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Broadcasting Values: Engaging with Alternative Interpretations of World Politics

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ADAM GROVES, NOV 28 2007

During World War II, the BBC represented a crucial arm of UK foreign policy, broadcasting allied propaganda across occupied Europe. Sixty years later the organisation has developed an international reputation for impartiality, yet 'BBC World Service' still plays an important role in transmitting 'British' values across the globe.

Unlike other areas of the BBC, the World Service is funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) – the Government department responsible for promoting UK interests abroad. Whilst in power, Margaret Thatcher asserted that "the World Service earns every penny we put into it, by promoting our world-view and policy. It has done so in the past and will continue to do so in the future".

With this in mind, I'd like to consider an innocuous item broadcast on the 27th of November 2007. Amid stories of emergency rule in Pakistan; an imminent major Middle East peace conference; the international fight against polio; and the failure of UN arms embargoes, the World Service reported on an issue of less immediately evident global relevance:

"A debate at Oxford University in England has been heavily delayed by mass protests against two of the speakers, controversial historian David Irving and far-right political leader, Nick Griffin. Protesters forced their way into a building but police eventually ejected them and the debate went ahead".

The two issues raised by the brief report —free-speech and extremist politics— are undoubtedly important and they deserve to be discussed on an international stage. Yet it struck me as surprising that this particular story was deemed worthy for the 'global news'. Does reporting on a small protest at an English university really represent the most appropriate, the most globally relevant, route into two issues which affect millions of people around the world every day? The description of the night's events as 'mass protests' also seemed strange; is five hundred people really a 'mass protest' in a town of over one hundred and fifty thousand? I can think of much bigger protests that haven't made the national –let alone global– news. So why cover the story and why describe it as such? The answer lies in the values embodied in the incident; values which are nowadays often understood in the West to be at the centre of a global struggle. Perhaps the report could be interpreted as follows:

British people protested en masse against extremist politics today. However, as a democratic society we recognise the importance of free speech. Therefore, ultimately —after a delay— a debate on the issue was had.

News is framed according to different ideological priorities and perspectives. The BBC inevitably represents (and seeks to project) a world-view which reflects 'British' values and interests. A brief look at the coverage of a recent major battle in Afghanistan is illuminating:

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Written by Adam Groves



The BBC headline declares that 160 Taliban have been killed. Al Jazeera's simply notes that 150 people are dead. Both are plausibly accurate – both might be considered examples of impartial reporting. There is no obvious propaganda at play, no clash of values or norms. Yet the reader is likely to draw very different impressions from glancing at the two pieces. The BBC headline suggests that the US-led coalition is successfully prosecuting operations against the Taliban – read: *there has been a significant victory for US-led forces against a terrorist group*. Al Jazeera, on the other hand, points to another story, one where 150 people are dead and a concerned Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, is flying to Washington to discuss the escalating violence.

As the World Service's report on the Oxford Union's 'free speech' debate demonstrates, the UK seeks to highlight and transmit its liberal democratic traditions; it's proud of a society which has strong 'moral' principles and yet which also engages with alternative viewpoints. However, coverage of a battle in Afghanistan shows that there are numerous legitimate interpretations of the UK's own standing in the world: whilst some of us intuitively see an army fighting for key values others intuitively see dead and wounded people.

Whether western publics are able to recognise and engage with alternative interpretations of world politics (which means looking beyond the BBC, Fox News and CNN) is, I suggest, one test of the self-image we seek to highlight and project: that of a society willing to openly acknowledge a plurality of views and to engage constructively with them.

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