“What role does media play in shaping western perceptions of 3rd world countries?”

This summer (2011) I spent three months volunteering in Cape Town, South Africa. This experience is what has given me the fuel to under-go the research project I am about to embark on. I was living and volunteering in a township in Cape Town, South Africa called Mitchells Plain. I worked there as a PE teacher during the day and helped run after school football training. During my time in Mitchells Plain I lived with a host family which enabled me to really integrate myself within the community. I got to see first hand what life is like out there. I had many conversations with both young and older people about their lives, problems they face, what their living conditions are like etc. Whilst in Cape Town I was also welcomed with open arms into a local family.

I tried to go out there with as open a mind as possible as to what I was going into. However it is almost impossible to not wonder what your living conditions will be like when trying to pack for three months. My Mum asked me, “Do you know what your accommodation is like? You could be living in a mud hut”. Looking back on it now its a crazy thought, but when those are the images you see on TV they are subliminally in your mind.

“They hear you’re from South Africa and they’ve got this sense that you’re still wearing little animal skins.” A. Irafaan (2011)

Irafaan Abrahams, a radio presenter on Voice Of The Cape, referring to the time he spent teaching at inner city schools in London, during a radio interview I had with him on his show.

B. Srividya (2005) states “Our understanding about other cultures and nations around the world is often colored by our memory of these places we have received through mediated visual information (Mita. 1999). Although numerous inter-related social forces might contribute to our perceptions of others, mass media portrayals undoubtedly play a very important role in influencing people’s attitudes towards out-groups, especially when presented in very realistic ways in media such as films.”

From this research I hope to gain a deeper insight into the way media can shape people's minds. The types of media I will be focusing on will be mainly video and film. Research methods I will use will include analysing and critiquing media pieces such as films, documentaries and journalistic films. Reading books and journal pieces covering the issues I am researching. I also aim to hold an interview to further my knowledge on the subject.
Chapter Outline

Before the start of each chapter there will be a quote/reference which relates to the chapter and aims to prepare your mind for where you are about to be taken on the journey the reader will go through reading my research. This idea came from a book I have been reading called “Surprised by Joy” by Michael Meegan.

Introduction

Whilst writing my introduction I was imagining I was writing the introduction to a book. I wanted to give the reader an insight into the author’s personal story and show them why that has motivated me to undergo this research project.

Perceptions

Early research has led me to find three types of perception which I will explore. These are ethnocentric perceptions, neutral perceptions and relativist perceptions.

T J. Scott (1999) is a social studies teacher and did an experiment in his class. He showed slides of India, got his students to write responses to the images and then analysed the responses categorising them using the three perception types.

T J. Scott (1999) explains the experiment, “The slides show a typical Third World country. As you view each slide, write a brief response, describing what you feel or think about the image. There is no right nor wrong answer. Simply write whatever comes to your mind as you analyse each slide. The slides included images of everyday life in India, portraits of Indian people at work or at leisure, and examples of architecture, religious sites, and rural village life. The third part of the activity involved a reflective exercise in which the students wrote about their impressions of the developing world after they had viewed the slides.”

I aim to look into the results of his experiment and analyse them in relation to the essay question. I think this is a good opening chapter as it engages the reader into a deeper understanding into people’s perceptions.
Third world cinema

This chapter is likely to be a large one and will be split into sub-chapters. To start of I want to look into third world cinema of the past and how the countries in these films were represented. Talking about the state of third world film as far back as the 1950’s,

“Third world film makers resented not only Hollywood's domination of distribution circuits but also its caricatural representations of their culture and history” S. Robert (2000)

I will focus on films, documentaries and journalistic films. I will find examples of these and compare them. I am currently thinking of Hollywood films such as 'Slumdog Millionare' set in India and Directed by British film Director Danny Boyle. I have come across a movement called the video journalism movement. The movement consists of video journalists from all over the world uploading short journalistic films/documentaries to VJM's website and YouTube page. For example a documentary by B. Linda, (2009) that follows a real life 'slum kid' in India and tells her story as she writes for a local paper about the issues that surround her. My aim here is to look at the difference between western idealism in the films they make about third world countries and the films made by the people in these countries themselves.

International aid

“We hear of tens of millions dying in Africa of AIDS, but the reality is sanitised by statistics and cold data that do not weep or yearn to be held in someone’s arms” M. Michael (2006)

This chapter will mainly be about advertising charities do to get people to donate. I aim to interview Jessica Everall who is in charge of fundraising, marketing and communications for Skillshare International, the non governmental organisation I volunteered with over the summer. I want to talk to her about the challenges she faces in terms of how they choose to portray the people of the countries they are fundraising for and the financial gains and losses that can come with deciding to have pictures of sad, needy people we feel sorry for in comparison to showing images of happy people.

“We see mainly images of the starving child, Aids and disease; no traders except poor ones eking out a living; little education; no police except as enforcers of harsh regimes and mostly Africans as having no agency. They are basically bystanders in their own affairs, depending on ‘our’ beneficence as benign aiding dispensing Westerners.” Mahadeo, M & McKinney. J (2007)

I will also look at TV adverts from other charities and see how they run their fundraising campaigns.

Conclusion

It is very likely I will have more than three chapters as I can already see my research will lead me to discover new ways of looking at things or different routes to go down during my research. I will keep an open mind and do not already expect a specific outcome. I am already amazed at a lot of the information I have come across from the journals and book I have been reading. This subject truly interests me and I look forward to furthering my research. By the end of the project I will look all the information I have found and try to summarise why things are as they are and try to answer the question of what role the media plays in shaping western perception of third world countries.
Chapter One

Perceptions

“To me, the Third World is a place where famine and hardship are very wide spread...The water you drink and the food you eat are all polluted and decaying.” - Student

A journal article entitled ‘The visual representation of developing countries by developmental agencies and the western media’ by Alam, S (2007) opens with “I was staying with friends, Paddy and Deborah, in Newry, Northern Ireland who had Kindly made their five year old daughters room available for me. Corrina was friendly and curious and would spend a lot of time in the room. One day as I was clearing my pockets of change I had accumulated, she suddenly remarked, ‘but you’ve got money, but, but you’re from Bangladesh’.

You cannot blame this child for thinking a guy from Bangladesh should be poor. It is what she has been fed via the media. Images she has seen in fundraising adverts, stereotypes in films, fundraising posters she has seen as she walks through the city etc.

What I want to explore with this chapter is the different ways people can perceive the same information and how images in the media shape people’s perceptions of developing countries.

To start off looked into the definition of perception and the different types that exist.

Ethnocentrism: Belief in the intrinsic superiority of the nation, culture, or group to which one belongs, often accompanied by feelings of dislike for other groups.

Neutral perceptions: Thoughts touch on a mix of the two other perception types

Moral relativism: The philosophized notion that right and wrong are not absolute values, but are personalised according to the individual and his/her circumstances or cultural orientation.

T J. Scott (1999), who is a social studies teacher decided to do an experiment in his class to see the perceptions his students had of third world countries. Before he showed any images he got the
students to all write down their thoughts and feelings on third world countries and how they feel about the differences in these countries ie a different accent and cultures. he showed them a range of photos of everyday life and sites in India. He did not tell them which third world country the images were from and none of the images had any captions. After each image he got them to write a brief comment on what they thought. Once they had viewed all of the images he got them to write their thoughts on third world countries after having viewed these everyday images.

He then grouped their responses using the three perception types. Here is a selection of the responses that followed;

**Ethnocentric perceptions:**

- I believe that we as a country, the United States of America, need to focus on ourselves. Our government thinks that the U.S has to be peacemaker. What we should do is worry about our own problems, like shutting down our borders etc, …

- To me, the Third World is a place where famine and hardship are very wide spread. Being able to live is the greatest challenge because it is so hard. Poverty and disease are as common as mosquitoes on summer day in Minnesota. The water you drink and the food you eat are all polluted and decaying.

**Neutral Perceptions:**

- Many of their customs and ways of living are different from those of Americans

- After seeing the slides … some parts are bad, but others are just like the states.

**Relativist perceptions:**

- People in the Third World have to work, eat, sleep just like us. Even though they have different ways of doing things . . . it doesn't make them any lesser.

- After seeing the slides, it doesn't seem as bad as they make it look on the TV.

The journal article does not mention the age of his students however this experiment is a great example of the different perceptions people can have. It is a good sample of the varying thoughts
people have on the developing world. Ethnocentric perceptions such as ‘The water you drink and the food you eat are polluted and decaying’ come from the images seen in the media via TV adverts, fundraising posters etc. Seeing these images over and over again means that they stick in your mind and create the image of developing countries in your mind. However after having the chance to see what day to day life is really like and getting to see the culture of these places there some opinions changed. One student wrote ‘After seeing the slides, it doesn’t seem as bad as they make it look on the TV’.

As a way of educating his students and slowly removing these miss conceptions T J, Scott (1999) has a theory. “Through visual imagery and systematic reflection, students engage in a process of evaluative consciousness in which they confront their attitudes toward cultural differences and assess whether those attitudes reflect the social reality of the developing world. After reflective engagement with imagery, many students realise that their existing perceptions are biased or inaccurate.”
Chapter Two

Third World Cinema

“Third world film makers resented not only Hollywood's domination of distribution circuits but also its caricatural representations of their culture and history” S, Robert (2000)

Throughout my research I have seen that there seems to be a difference when it comes to the portrayal of third world countries when they are portraying themselves as to when they are being portrayed in mediums such as films by western countries. There is no doubt that what we see in these films on our screens has a big influence on the way we think about these countries. “Films play a big role in shaping ethnic and national identities, especially in the absence of much face to face contact with these groups. They help to create and perpetuate national stereotypes.” B, Srividya (2005),

It seems that misrepresentation of developing countries in films is not a new issue. As far back as 1947 “Brazilian film critic Benedito Duarte, wrote in Estadio de Sao Paulo of his admiration for the ways that Italian film makers had created an “aesthetic of poverty” by using documentary techniques and lightweight equipment to create technically poor but imaginatively rich cinema”. S, Robert (2000). The use of documentary to empower and show life as it really is in these communities is a subject I will return to.

I decided to research some films from around the era of Duarte’s comment. Whilst watching the trailer for the movie One Way Street - A Warner Brothers film made in 1950 set in a small village in Mexico- it didn’t take long for me to see an image of the heroin James Mason punching an Indian baddie to the floor. “As for Mexico, it continually suffers offenses ranging from the trivial…to the most serious, as in Warner Brothers One Way Street, in which James Mason, incarnation of a yankee tough, is the hero and benefactor, while the proud mob of Indians is humiliated beyond limit, in a one-sided picture of misery, humbug, ignorance, and banditry, designed to foment in the North American and International public the belief that [the Americans] South of Texas [are] are an irredeemable and savage territory, in which any fair-skinned gunman becomes a messiah,(Chanan, 1983). It could be argued however that it is just A film and ‘somebody’ has to be the bad guy. The fact they are seen this way in the film doesn’t necessarily mean the film makers are portraying all Indians this way does it?

The problem seems to be the repeat over and over again of these images, therefore enforcing
negative stereotypes into people’s minds. “It would not be surprising if many Americans learn about Africans from Tarzan films, about Arabs from movies such as the Mummy, about China in films such as The Last Emperor, and about nations such as Russia and North Korea from James Bond pictures.” B, Srividya (2005)

Sticking with India, Slumdog Millionaire is a film which received very mixed reception after its release in 2008. It depicts the life story of Jamal Malik, who has made it to the final question of the Indian version of gameshow “who wants to be a millionaire”. Prior to answering the final question Jamal is arrested by the police on suspicion of fraud. Despite the police thinking that a slumdog could not know the answer to all these questions Jamal’s flash backs on his life show how he knew each answer. Internationally the film was received well, receiving a vast amount of awards such as 8 Oscar awards, 7 Bafta awards and 4 Golden Globe awards. During the film - set in the slums of Mumbai, India - you see scenes depicting slum life/poverty, children being trained to beg and steal etc. On his blog ‘Passionate about India’ Indian Film maker Arindam Chaudhuri writes about his displeasure of the way his country has been portrayed by British director Danny Boyle. He feels that “The films entire narration seems like the germination of a sadistic and complex mind with the sole aim of satisfying the western idea of India – and its new found growth instincts at their cost – and its done through a combination of illogical happenings in order to show everything in a disgustingly negative vein.” Chaudhuri, A (2009). Despite the movies world wide success, which is surely good for Indian film s recognition and the all India cast members, Chaudhuri does not feel the success of the film should be celebrated. He is disappointed with India media hailing it as a great film as he feels it is only re-inforcing mis conceptions and a western view of India around the world. He goes on to list ways he feels his country has been shown negatively; “It illogically shows every negative thing about India happening in the protagonists life… slums, open-air laveteries, riots, underworld, prostitution, brothels, child labour, begging, blinding and maiming of kids to make them into ‘better beggars’, petty peddlers, traffic jams..” Chaudhuri, A (2009). and the list goes on.

However a fellow Indian commenting on Chaudhuri’s blog disagrees with him totally. She starts off by stating “firstly this film was never made wid and intention to show the darker side of our nation. it never had the motto of demoralizing the achievements our nation has raked.it merely picked up an issue which has been in circulation for a longer time.”. She then goes on to point out that the film is adapted from a book by an India author. After further research I have found the book the film was adapted from is called “Q and A” by Indian author Vikas Swarup. In the book there is also mention in the narrative of the main characters love interest being involved in prostitution and his friend dying of rabies.
Chapter Three

International aid and the media.

“We hear of tens of millions dying in Africa of AIDS, but the reality is sanitised by statistics and cold data that do not weep or yearn to be held in someone’s arms” M, Michael (2006)

International aid is big business, full of non-governmental organisations around the world trying to help people in the poorest parts of the third world. These companies are not for profit, and in order to maintain the work that they do they rely on sponsorship and most importantly donations. Although this is all out of good nature, I want to explore what effect the advertising these companies do has on our perception of third world countries.

I decided to ask Jessica Everall, Fundraising, Marketing and communications manager at Skillshare International a few questions about their stance on advertising. To start off with she pointed me in the direction of The Concord code of conduct on images and messages which many British Non-Governmental Organisations sign up to.

Whilst reading the pre face of the code the first thing that stood out to me was “Signatories to this Code are acutely aware of the many challenges and difficulties entailed in conveying the scandal and injustice of poverty while striving to meet the ideals of the Code. It is a reality of our world today that many of the images of extreme poverty and humanitarian distress are negative and cannot be ignored. To ignore them would run counter to the spirit of this Code which is to portray the reality of the lives of people with sensitivity and respect for their dignity.” Concord (2006)

Many NGO’s are in a bit of a catch 22 situation. Indeed their intention to help the people of these countries are good, but they then need to convince the public of their own country (Great Britain for example) to feel the same passion they do and want to donate money or volunteer to help. In order to do this you need to convince people why they should help. There is then the issue of HOW to address the issue. Showing images of helpless, starving adults and children pulls at the heart strings and can people ‘feel bad’ and want to help. On the other hand by trying to “respect their dignity” and show happy people who are trying to get on with life but could use our help, can have the public thinking that they are fine and don’t need the money.

In a report by entitled ‘The live aid legacy – The developing world through British eyes: A research report’ British NGO VSO (voluntary service organisation) argue that the media are to blame for
creating stereotyped images of developing countries. "We commonly use images of famine and western aid that are 16 years out of date and relate to only a tiny minority of people in the developing world," says Mark Goldring, Chief Executive, VSO. The report speaks about the unbalanced, stereotypical view that development agencies and the media have promoted of developing countries and the bad effect it is having on the publics perceptions of these countries.

In the report VSO are not simply discounting the media but as saying it is a powerful tool which should be used wisely for the good. It reads "The average Brit does not just wake up one morning with the desire to seek out more information on the developing world. A personal connection, often stimulated by media coverage, triggers the desire for greater knowledge and understanding. So the role of the media is crucial in forging a more balanced view of the developing world". Goldring, M (2001)

Jessica Everall, in charge of fundraising for Skillshare International, an NGO who are currently working alongside VSO as part of the International Citizen Service project. This project see’s 18-22 year old’s across the UK given the chance to take part in three month, fully funded voluntary placements across Africa and Asia. Miss Everall was kind enough to allow me to ask her a few questions on the use of images when putting together an advertising campaign. First I asked her what Skillshare International’s stance is on the use of images during their advertising campaigns to get donations or attract volunteers.

“When we’re taking photos of a project or one of the communities we’re supporting, it’s really important that we are sensitive and treat people with respect. Cameras can be really intrusive and it’s important to preserve people’s dignity when we’re taking photos. Images are incredibly powerful; We believe that they should be used to challenge negative stereotypes and common misconceptions about Africa and Asia rather than reinforce them." Everall, J (2011).

This is a Skillshare ethos I can actually vouch for, as I remember a pre-placement UK based training session we had. The session was on the use of digital and video cameras whilst on our placements. The advice we were given as volunteers was to be very careful and selective about when taking photos or recording videos. Although they understood some of us may have wanted to document our surroundings and the people in the townships of Africa or in Asia we were advised to think first. They explained that a lot of these people do not like people coming over and taking pictures of them. It can be like being in a cage and tourists coming and snapping pictures of you, without even considering your consent or talking to you.

I went on to ask Miss Everall how they go about addressing the catch 22 situation I addressed
earlier in this chapter. Wanting to motivate people to donate or volunteer, but also wanting to respect the dignity of the people of the country and show them in a positive light.

In response to this she said “Skillshare International’s approach is to use positive images of people actively engaging in our projects and leading change in their own communities. In terms of fundraising, we ask individuals and funding bodies to support this approach and we make a conscious decision not to use distressing images that portray the people we work with as helpless or passive recipients.” Everall, J (2011).

The last sentence brings me back to the Live aid legacy report. “Starving children with flies around their eyes.: 80% of the British public strongly associate the developing world with doom-laden images of famine, disaster and western aid. Sixteen years on from Live aid, these images are still top of mind and maintain a powerful grip on the British psyche” Goldring, M (2001)

This links in with the next very interesting statistic from the report. “The strongest call is to media, particularly television”. 55% of British people say they want to see more of the everyday life, history and culture of the developing world on television. They want to see the positives as well as the negatives, and they want context and background to a news story”. Goldring, M (2001)

These statistics show that there are a lot of members of the public who DO want to know more. If they are not given this information however, they can only really go by what else they see in the media until they have the chance, as I did to experience things first hand.
Conclusion

Collating all of my findings together it is clear that the media do play a very big role in shaping western perceptions of third world countries. It seems this is mainly due to the fact that coverage/footage of developing countries is currently the first and only real medium people get to see of these places. It has been mentioned a few times in my research that in order to try and dispell these miss conceptions people need to be able to see depictions of everyday life and culture in these developing countries.

T J, Scott (1999) uses his images of everyday India to show his students what life is really like out there. Via this process they get to start thinking for themselves and not just the ideas they have been fed by the media. VSO also seemed to think exposure to more visual, personal and cultural information about developing countries could help people start to see the third world in a better light. VSO state that 55% of people asked would be interested in watching more television shows that show everyday life, history, culture and people in developing countries.

Whilst researching I came across VJM (the Video Journalistic Movement), who pride themselves as the platform for high-quality, independent, journalism from different perspectives. On their website (www.vjmovement.com) they have journalistic, documentary type videos from a wide range of countries around the world. The videos touch on a range of issues and they have video journalists in over 100 countries. Earlier on I mentioned the dissatisfaction Indian film maker Arindam Chaudhuri felt on how his country was depicted in Danny Boyles award winning Slumdog Millionaire. My guess would be he would be a lot happier with the video ‘India: Young girl documents slum life’ by video journalist B, Linda, (2009). In this 11 minute video you see a real life young girl from the slums of Delhi document life in the slums but in a very positive and inspirational way. The 11 year old writes articles for a youth run newspaper about issues affecting her community. Her work has inspired community leaders to launch nutrition and hygiene workshops for new mothers. She says that when she grows up she would like to open a hospital for the poor and serve them so that even they feel important. If videos such as these were on our televisions people would learn a lot more about the developing world very quickly. It also helps that rather than just stereotypes and statistics you get an emotional connection actually following a real persons life as they show you what life is like for them and what they want for their future. There are 3 videos under the series heading ‘Slum kids push themselves to create a brighter future’. These videos follow the stories of children in the slums of Argentina, Brazil and Pakistan.

Documentaries such as these, however are not making it onto British screens regularly enough.

“There is a view that editors and programme schedulers do not see programmes on the developing
world as ratings winners and are therefore less interested in covering developing-world issues. News is increasingly the main source of information and education in this sphere, although the UK consumer research pointed to a belief that the confines of news programming promote one-dimensional stereotypes.” Goldring, M (2001).

There is a demand from UK consumer groups for media coverage that creates a true more balanced view of developing countries. “They have asked for; The portrayal of positives as well as negatives – good news as well as bad, A sense of continuity – what has happened six months on, a year on, etc, coverage of how disasters come about or are combated and context to stories – why is this happening, what are the underlying issues?” Goldring, M (2001).

At the moment we are left with shows such as “Ross Kemp on gangs”. I am sure this series has an audience who enjoy the show, however being one of the only shows on TV showing countries around the world, people only get see and hear stories of murder, gang violence and drugs. I have recently come across a Channel 4 series called ‘Unreported World’. Channel 4 describes the series as a ‘Critically acclaimed foreign affairs series offering insight into the lives of people in some of the most neglected parts of the planet. They are now into their third series and have been running since 2009. Looking through their videos it doesn’t seem that they have as many inspirational type videos but they have some really interesting content from around the world. The series covers topics such as a group of people who try to stop children being kidnapped on the streets of India, tobacco child workers in Malawi and why malaria – a treatable disease – is still such a problem in Uganda. By watching videos like these people not only get too learn more about what is going on around the world, but also see what it is actually like in places such as Malawi, India and Uganda. See what the streets and towns are like, see a bit of what the culture is like and start to understand their communities a bit more.

“The most constructive observation for journalists and programme makers was a stated desire for programmes that don’t just educate, but create emotional points of connection. A lack of personal connection generates emotional distance, which generates disinterest.” Goldring, M (2001)

It seems that all my research has suggested that the role the media play in shaping western perceptions of 3rd world countries is a very big one. The media footage/advertisments are the first point of call for most people in terms of information about developing countries, therefore they take in what they are being shown and remember it. This, along with seeing a lot of the same kind of repeated images builds up an image in their head of third world countries being disease stricken, full of people who need help from the west and corrupt governments. The results of a British survey by VSO show that when asked “When I say developing world, what comes to mind?” 80%
replied with negative words such as war, famine, disaster, starvation and corruption. Only 5% of the public had positive replies such as exotic travel, wildlife, ancient civilizations and alternative medicines. My research has undeniably shown how powerful a tool the media is in shaping people's perceptions, but now it is important that media is used to change people's perceptions and show them the culture, life, hopes and ambitions of people of developing countries across the world. Next summer (2012) I will be returning to Cape Town. Whilst there I am to do some filming to do exactly this.

I am pleased to see both Skillshare International and VSO seem to be aware of their actions and enforcing people's stereotypes. It seems people in the right places are aware of this and attempting to change things in the right direction. From my research however I can see it will need the backing of media broadcasters in their respective countries before we can start to re-educate. There are also reverse stereotypes in developing countries of 'first' world countries. When I was in Cape Town a lot of the younger locals seemed to think my white friends were rich as they were white and from England. So it would be good to provide programming where possible in these countries about other countries as well. Knowledge is power.

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