

## WHO STOLE REALITY?

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There's something happening today in modern day television that broadcasters are still at a loss to explain clearly to their audience, an already confused audience who at the moment must be wondering whether it's them who are living in an unreal world or whether it's just the English language or even their very trusted media that is playing some tricks on them.

At this point in time, it looks like they can't quite see the difference or piece the jigsaw between the "reality" of TV's celebrity game shows and the hard-hitting 'real' reality of ordinary, innocent, voiceless people all around us.

For some of us, story tellers caught in the middle though, there's no doubt that what we can see is nothing but a much darker and Hollywood reality that is being shoved in their face.

The sort of programs that helps educate westerners about the cultures and life styles of people living in the developing world, a part of the world in which most of its people are today being referred to as 'enemies of peace and democracy', people who no doubt are more relevant to the western audience today than they have ever been, people, me and you would want to know more about (perhaps need to know more about) seem to be vanishing at very high speed from our television screens.

In my early years in the UK, television really meant something to me.

It was clearly the most powerful instrument with programmes that helped influence real and effective changes for real people caught up in real mess world-wide.

It used to air programs that would make you think seriously about life rather than your phone in votes or your red button vote on the remote control.

Certainly television here enlightened me about the ethnic cleansing that was going on in Kosovo, the bloody civil war in Chechnya and it definitely made me eager to find out more about Israel and Palestine.

But even though it seemed to do a better job then it still left me worried and disappointed about the coverage of my own people.

I think there's always been a hole in the coverage of my country and my continent. It's the big powerful silent mass – the innocent, the ordinary, the good and the decent, the people who get stuck in the middle of whatever events their “masters” play their roles in.

So somehow, I suppose it is those people who I feel responsibility for in my work. I am one of them. They are my people – in Sierra Leone and in the whole of Africa and indeed in the whole world.

I have met them in Freetown, capital of my country. I've met them in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan and in London where I live now.

I think in the normal journalism, these people, my people are too often ignored, they are powerless, they have no voice at all. The only sound we hear from them – is their crying. Well, if I have a job, then my job is to hear their voices and make sure that the rest of the world hears their voices too.

Let me tell you what I think happens when you ignore those voices. First you get frustrated that nobody is listening to your real problems. Then someone sees an opportunity to get some power

by playing with your frustrations. They offer you a way of getting your voice heard.

Sometimes, if you are lucky, a politician emerges and is clever enough to get his or her peoples' views understood in a democratic process, but the poorer people are, the less educated they are, the more unlikely such a leader will emerge.

Even when a leader does arrive, how many of them take the power for their own good when they get the influence and the political positions? Too often that is what 'real' democracy means in the developing world.

So in my country, and maybe in a few others like Afghanistan and Iraq, many young vulnerable people ended up picking up a gun and playing the 'big man' soldier – and all because they felt nobody in power was listening to their real problems.

Why is it surprising that when you make someone feel irrelevant then part of them is going to want to change your mind? You can call them rebels if you want, but I think we should at least make the effort to understand what it is they are rebelling against. I suppose it has always been a difficult one the western media to listen to the voices of the weak, but I think that now more than any time before it is time we started to do some serious listening. So that is what is so strange to me, that when world needs real 'reality' it gets 'Reality Television'.

Tamba was an example of what I call real 'reality'. I met him when he was 18 and for the most part of the eight years before I met him he had been a killer, a child soldier in my country's terrible ten year long civil war.

For all his crimes and there were many, Tamba was and is an innocent, ripped from his childhood by people who should have known better.

They too, part of the cycle of violence and evil that grew out of injustice, wrongs done to people by governments that didn't care. At the beginning they were 'irrelevant' so they did things like creating soldiers out of children that eventually made them relevant.

Tamba has not being destroyed by his experiences as a child soldier. He is a good guy. He needs to know the good that is in him and so do all my countrymen and women in Sierra Leone.

In the film I made with Tamba called Return to Freetown, I hope I have shown people a way to forgive Tamba and all the child soldiers for what they did and I hope the child soldiers like Tamba can learn to forgive themselves because that is the purpose, I think of good journalism – to show us all a way out of the cycle of violence by understanding how we got there in the first place.

For me the saddest thing is that it is becoming more and more difficult to make my films. The stories of Tamba and all the other "innocents" do not make popular television – according to the broadcasters. I suppose they're just another business although I had always hoped – I had always felt they were better than that.

What I mean is: I think broadcasters have a responsibility to explain things to us all, to use this great technology so that we can get all of us, together, to understand the big issues or at least talk about them. Maybe that type of thinking is old fashioned now.

Television today is about audience, about ratings – the bigger the better. My side of the deal is to make films that make the important...interesting and their side of the deal is to promote

those films and do their best to make sure they're watched by large audiences. Well, I wished it worked more easily.

When I started using a video camera, the most obvious thing for me to do was to use it to tell stories about people. I was working for UNICEF in Sierra Leone and we had all those big issues to make films about like infant mortality, malnutrition, child protection, education for the girl child but every time I was looking for the ordinary person in the middle of that issue, a real person who would not just explain their circumstances and how they related to the issue but would be themselves in front of the camera and because they were being themselves and being honest, they would then make a connection with the viewers.

So the issue were personalised - it becomes clear through the stories of these ordinary people that this was something that affected real and decent people like you and me.

The issues that I now deal with have become a bit more global like migration, famine and wars but I haven't really changed in the way I make my films, real people in extraordinary situations make my films work. In fact that is what I call real reality television.

I wish I could convince broadcasters of this reality reporting so that they could save all their money on the *Big Brother* houses and all the other reality television studios they keep building and instead tell real stories about the one world we live in. How dare they call their world "reality" television!

Well perhaps this is because they believe that it is only their 'reality' that has brought them commercial success, therefore convincing themselves that it is justifiable to slow down on the 'real reality' programs that they believe keeps dragging their ratings down.

There's no doubt that the tension between making sure that the pockets of the share holders are filled up and that of risking less popular but highly enlightening real stories is making the jobs of the broadcasters unenviable.

But beyond their commercial success and reality television boom, I just wonder if they realize how much responsibility they have towards their viewers who still rely on them for the information that helps them make important decisions for them and their children – decisions that may stay with them for life.

I never really think of myself as part of the television business. In fact I've only met very few people in the television business that I respect and admire.

The most difficult part of my job is working with my team as we all try to convince the next broadcaster to support our next project. I work with my team at Insight News TV in London and whilst we may have won all the awards for the films we've made in the past, it's difficult to get a broadcaster to respond even to an email.

What we do is not popular at least with the broadcaster. I think our ideas make them uncomfortable but then that's exactly how I feel about the way the world is. I'm uncomfortable, my stories are uncomfortable – that's the real world I live in. I can't change that and I don't think it is my job to change that.

I think what we should be working on now is about how best we can “engage” with a big audience in the world, an audience who really do want to know what is going on. I want them to understand why things happen and what the context is and I want my films to make people think about the characters I show them, see them as individuals and if possible be able to relate to them.

I know I am very lucky to be doing the work that I do and I know how lucky I am to be working with the people I work with at

Insight. In the future I think the greatest hope I have is that more story-tellers and film makers from Africa and the rest of the world can share my luck and gain the strength that I have gained to tell my stories as they are and not as some authorities or governments would want me to do.

I believe that proper journalism can bring real change to Africa and to the rest of the voiceless, defenceless majority in our very troubled world. I believe that democracies are empowered by informed electorates and I believe that every one of us is responsible, to at least some degree for each other.

So I guess my real question I want to leave you with is this: would we ever get the opportunity to understand our real neighbours who one way or the other we not only have to keep doing business or going to war with but maybe sharing the same council block with? Maybe not with our broadcasters' new found 'reality'.