
Review

Third World Issues: A Challenge for Television Conference at IDS, 24-26 September 1976

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A year and a half ago, Dudley Seers broke new ground in the 30th issue of the IDS Bulletin (vol 7 no 3) with a somewhat harsh critique, entitled 'Heart Without Mind', of Alan Hart's documentary 'Five Minutes to Midnight'. Addressing a Conference held at IDS a year later designed primarily for television producers and IDS staff to exchange ideas on how British public can best be informed on development issues, he compared the less formal rigour of such artistic statements to most academic work on development, identifying three common aspects facing the reviewer: content, the context in which it was produced, and the underlying model behind it. These themes dominated discussion in the two days which followed.

The three conference directors (Rita Cruise O'Brien, Sandra Nichols and Robert Cassen) have probably made a break-through in conference design. They arranged discussions based on films on development themes made for British television, which as vivid works of art, seemed to speak far more eloquently than the precise academic papers of social scientists, by communicating provocative messages to the viewer. Certainly there was nothing dull about a confrontation of television professionals and constructive critics searching for collaborative contacts. The success of conference discussions was apparent in the extended last session of the conference which over-ran Sunday lunchtime, with all three dozen seats round the conference table occupied.

Participants seemed to be agreed that 'Five Minutes to Midnight', which was the first film to be discussed, conveyed a vivid picture of what it means to be poor, but thereafter there was little agreement except that the film left a great deal unsaid and unexplained. However, its Producer/Director emphasised his limited objectives and moral concern to make explicit the dimensions of human poverty and to warn of the crisis facing the rich world.

The Conference was not intended as a festival with discussion of the intrinsic merits of the various films shown. The integration of films

with discussion was rather meant to prompt consideration of the best methods of incorporating and presenting development concepts in a responsible and thought-provoking way, and to large audiences. Three carefully chosen contrasting films helped not only to raise these issues, but also to provide convincing visual evidence of what might be done.

The second film from Granada's Disappearing World series, 'The Eskimos of Pond Inlet', made a startling contrast to the first. Although not intended as a film about development, it was concerned with modernisation and dependency, both principal manifestations of the development process. The Eskimos themselves conveyed the poignant messages in a number of conversations translated by sub-titles in a film which a member of the Eskimo community later helped edit in the cutting room. The result was a moving and universal message, a sophisticated work of art which left us all full of admiration and with a deeper understanding of the human agony and misery when a deep-rooted society undergoes drastic change.

The mediator between the disappearing traditional society with its fascinating, almost enviable ancient life-style, and the film-makers was Hugh Brody, an anthropologist who had spent four years with the people in Pond Inlet. His sensitive approach seemed to provide a most convincing model for effective collaboration between social scientists with considerable knowledge of a particular region and those wishing to make films. Brody's claim to the conference that film-making could be more rigorous than academic writing was borne out by what we saw.

Although there was disagreement whether it was the Disappearing World crew or the Eskimos who were actually speaking through the film, we were certainly left with the impression of direct, honest, and often disturbing communication with minimal interpretive intervention. We began to consider whether this particular success was unique, or whether it could be replicated to present some other aspects of the development process at the local level.

Programmes made for the BBC 'Worldwide' series on Cuban and Mexican television provided a discussion of their sharply contrasting, if derivative styles and values. The contrast between the social education which is dominant on Cuban television with the blatantly commercial messages to be found in Mexico were not just examples of the extremes of media polarity, but of the international context of media development. We learned of the commercial ramifications of the distribution patterns of the major exporting countries—dominated by the USA—of a giant industry's sales programmes, equipment, use of satellites and expertise on a massive scale. The discussion considered the dependence contained in the message itself, and doubted whether poor people will vote with their fingers to sever their dependence on the images of the rich man's world. This conference was concerned primarily with informing the British public and only incidentally with the imbalance in the international flows of television programmes from rich to poor countries, an important topic which will no doubt be the subject of other conferences.

As Jonathan Dimbleby was called away at short notice to make a programme, we left out the Thames TV film on Ethiopian famine, which made a considerable impact at the time and which was to have been the vehicle for our discussion on the TV treatment of disaster in developing countries. Our concern was to ask if sensational handling of such catastrophes was clouding the public's understanding of the more fundamental set of underlying causes.

We were reminded of the recent Birt/Jay debate about the making of television news, of the bias in the selection of news items, of the subjectivity of opinions, and the subtle influences that condition what we think is happening in the world. The discussion moved from *what* to say to *how* it was said, which raised the issue of which audience these films were made for. Sensitive to the problems of making programmes under budgetary and time constraints, a frank exchange of 'shop talk' raised the difficulties of using detailed research as background for films. A BBC Money Programme film, 'Brazil: The Last Frontier', completed the programme. Al-

though it emphasised the links between national development and the global economy and showed how Brazil was dependent on foreign finance and the world market, it failed to deal with fundamental political issues, and an opportunity for a comparative historical approach covering several previous 'golden ages' in Brazil was missed. In a very candid discussion, the series editor gave an indication of the constraints of the medium, which set a concrete framework to the discussion of how to encourage academic collaboration as a basis for reliable information and understanding.

This discussion led to suggestions for specific films or series on the issues raised by UNCTAD, for example, which might examine the whole chain of handling the production and marketing of particular commodities from grower to consumer, covering both the economic and social aspects. This enthusiasm was tempered by concerns expressed by participants from Africa, in particular about the purpose of such a series and whether proper account would be taken of responsibility to the countries where the films were made.

The conference concluded with a panel discussion aimed at drawing together the sessions and pointing the way ahead. The television people seemed very interested in the possibilities of collaboration with IDS staff on ideas and programme planning, while academics, in a similar spirit, were encouraged that their work might be projected to a mass audience. During the conference the spirit of mutual professional diffidence seemed to alter: towards the close of the conference it had become one of collaboration based on closer understanding of problems and limitations on each side. We wait now for the programmes which may help enlighten issues of international development and ultimately help to make a better world for rich and poor.

Postscript

Granada World in Action advertises in the Times of 22 October, 1976, that it is looking for "someone interested in both television and careful, painstaking research—often spread over many months."