

# REAL WORLD BRAINSTORMS

## Background

The Real World Brainstorms take place annually and are co-hosted by BBC Vision and BBC News. The aim is to bring together key decision makers within broadcasting with a mix of writers, producers and environment and development specialists to explore how we can more effectively represent our interconnected world. Delegates exchange views on key issues and ideas, discussing fresh approaches to stories which impact here in the UK and around the world.

Past seminars have had enormously positive feedback, inspiring major programme seasons as well as diverse individual projects. But the meetings are not about pitching ideas – they are about making space for fresh thinking about the way the world is and how it might be represented more richly.

The seminars are organized jointly by the BBC, IBT and the Cambridge Media and Environment Programme.

## The seminars so far

### 2004

The seminars started with an overall theme: change and its impact on people's lives in the west and in the developing world. The aim was to demonstrate that the lives of people in the developing world are not static- as they are sometimes portrayed on television. Specific issues discussed included the effects of global environmental, technological and economic changes, the economic growth of China and India, urbanisation, deforestation, access to education and running water, healthcare, trade rules, HIV/Aids and mental health.

The first seminar took place in London, on Thursday May 20, 2004 and the second in Cambridge, on September 16 and 17, 2004. Each event was attended by 20 senior BBC executives, including the Director of Television, the Channel Controllers for BBC1, 2 and 4, the Heads of Drama, Documentaries, Specialist Factual, Learning, Children's, News, Current Affairs and Sport. 20 developing world experts also attended. They included academics, film makers, writers, grassroots activists, representatives from UK based NGOs (including Barbara Stocking, the Chief Executive of Oxfam), Government Ministers and business leaders. The Kew meeting was addressed by Hilary Benn, the Secretary of State at the Department for International Development. Delegates traveled to the two seminars from a range of countries including Pakistan, South Africa, Mexico and Haiti.

### 2005

The first brainstorm of 2005 took place on July 14-15 at New Hall College, Cambridge. It was our most successful to date. We continued to have high level participation from across the BBC - including the Director of Television, Jana Bennett, and three channel controllers – from BBC2, 3 and 4. Interestingly, we also had representatives from drama, comedy, features and factual entertainment. For the first time, several independent

producers were also present. On the non broadcasting side, there were grassroots activists from India, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Antigua.

## **2006**

A one day event was held in London on January 26 2006, focusing on climate change and its impact on development. The brainstorm brought together 28 BBC executives and independent producers, this time including several from BBC News, and 28 policy experts. It was chaired by Fergal Keane and looked ahead to the next 10 years, to explore the challenges facing television in covering this issue. Several delegates attended from developing countries, including Ethiopia, China and Bangladesh.

On September 14 and 15 2006, another one and a half day event took place at Sidney Sussex College in Cambridge. The theme was 'interconnectedness' and there was a particular focus on Latin America. Many of the BBC participants were drama and comedy producers, directors and writers. One of the aims of the seminars has been to persuade non factual programme makers to introduce international themes and stories into their programmes. As a result of the Kew seminar, the BBC commissioned Howard Brenton to write a drama on contemporary China. It is now recognised that drama, comedy and entertainment offer ways of reaching new and wider audiences.

## **2007**

A one and a half day event was held on July 12 and 13 at New Hall College, Cambridge entitled 'Telling stories about an interconnected world: the challenge to broadcasting.' There were four 'carousel' sessions with a wide range of experts, who all approached the theme of an interconnected world from different angles. Some of the specific issues explored included innovation, design, migration, generational differences and the role of global business. This was a very successful event. The BBC's upcoming *India and Pakistan 07* season was highlighted and broadcasters found the interconnections theme challenged them to rethink the nature of their work. The specialists appreciated the opportunity for a deeper insight into media decision making.

There was recognition of the need to acknowledge some of the complexities and contradictions in communicating global stories. Roly Keating, the Controller of BBC2 took up this theme in his closing remarks 'We've got to keep challenging the frames in which we put these stories because every frame – whether a news item or a classic 60 minute documentary – carries with it all sorts of inbuilt rather unexamined assumptions about the way we tell the story.' Roly urged producers and commissioners 'to generate more variety – shapes, tones, formats – because the liberation of coming at these subjects from a completely different perspective is so breathtaking.'

## **2008**

A one and a half day brainstorm was held at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge on July 3 and 4 2008. This was our largest event to date with more than 50 participants from the BBC, independent producers and a wide ranging group of specialists. The overarching theme was 'Making Sense of an Interconnected World' and the aim was to encourage the BBC to be more ambitious and innovative with its international content. There were small group sessions on the themes of resources, money, change, population and objects. The event was chaired by John Lloyd (producer of *Black Adder* and *QI*) and attracted a number of senior executives from BBC News (Helen Boaden, Director of

News; Jon Williams, World Editor; Craig Oliver, Editor, 10 O'Clock News and Kevin Bakhurst, Controller, BBC News Channel) and from BBC Vision (Jay Hunt, Controller, BBC1; Liam Keelan, Controller, BBC Daytime; Mark Freeland, Controller of Comedy and Emma Swain, Head of Commissioning, BBC Knowledge). On the non media side, there were specialists from a range of disciplines and countries. Several travelled specially to take part – from India, Nepal, South Africa and the US.

**The next brainstorm will take place in summer 2009.**

**Mark Galloway**