

BROADCAST TELEVISION: BROADCAST GEOGRAPHY?

John W. Halocha

Bishop Grosseteste University College, Lincoln, LN1 3DY, UK, j.w.halocha@bishopg.ac.uk

Abstract

Television plays an important role in how the public both understands and takes an interest in geography. As geographers, if we are to maximise the opportunities provided by television to promote geography, we need to understand how it is developing in the 21st century. The first part of this paper examines some of the concepts currently applied to the academic analysis of television. It also attempts to place programmes with geographical themes within the current media climate in Europe. The second part analyses four television series broadcast in the UK during 2007 with an emphasis on their geographical content.

Keywords: Geography, HERODOT, promotion of geography, public understanding, media theory, television.

1. INTRODUCTION

The promotion of geography in the 21st century will of necessity need to consider how the subject is presented on television. Louw (2001) suggests that “For OECD (Organisations for economic corporation development) populations, television increasingly sets the agenda for what these highly ‘media-ted’ populations think about and discuss” (2001, p.191).

However, with so many broadcast channels and other media such as DVDs now available to the general public, Baudrillard (1983) sees the information blizzard causing the collapse of meaning. Any subject that does not have a high profile in the media is possibly going to have its meaning and core purpose hidden by many competing forms of knowledge. This paper

takes some of the concepts used in academic media analysis in order create a framework for more in-depth study of the extent to which television may promote geography. A range of programmes broadcast during 2007 in the UK are examined using a variety of media analysis concepts.

2. PART 1

2.1. The nature of audiences

Williams (2003) explains that “Contemporary media scholarship has moved away from examining how particular messages influence people, to exploring the nature of media audiences” (2003, p.190).

To understand what this might mean for geographers, we may be looking at one audience of people who make the conscious

decision to watch the National Geographic channel, compared with the casual viewer who happens to be watching television when “Coast”, a popular UK television programme, is broadcast. These may well be different to the audience who deliberately go out and buy a DVD of “Coast” to enjoy at their leisure, either for general interest or to think more deeply about the nature of the subject.

Active audience theory may be one way of thinking about what we as geographers actually hope or wish to achieve by promoting geography through television. Williams (2003) considers that the power of media “to shape people’s knowledge, beliefs and attitudes has been intense” (2003, p.209).

However, Gisell (2006) argues that “the generalist audience watching television while at leisure, expecting in some degree to be entertained, and not always knowing where to draw lessons from within the situation they are viewing” (2006, p.75) may well not perceive that there is something we might call ‘geography’ within the content of a programme. Also, as professional geographers we have a highly developed understanding of how the subject may help to explain complex processes and issues arising across our planet. What type of audience actually wants television to be “dealing with complicated issues and contexts which require non-sensational, analytic unpacking of their complexity” (Louw, 2001, p.191) when perhaps they wish to relax and be entertained? As geographers we now perhaps need to consider how we wish the subject to be promoted: are we serious, analytical people who seek to understand our world or maybe people who show a genuine enthusiasm and excitement about the wonderful things we can find on the earth? Or is there a place between these

extremes where we feel geography will be best promoted?

2.2. Tabloidization

In his analysis of current trends in television, Barnett (1998) argues that many programmes approach to content and presentation are going through a process of tabloidization and identifies three features:

1. Less serious material;
2. The nature of serious and challenging material in the media is being debased through various packaging and presentational strategies to make it more populist;
3. Serious news, information and programming are less prominent (1998, p.230).

Is “Coast” an example of how the ‘serious’ nature of geography and indeed other disciplines has been re-packaged by the programme-makers in order to have a more tabloid and populist appeal to audiences? On the other hand, should we as geographers actually be pleased that such programmes are made in order to provide appealing views of the world? This particular series is further complicated by the fact that a number of disciplines and their associated academic promoters are all seeking attention in each programme. Indeed, it is often quite hard to identify how geographical understanding and processes are being communicated. This may be a focus for future research with its various audiences.

2.3. Documentaries and Features

If geographers are going to consider how television may promote geography in the 21st century, it may be helpful to have an understanding of how media theory attempts to identify documentaries and features, and how their particular treatment of a subject

can influence people's understanding of it.

Gisell (2006) suggests that a successful documentary "seeks to elicit from the human and physical worlds a body of principles, rules, axioms or theories that will enable us to make sense of them" (2006, p. 69).

This perhaps suggests a move to promoting the more serious side of the discipline in order for viewers to gain a deeper understanding about how geography can explain the world. He further divides the process of documentary into programmes that 'tell' and programmes that 'show'. Telling documentaries focus on the transmission of information and ideas, while showing documentaries rely much more on the visual messages, leaving the viewer to decide what they are being told through them. He refines this further by suggesting the 'showing' documentary recognises that "looking is both a pleasurable experience and undeniably an educative one in the limited sense that new insights confer new knowledge, even if the precise nature or usefulness of such knowledge is often less certain" (2006, p.75).

He defines features as being "lighter in tone and seek not so much to impact specific knowledge of the world as to extend our experience of it or to enable us to revisit some of the endearing, admirable baffling facets of human nature" (Gisell, 2006, p.65).

If we accept these definitions then perhaps "Coast" is an example of a feature programme where the earnest education of the viewer is not a priority. However, as soon as any subject material is taken through the TV production process, it is manipulated and Grierson (1979) suggests that "however well-intentioned producers are to accurately represent the world, documentaries always become 'the creative treatment of reality' " (1979, p.11). As geographers we perhaps need to discuss how these various programme formats may promote geography to various audiences. Indeed, are some

more suited to a particular medium than another?

2.4. Deregulation

Television viewers in the 21st century will have an increasingly wide range of channels and programmes from which to choose. Williams argues that "no longer do ordinary viewers have to watch what others think they should" (2003, p.232).

This also has interesting implications for the public understanding of geography. In the past when few channels were available, a body of people may have watched one programme having the 'hypodermic' effect of injecting the population with knowledge, ideas and values. Today, suggests Williams "the new question is 'how do the media affect the way in which we collectively think?' " (2003, p.167).

It raises the question of the extent to which television is now actually capable of promoting a common understanding of geography amongst the public. While we may interpret some processes suggesting we are moving to a more globalised world, others argue the rise of the nation state, with parallels occurring in the media. Held (2000) distinguishes between 'positive' and 'pessimistic' globalisers. Perhaps geographers need to consider how they will capitalise on both the trends towards globalisation of the media and its fragmentation into 'narrowcasting' for specialised audiences. However, there is a shift in the nature of broadcasting as channels compete for audiences, money and ratings. As this accelerates, Curran and Seaton (2003) fear that "The present 'privileged' status of news and documentary, which has been a prominent feature of public broadcasting service television, will be eroded even further" (2003, p.204).

Indeed, as new digital technology becomes more widely available, audiences

will be able to call up programmes on demand and record their own choice of materials based on content and themes for viewing at their convenience.

Another factor in the equation is the availability of television in the home. Back in the 1950s it would be very unusual for a home to have more than one television (Hand, 2003). Today, individuals often watch television alone and chose their own programmes. Also, television can now be accessed through computers and time-shifted for the convenience of the viewer. As Durrani (2007) reports “The number of people in the UK accessing TV, video and movie sites online is up 8 per cent to 21 million, according to figures from Nielsen Online. The TV, video and movie sector now attracts some 63 per cent of Britons, up from 55 per cent in September 2006. The total time spent consuming content from such sites has also nearly doubled, from 641 minutes in 2006 to 1.2 billion minutes by September 2007”.

Will these technological advances increase or decrease public decisions to watch programmes with a geographical focus? As geographers we need to consider ways of encouraging them to select programmes to develop their spatial understanding of the world.

A further factor is the source of programmes. The existence of The National Geographic channel is well known to satellite viewers. However, in conversation members of the UK public it is found they often confuse the channel with the Royal Geographical Society and the Geographical Association, being unsure of what each organisation does. In addition, the USA is seen as a growing source of television programmes, for example the purchase of children’s programmes by the BBC, rather than in-house productions. Currently, the BBC and ITV are responsible for the production and commissioning of numerous

programmes with a geographical focus, but it may be worth monitoring how this will continue in the future. Some of these programmes are discussed in later sections.

The promotion of programmes is also another issue for consideration. TV listing magazines vary considerably in style. One benefit for programmes with a geographical focus is that attractive images can be included with programme information to catch the eye of the viewer. The ‘Television’ listings magazine 13-19 January 2008 for *The Observer* newspaper states that in the programme ‘Coast’ “A team of academics, including geographer Nicholas Crane and historian Neil Oliver, journey around the entire shoreline of the United Kingdom”.

How might the public interpret this information? Does the word ‘academic’ put people off or does it raise the credibility of the programme in the eyes of potential viewers? The use of ‘geographer’ and ‘historian’ is explicit: does this help people understand what such people actually do? Interestingly, the combination of two disciplines to help explain the nature of the UK coast raises interesting issues of interdisciplinary study.

It is within this context that geographers should have a thorough understanding of the media if they are to have any hope of understanding how television can promote geography in the 21st century. In part 2 we examine case studies of four UK television series broadcast in 2007 in order to consider this in practice.

3. PART 2

3.1. “Long Way Down”

“Long Way Down” was presented by Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman. It follows the two motorcyclists who ride from John O’Groats in Scotland to Cape Town in South Africa in eighty-five days. Geography is not specifically mentioned at all in the

series. However, it provides the viewer with a very detailed visual impression of how people, places, climate, land-use and resources vary on the journey. Maps and graphics are used to inform the reader of location and progress of the journey. These are produced in sketch form but do require the reader to mentally locate specific parts of the globe within the wider context of the whole earth. Examples in this analysis are taken from the final leg of the journey.

All the programmes present the material in a less serious manner. Issues such as AIDS, globalisation and childcare are included on the journey. However they show what is occurring in various African countries but do not go into great detail within the themes. The nature of cause and effect is only touched on and relies upon the viewer to make more complex links with other knowledge and understanding they may already have. In these ways, Barnett (1998) might describe the series as being an example of tabloidization in which the programme content is presented in a popularist manner. Evidence for this comes from the everyday, non-specialist language that is used by presenters who adopt a very relaxed style throughout.

The series provides the view with a wide variety of geographical images which they can read as they wish because the bikers are mainly concerned with the physical nature of the landscapes through which they pass in relation to their needs as bikers: Sandy roads are one such example. At one point they are joined by one of their wives who, after staying in an African village overnight claimed that “meeting people, seeing how they lived was just the best”. Carefully listening to her other comments, we find one of the few occasions where reflection and analysis of the travel experience is made. She is clearly making comparison with other spatial experiences she has had. As such, it is a TV series that has a considerable

amount of geography in the landscape images but leaves the reader to interpret them how they wish, or indeed, simply as a backcloth through which the riders travel. Watching the whole series leaves the viewer with this impression. As a geographer, one feels that many opportunities have been missed to encourage the reader to gain more than a fleeting impression of the many countries travelled through. It does not even fit into Gisell’s definition of a ‘feature’ which is “lighter in tone” (2006, p.65) than a documentary. While this is only one example of such a series, it does raise the question of the proportion of programmes such as this where the geography is simply the stage on which the central action takes place and how viewers interpret what is presented to them.

3.2. “Great British Journeys”

The BBC series “Great British Journeys” was presented by Nick Crane, a geographer and travel writer. Each episode follows a similar pattern with the presenter taking a route followed by a particular writer from the past. Examples in this analysis come from the programme following William Gilpin’s journey in the Wye valley. Although it follows a journey as in the previous example, the use made of the geographical material is quite different. The presenter is clearly enthusiastic about exploring and understanding the landscape. At the start of the programme he helps the viewer understand how rivers work and openly uses geographic words and concepts which he explains in a clear and non-patronising way. While he may well be an authority in academic geography, this is not how he portrays himself: simply as someone wishing to allow the viewer to better understand their world. Indeed, when explaining river processes he says “what geographers call its base level” and then adds “sea level to you and me”, where he

apparently does not promote himself as a geographer.

Close-up shots of maps are used throughout the programme with the presenter interpreting the map in the context of the landscape on the screen. While clearly not a map-reading programme, it does help the reader to see how clues in a map can help with finding ways and interpreting the landscape. He is seen in the landscape talking through possible explanations and making travel decisions based upon them. Old photographs and engravings are included at numerous points in the programme to point out to the reader how and the landscape has changed over time.

By covering part of the journey in a canoe, the viewer gains a very active sense of how the river flows as it follows its course. His explanations are carefully linked with relevant views, for example where the river gets wider owing to it flowing over very hard rock and finding it easier to erode the banks. Key geographical facts and concepts are built into the programme throughout, but there is never a sense of it being a lesson as such.

There is also a strong feeling of the development of a sense of place where phrases such as “cosy meanders coil through the landscape” with the related images clearly showing what a meander looks like from above. A painter he meets states that “I feel I own the place” after years of interpreting the land in her paintings.

The programme ends with a colleague explaining how Symond’s Yat, a large gorge, was formed. Again, while the word geography is not actually used, the viewer is given a very clear geographical explanation of what can be seen in real life with no attempt to avoid accurate geomorphologic vocabulary. This is a hard programme to categorise within current media theory. It would be possible to argue that it comes into Gisell’s concept of a ‘showing

documentary’ where information and ideas are presented in an enjoyable and educative format. It equates with Louw’s concept of an audience prepared to develop their understanding of the content but in a relaxed and entertaining manner. It may be that this is one programme format that geographers may use to develop a public understanding of geography within an informed yet informal means.

3.3. BBC programme series

During the summer of 2007 the BBC broadcast a range of programme series on India and Pakistan. This included the series “India” written and presented by Sanjeer Bhaskar. As he stated in the first programme, the brief was to make a different type of series and having one created by an Indian was thought to be an original way of doing it. The data analysed in this section comes from the programme entitled ‘Bombay Dreams’. Sanjeer deliberately uses the old name for Mumbai throughout the programme to make links with the past. Throughout the series he balances a genuine desire to introduce the audience to India being aware that he is dealing with issues of significance to millions of people, while at the same time providing snippets of humour often at his own expense.

Although he does not use the word geography, the whole programme covers many geographical concepts such as global change, globalisation, environment, cause and effect and urbanisation. Early on, he introduces the concept of India as being a brand new superpower. He also offers a reflective analysis of the patterns and processes at work in Mumbai by selecting local case studies for examination. For example, he spends time with a clothing tycoon who states that they work to “position ourselves as the fastest growing economy in the world”. The audience is then

shown practical examples of how this is taking place. A further strength of the series is that it makes a point of linking what is happening in India with the wider world. For example, in another part of the programme we see how the role and status of women in a fast changing society is being developed through the 'Mrs India' contest whose organisers argue that it provides another voice for Indian women.

As he presents the audience with case studies of change and development, he allows the voices of the people to explain how and why things are changing so rapidly in the city. He then picks up the ideas and places them in a broader context. He does not simply rely on the audience to make the various spatial connections. The structure of the programme allows the key themes to be presented in clear sections, without it appearing fragmented. For example, before he analyses the extensive slums, there is a long slow pan across the city horizon showing a wide range of urban structure and building. This allows the viewer a chance to gain an impression of the sheer scale of the urban landscape.

The section on recycling is an example of how the city is placed within a more global context. The city authorities have been putting recycling programmes together which provide employment for many people within a coordinated structure. Having lived in the UK for many years, the presenter has the credibility to comment that this project is "miles ahead of stuff that's happening in Britain". When he moves to Bangalore he visits the rapidly developing silicon valley area and we are shown large tracts of high tech buildings. Having experienced the perceptions of India by people in the UK, he remarks that "when people have images of India, they don't think of this". Without placing a value judgement on the images, he provides opportunities for the viewers to re-

consider their understanding of India. Williams argues that current analysis of the media includes the question of "how do the media affect the way in which we collectively think?" (2003, p.167).

This series may be an example of media that encourages audiences to re-think their understanding of the world, without suggesting right and wrong interpretations. Indeed, there is a sense in which the programme "distinguishes between 'positive' and 'pessimistic' globalisers" (Held, 2000. p.213).

Moving on to Cochin and Kerela, the audience is given local and global examples of what geographers would call interdependence by showing how the changing demands on coastal and river resources are affecting people and the environment. The programme concludes with the introduction of the Hindi idea of 'a world in constant flux', one that perhaps many geographers would easily relate to.

3.4. Series "Earth"

The final programme to be analysed is the BBC/National Geographic Channel – US/ZDF series "Earth". It is presented by the professional geographer Iain Stewart. The following analysis is based on the first programme focussing on volcanoes. Throughout the series he clearly offers his enthusiasm for the subject without resorting to popularist gimmicks to keep the attention of the audience. He is relatively young and actively gets involved with the environments he presents. An example of this is going into the crater of an active volcano in order to gain film of geomorphologic processes that he uses during the programme. He describes the crater as a 'window to look deep into the earth'. He offers a sense of awe and wonder at the start of the programme using phrases such as our 'amazing ever changing earth', 'unique' and 'how our remarkable planet

works’.

Powerful background music is used early on but this is reduced as the programme progresses. A key strength is the excellent use of computer graphics used to model geomorphic processes. They are of sufficient quality to be used with academic students and are quite accessible to a more general audience. Throughout the programme geographic vocabulary is used and is explained in very clear ways, without in any way suggesting to the audience that it is being simplified to aid their understanding. After such explanations the commentary pauses and the graphics are used to reinforce geographic concepts.

Many aspects of volcanoes are covered during the programme which lasts an hour. However, there is no sense in which ideas are glossed over. The careful introduction and sequencing of concepts allows the viewer to scaffold their understanding as the programme progresses. A further strength is that examples are taken from many parts of the world. This enables the reader to gain both a local and a more global sense of scale in which to understand volcanoes, plate movement and the structure of the Earth. Between each section a Google style of globe is used to show the viewer where the next location is on the planet in relation to the current study. These are rather brief and it may be helpful to have slightly longer sequences to enable viewers’ position themselves and relate it to their knowledge of the globe.

A key strength of the programme is the way complex ideas are introduced simply and then develop into more elaborate explanations. The sections covering faults and geological time scale are good examples of this. They are supported by the selective and powerful use of geographic resources such as aerial photographs and satellite images. Again, the commentary helps the viewer relate what is taking place at various

points on the planet in order to build up a united picture. The presenter is careful not to suggest that theories are clear cut and agreed. When he introduces the beginning of life on Earth, he offers a range of examples of how scientists think life may have begun and evolved. For example, he compares the theory of life evolving in areas of hydrothermal vents with those of other specialists. Studies of Mount Etna and Mount St Helens enable the reader to link physical geography with its impact on human activity. The powerful film of a farmer calmly eating a meal outside his house as the lava from Mount Etna slowly makes its way towards him provides much for the viewer to think about while the narrator remains quiet.

4. CONCLUSION

The four case studies above attempt to show the variety of ways in which UK television viewers have been exposed to the wider world during 2007. A number of other programmes and series also offered this experience but the scale of this chapter does not allow for discussion of them. Presenters range from international actors to indigenous people through to academic geographers. They all offer opportunities for viewers to develop their geographical interest, knowledge and understanding. Two lines of future research now present themselves. The first is to establish how audiences respond to such programmes and how their geographical understanding develops. As Williams suggests “Media researchers are more interested in what audiences say about the influence of the media in their lives.” (2003, p.190).

Secondly, geographers need to consider how they may actively promote the subject though the medium of television. It is in competition with many other themes and subjects, therefore its visible presence in the media may give important messages about

the power and status of the subject. "New audience research focuses on how audience members generate meaning from the media in the broader context of the exercise of power in society" (Williams, 2003, p.193).

Perhaps as geographers we do not interpret power as a means of control, rather to enable audiences to better understand the subject and empower them to develop a greater understanding of the world in which they live.

DVDs of the BBC series analysed in this article may be purchased on-line at www.bbcshop.com/

REFERENCES

- Barnett, S. 1998. Dumbing Down or Reaching Out. In *Politics and the Media*, ed. J. Seaton, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Baudrillard, J. 1983. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext.
- Curran, J. & Seaton, J. 2003. *Power Without Responsibility. The Press, Broadcasting and New Media in Britain*. London: Routledge.
- Durrani, A. 2007. *Internet attracts growing TV audience. Broadcasting and New Media in Britain*. London: Routledge.
- Gisell, A. 2006. *A Study of Modern Television: Thinking Inside the Box*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Grierson, J. 1979. *On Documentary*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Hand, C. 2003. *Television Ownership in Britain and the Coming of ITV: What do the statistics show*. London: Royal Holloway University of London (unpublished paper).
- Held, D. 2000. *A Globalising World? Culture, Economics, Politics*. London: Routledge.
- Louw, E. 2001. *The Media and Cultural Production*. London: Sage.
- Williams, K. 2003. *Understanding Media Theory*. London: Arnold.