

Glocalizing ‘the other’: British factual television and documentary practices in global media cultures

by Sue Sudbury, Bournemouth University

The concept of ‘glocalization’ was first introduced in Japan with the use of the word ‘dochakuka’ to refer to the adaptation of farming techniques to local conditions (Roudometof, 2016:2). Then a group of Japanese economists used the word in a series of articles published in the late 1980s in the *Harvard Business Review* (Mendis, 2007:25) and the term soon became more widely used to refer to the process in which international products are adapted to the particularities of a local culture in which they are sold.

Every year, British television programmes are sold internationally, grossing over 1.3 billion pounds in 2015-16, with the USA remaining Britain’s largest export market (*UK TV Exports Report, 2015-2016*). However, statistics, for this same year, show that Asian territories are the fastest growing market for this particular British product, with Japan buying 48% more programmes than the year before, India 43% and China 40%. British viewers may be able to tell if a high budget drama has been produced with an eye on the export market if it contains an assorted collection of ‘chocolate box’ images such as the quintessentially British village green, red buses and stately homes; images primed, in the past, to sell to the lucrative American market and it remains to be seen if such images are now deemed right for Asia.

Factual formats conceived in different territories, such as in the Netherlands by Endemol and in the UK by Freemantle Media, are licensed to television networks around the world and then adapted to the perceived tastes of their own local audiences. So, Endemol’s *Big Brother* is re-named *Bigg Boss* in India, *Housemates*, *Let’s Stay Together* in China and *Bolshoy Brat* in Russia, and changes are made to the rules of the game in each territory. Even within Europe regional differences occur; an Italian television channel produced a slightly different version of *Deal or No Deal* to the one broadcast in Britain. Perhaps this is not surprising; it is about making the ‘generic’ local. As Roland Robertson correctly states, the very process of globalization has also involved the ‘reconstruction, in a sense the production, of “home”, “community” and “locality”’ (1995:30). Television executives, from India to Italy, decide what constitutes ‘home’, what are the particular tastes of their own national audiences.

However, certain forms of documentary practice can reverse this commonly understood process of glocalization, in which global products are adapted to the local marketplace, by seeking out the local ‘abroad’ and then adapting it for the global media sphere. Bondebjerg claims that, at their best, observational documentaries can ‘glocalize global structures of understanding’ (2009:223). Although more frequently made by Western filmmakers, international documentary films can attempt to present in-depth portraits of human life and draw on universal human emotions. These films can glocalize ‘the other’ and bring ‘both specific cultural knowledge of difference and a universal dimension of human commonalities into the global media culture’ (2009:230).

In 2016, the British independent production company, Keo Films, made a series of three one-hour documentaries for BBC2 entitled *Exodus* in which they gave camera phones to a group of refugees from Syria attempting to escape to the West. The resulting films contained some of the footage generated by the refugees themselves, particularly that shot on the boats they were forced to use to make the hazardous journey from Turkey to Greece and then the

footage they took as they made their way through Eastern Europe. Though most of the scenes were shot by a British crew, some featured intensely personal and human moments, scenes that a global audience could relate to; the result of a search for ordinary, everyday life under extreme circumstances. For example, a family, in the dead of night, packing up their meagre belongings to make their way to the boat which would be the start of their uncertain journey. Despite the danger that could lie ahead, the father was joking with his disabled daughter and his other daughter showed the camera, and us, the life jacket that she would be wearing in the boat. It was a deeply touching and familial moment and particularly poignant as earlier in the film we had found out that some unscrupulous vendors were selling faulty life jackets just to make money from these desperate refugees. Filmmakers, and television executives, are looking for these particular moments which reveal a universality of human emotion that resonates with a global audience. 'Precisely by focusing on both the specific and universal aspects of everyday life in different national contexts, documentaries can situate human life in a context that has elements of both global, universal life and local, regional, and national forms of life' (Bondebjerg, 2009:223). The 'local' is fundamentally shaped by the global but the opposite is also true; there is a complex interplay between the two.

A very different example of 'the other' being recorded by a Western crew is in the production of *The Tribe* (2015), a four-part series made by the independent British company, Renegade Pictures, for Channel 4 Television. The 'fixed rig' had been used previously in different British institutions, from schools and hospitals to police custody suites, to capture moments that would be hard to get with just one camera. Installing sometimes as many as 100 fixed cameras, video was recorded from just three of the many robotic cameras at any one time, chosen by the director based in the single Portakabin somewhere on site. Similar to a television studio set-up, the director and production team made decisions as to which stories to follow at any given time from looking at the feeds coming into the gallery. The subjects knew where the cameras were and they knew they were being filmed, but without the presence of the crew 'on the ground', which they may have found inhibiting or even intimidating. The resulting films have been very popular with viewers, with the consolidated ratings of the series based in a school, *Educating Yorkshire*, frequently topping four million.

David Brindley, the commissioning editor at Channel 4 said, 'we came to the question of how we can move (the fixed rig) on. The simple and bold idea was: what if we afforded one family in Ethiopia, 4,000 miles away, the same technology and applications as, say, a school in Britain' (*The Guardian*, 31 May 2015). The production team selected a particular family from the Hamar tribe living in the Ethiopian South Omo Valley. The cameras focused on their everyday lives as well as more important tasks like planning marriages and when their children would leave home; not surprisingly, universal human 'rights of passage' that a global audience could relate to. British television reviewers praised the series for tapping in to a shared humanity. The British newspaper, *The Express*, said it showed all 'the familiar fault-lines and foibles of our world', *The Herald* for moving on from 'the stereotypes' by portraying a family that are 'uncannily and sometimes hilariously close to us' and *The Times*, 'what is miraculous about this film is the way it highlights our shared humanity'. The series trailer highlighted this by showing the irritated father picking up clothes from the floor that had been casually discarded by his teenager and the next minute complaining to his wife that she was nagging him again. Paddy Wivell, the series producer and director, said:

This is a new way of doing TV anthropology ... What excited the consultant anthropologist we worked with was that we were using a different tool – you don't have a camera operator or a presenter. You can film it in a purer way. I sometimes

feel too much television is presented through western, celebrity eyes ... Let people speak for themselves (*The Guardian*, 31 May 2015).

However, perhaps surprisingly, the series did not rate well and though it started at 1.71 million, by the final episode it had fallen to 1.38 (figures from BARB, the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board <http://www.barb.co.uk>). A possible reason why the series rated badly was a failure to sufficiently 'glocalize' the programme content. The local was not made global enough and so British audiences found the tribe too 'other' to relate to.

In contrast, Twofour's production, also in 2015, for BBC2 of *The Real Marigold Hotel* was a ratings success with the second series becoming the highest rated factual series on BBC2 in 2017, with a series consolidated average of 4.1million viewers. In response to the feature film *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011), the first series followed an eclectic bunch of older British 'celebrities' on their journey to Jaipur in northern India to see if they could happily retire there. The premise was a little weak in that they all seemed to have very established lives in Britain but nevertheless it led to some amusing encounters along the way and allowed the British audience to 'experience' India. It could be seen as a very good example of 'the local', as perceived through Western eyes (the credits showed that the key production roles were filled by British crew), being 'glocalized' for our consumption. It is important not to underestimate the role of the 'celebrities' in these series' successes as it would probably not have rated so highly if it had been a group of 'ordinary' British citizens trying out India as a retirement destination. Overall, the series was respectful and the protagonists did make efforts to visit a range of people and hear about their lives. However, there was one awkward moment when actress, Miriam Margolyes, was needing to 'do a wee' and darts player, Bobby George, asked, on her behalf, where was the nearest women's toilet. George was visibly irritated when the young man at the street stall did not seem to understand his English; 'doesn't anyone speak English around here!' he exclaimed in annoyance. There is then a comical shot of the two of them, overweight and hot, struggling to cross the road while minding the on-coming cows and tuk tuks. At times, they sound disrespectful, saying that the Indian street is like a war zone and at that moment we see the seeming chaos through their eyes, but then at another moment the joke is on them; we see them as caricatures, as 'ducks out of water' and 'idiots abroad'. Overall, the series was about the celebrities themselves rather than about India. India was used as a 'bit player', a 'side character', sometimes a slightly shocking one but in the main as a stereotypical colourful and scenic backdrop. The ratings successes of these two series has led to the commissioning of a successive serie with new celebrities and a move from BBC2 to the more mainstream channel, BBC1. Charlotte Moore, Director BBC Content, said, 'the first series was a big hit that connected with viewers of all ages in a really authentic and heart-warming way. It was entertaining whilst brilliantly enlightening which makes it the perfect fit for BBC1. It celebrates a big universal subject that we all care about and I'm looking forward to watching our new cast of characters explore India and reach an ever broader audience on BBC1' (www.tellymix.co.uk). This is heavily 'glocalized' factual entertainment which is more about the characters themselves than the place in which they have been located.

In the past, international subjects have appealed to British audiences without the need to inject the 'celebrity factor'. *Welcome to Lagos* (BBC2, 2010) produced by Keo Films, was a three-part observational series exploring 'life at the sharp end of one of the most extreme urban environments in the world: Lagos, Nigeria...this eye-opening series shows what life is really like in some of the toughest parts of the world's fastest growing megacity' (BBC

oplayer). It was followed by *Welcome to India* (BBC2, 2012) and *Welcome to Rio* (BBC2, 2014). Interestingly, *Welcome to India* was voiced by the British Indian actor, Sacha Dhawan, who narration often started with the words ‘we are’ to make the series feel like a portrait told from the inside rather than by the country’s old colonial masters. Two British Indians were involved in the production - the editor, Paul Dosaj, and the director, Ashok Prasad, oversaw the Kolkata shoot, though most of the key editorial roles were filled by non-Indians.

BBC2, and in particular BBC1, are the most popular and mainstream of the BBC channels and need to secure high ratings for their programmes to justify the higher production budgets. In contrast, BBC4, where budgets are lower, can arguably afford to take more risks with their programming and also broadcast more single documentaries (series are seen as creating more ‘noise’ (press and social media publicity) and it is easier to build an audience over their ‘run’). For that reason, singles are sometimes curated into a ‘season’ of programmes on a particular theme or subject. In 2015, as part of an Indian season of films, Century Films made *Mumbai High: The Musical* for BBC4; a unique film in which the director, Brian Hill, used a technique he has employed previously in his documentaries of asking key protagonists to sing (*Feltham Sings* (2002), *Pornography: The Musical* (2003) *Songbirds* (2005)). *Mumbai High* focused on three children attending a school in Dharavi, Mumbai, and told their stories through song and dance routines, performed together with some of their teachers and class mates. The credits indicate that this was more of a genuinely collaborative production with the roles of 1st Assistant Director, Camera Assistant, Grip, Gaffer, Playback Operator, Sound Recordist, Choreographer and Composer filled by local Indian production staff. This is another example of the packaging of India for a British audience, in this case by using familiar song and dance routines.

BBC4 is the home of the internationally renowned documentary strand, *Storyville*. All of these films are, by necessity, internationally financed so the production budget is truly global, though financed mainly from Western countries. One such film that was broadcast in this strand was *5 Broken Cameras* (2012). In 2005, Emad Burnat, a Palestinian farmer, bought a small camera to record the birth of his son. However, when fellow villagers started protesting against the West Bank Barrier being built nearby, he decided to use his camera to film them. When his camera was destroyed by Israeli police, he just went out and bought a new one and then another new one – in total, he had to buy six to tell this story. This film is an example of a genuinely local product which became global. Emad was joined in 2009 by the Israeli director, Guy Davidi, and it was his idea to use the destruction of the cameras as the framework in which to tell the story. Davidi also suggested that Emad and his family should become protagonists within the film so that a personal story unfolded alongside that of the protests. Later, with experienced French producers coming on-board, they secured significant funding from the French television channel, France5, and CNC, the French Film Fund, together with grants and funding from Israel, the Netherlands, Canada, America, South Korea and the UK. To qualify for French film funding, the edit had to take place in France so although shot in Palestine, the final film conformed to a French aesthetic, or at least a Western one, with most of the funding coming from this source. Did this process glocalize the film for Western consumption or despite traveling, did the film stay true to its ‘locality’? It was certainly highly acclaimed and won more than 40 awards, including awards at film festivals in Jerusalem, Amsterdam, South Korea and Armenia and in America, the 2012 Sundance Film Festival Award, the 2013 International Emmy Award and a nomination for the Academy Award.

In 2008, I received development funding from the British organisation, WorldView, to make a documentary about a group of women in rural Andhra Pradesh who were being trained, by a local government initiative, to be video reporters (Sudbury, 2016). The idea was that the women would make films about issues concerning them and then screen the films in local villages, to empower themselves but also to inform fellow villagers about important issues. As a British filmmaker, I was an outsider coming into their villages to tell their stories so in an attempt to record something genuinely 'local', I asked four of the women if they would use their project cameras to film anything they wanted to in everyday lives. Each woman chose to use their cameras in very different ways; Indira used hers to get her husband to own up to his opposition to her being part of the video reporter training project, while Parvathi filmed her children doing homework. I then interviewed each woman and as the director, my role was to illicit thoughts, feelings and information from them that I felt would interest a global audience. I made my questions sufficiently universal to relate to this imagined 'global audience'. So when I asked Parvathi what makes her sad, that was when she disclosed the death of her first son. This was a moment in the film (*Village Tales*, 2016) that clearly resonated with a global audience; it speaks to a situation that the wider audience can identify with.

In the age of YouTube it may become increasingly irrelevant to talk of the glocalization of media products. When the domain name 'cats.com' was recently valued at \$1 million, it is clear that 'locally produced' videos of cats do not require any glocalizing effort for them to appeal to a global audience; cat videos obviously 'speak' to millions and travel across international borders. However, while long-form documentaries still require expensive and time-consuming post-production processes, money will be required to make them; funders will require 'product' that 'sells'. It is this economic fact that drives the glocalization of content and makes specific and local experiences into globally relevant programming. Hopefully this process does not distort the veracity of these original 'local experiences' and documentary film's ability to document different forms of everyday life around the world is recognised; documentary can play a fundamental role in the way we understand both 'us' and 'them' and bring together the culturally specific and the universally common. Documentary films can present more in-depth portraits of human life, drawing on universal, human dimensions that we all share.

References

Bondebjerg, I. 2009. Behind the Headlines: Documentaries, the War on Terror and Everyday Life' in *Studies in Documentary Film*, 3:3, pp. 219-231. Taylor and Francis online.

Mendis, P. 2007. Glocalization: The Human Side of Globalization as if the Washington Consensus Mattered. Raleigh, NC: Lulu Press.

Robertson, R. 1995. Glocalisation: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity in Global Modernities. London: Sage).

Roudometof, V. 2016. Glocalization: A Critical Introduction. London: Routledge.

Sudbury, S. 2016. 'Locating a 'Third Voice': Participatory Filmmaking and the Everyday in Rural India. *The Journal of Media Practice*, 17 (2-3), 213-231.

TRP Research. 2017. *UK TV Exports Report 2015-2016*. Taunton: TRP.