those forms of representation that belittle the agency of those deemed in need of ‘development’.

We argue that our work with the BBC on various development programmes, such as Comic Relief, Sports Relief, and now African School is part of this form of development practice. The viewing audience of BBC documentaries is much larger than anything academics would normally be involved in and can be seen as a key element of necessary ‘development engagement’ work, where development is represented and mediated around certain issues (Smith and Yanacopulos, 2004). This work is seen as not only raising awareness around certain issues, but also (particularly) in this case, as unsettling conventional ideas around the people who are supposed to be ‘developing’.

In particular, we feel it is crucial to unsettle popular representations of Africa that intentionally or not underpin efforts to renew trusteeship over the continent by depicting it as place beyond rationality (Mercer, Mohan and Power 2003). As Beattie *et al* (1999: 233) have argued most accounts ‘convey a dominant image of Africa – that it is a
place of ‘misery’, ‘chaos’, and ‘brutality’, the recurrence of which is almost predictably systematic’. And as Chabal (1996: 31/32) asserts there is a ready acceptance of such ‘slovenly, hypocritical or even racist’ analyses, whose simplicity we would not accept in analysing our own political systems. Hence, there is a need to confront the parochialism of many so-called universal representations and to acknowledge the connections in a world of difference.

The question is how to challenge such representations? We reflect on the ways in which this was attempted in the African School series. The first lesson is to push at the right time. The commissioning of African School was done as part of the BBC’s Africa Lives Season. As Poland (2004) outlines, it is easier to get something commissioned if there is a ‘peg’ – an event, or in this case, a season. The African School series was primarily funded by the Open University (OU), which has moved towards supporting popular programmes that, more generally, excite learning. The OU and BBC have a long history of working together and, given the focus on Africa and education, the African School series seemed a natural choice for the OU to commission. Once commissioned it is here that we, as academic consultants, became involved with a remit to advise on approach, content and factuality.

Beyond getting the series commissioned at an opportune moment, the approach and tone of the series also sought to challenge partial representations. One of the main problems in representing Africa in the popular media is that many images coming from the news and Development industry are extremely negative. A primary aim of the African School series was to represent African children and teenagers in an unconventional manner – one that did not represent them as victims of war, poverty, disease, and conflict, but as individuals who perhaps have been affected by these things – just as individuals in other places have been affected. The programme is in the ‘docudrama’ style which brings out stories from real lives. In presenting the stories and ‘characters’, they are named, the viewer is told details about them, and they are then allowed to speak about themselves.

Another aim of the series was to normalise Africa by pointing out the similarities between children and teens in the UK and those being shown in Massindi, for example, romance, exams, football, special needs, school elections, religion and sex. Reviewers of the series picked up on this, as we see in the following statement: ‘...this is a unique portrait of an Africa we seldom see, full of vivacity, charm and passion.’ (Daily Telegraph – 21 June 2005, Digital Choices). Humour plays a big part in the series – which gives it balance – and this is sometimes extremely important in dealing with serious and difficult issues. Whilst there is commentary, the balance is tilted to the characters’ own voices.

The aim of unsettling difference is imperative in this series. In episode 9, one recurring 16 year old, Dixon, proudly claims that he’s a ‘nigga’. He sees this as an empowering tool, where he is identifying with a strong sense of connection to the assertive African American male. This term will make many BBC viewers flinch – but it is a term that he has consciously taken on board and that has been reinterpreted as a positive label. Something that everyone involved insisted upon was the checking of the commentary where it jumped too easily from the specificity of the Masindi case to Africa as a whole.

**Intellectual and political challenges**

Certainly much of the audience feedback and journalistic analysis picked up on and was thankful for this ‘other’ picture of a part of Africa. But how successful were we in totally challenging the dominant responses to African development? Although the purpose of the series was specifically not to fundraise (unlike Comic Relief), it was surprising how many viewers attempted to donate money through the Open University, Lion TV, and the BBC. This caused a problem, as none of these institutions were capable of dealing with donations and had to have a list of charities that could accept the funding. However, this raised larger issues around the ways many viewers are used to dealing with shows on Africa, which is to give money. The inequalities are so striking that charity is seen as the way to alleviate the anxiety around difference. And, interestingly, most wanted to give directly to a specific pupil or to the head teacher, partly to avoid the perceived corruption of African countries.

So, despite our best efforts, many saw Africa as a governance nightmare and inter-personal giving as the only solution. As academics who tend to see things as, in part, structural issues such programming and the responses to it present some problems. How can you present complex developmental processes through the experiences of, for example, one child? As academics we always wanted to ‘teach more’. Why was there a war in the North? What role were Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) policies playing in funding education? Can we talk so easily about ‘traditional’ values? At one level we did get these issues incorporated, but were obviously constrained by keeping the narrative engaging and also letting the real drama speak for itself. Our other input, and part of the programme’s wider aims, was to lead viewers into alternative learning resources. We oversaw the content of an OU-hosted website (URL) that handles all OU/BBC projects (www.open2.net). Our website dealt in more detail with questions of debt, health and education, and the history of Uganda. And part of the OU’s involvement was, in addition to a public service obligation, to entice learners into higher education, though it is too early to gauge any impact from this.

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The project activities included meeting interested groups to identify their local and global issues of concern; researching the chosen issues in different ways, including reading, web research and interviews; and then writing and recording the broadcast. If the groups’ issues of concern were local issues, the project worker found ways of introducing a global dimension to the issue. For example, a Morecambe youth group complained about poor public transport. The project worker then explored the relationship between public transport and global warming.

The project has been very successful in generating interest in global issues with the youth and community groups, but not in reaching a wider audience through BBC Radio Lancashire.

The first learning point is that the idea of making a radio programme was very motivating for all of the groups that we worked with. This allowed us to work with groups who we might not otherwise have had the opportunity to work with. For example, a group of students at a local high school became involved with the project because of the radio dimension; had we approached them with the idea of doing a piece of work on a particular global issue, they would not have responded so positively. Thus the task of creating a radio programme is an excellent vehicle for new learning with new groups.

The project was successful in that the groups we worked with greatly extended their learning about global issues, even those groups who already had some awareness, such as the MAKEPOVERTY HISTORY group. The fact that they had to communicate their ideas for radio meant that they had to clarify and articulate their own knowledge clearly.

The programme raises interesting issues. How effective is OU/BBC programming in raising public awareness around Development? What is the role and responsibility of academics and academic institutions in engaging with publics and rectifying the existing unbalanced view of Africa? How can the powerful medium of television be better utilised to do this?

Radio for Change: a youth and community development education project run by Global Link Development Education Centre

Gisela Renolds and Ruth Davies reflect on a media project which clearly illustrates the difficulty of marrying education and media agendas.

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The project was stimulating for both the participants and the project worker as it enabled the project worker to initiate experiences for the groups that they would not otherwise