

Institution: The Open University

Unit of Assessment: D30 History

Title of case study: Public education through an Open University-BBC collaboration

1. Summary of the impact

Collaboration between The Open University (OU) and the BBC on the landmark series *Empire* led to enhanced public understanding about a contested past. *Empire* was informed by research by Dr **Karl Hack**, Senior Lecturer in the History Department and Director of the OU's Ferguson Centre.

The series attracted up to 2.96 million viewers per programme '[text removed for publication]' and 53% of respondents to an OU survey reported they had 'learned a lot' from watching. Additional impact was achieved through linking the series to an OU 'Learning Journey', including a print item devised by Hack (63,700 requested by July 2013, including 2,700 downloads). OU *Empire* content had 98,660 unique visitors online by July 2013.

2. Underpinning research

Hack's research has emphasised shifting patterns of imperial power and influence and has highlighted Britain's 'managed' decolonisation of Southeast Asia (*Defence and Decolonisation in Southeast Asia: Britain, Malaya and Singapore*, 2001). This was broadened into an attempt to categorise and describe contrasting imperial systems (notably Chinese, British and Japanese), types of colony (settler, mixed, occupation, entrepôt and informal), and shifting power systems [3.2]. He has been able to demonstrate that this process of decolonisation had impact around the world.

Hack's research projects place emphasis on oral history at every level (using interviews with Europeans, Malays, Chinese, Eurasians and Indians), including interviews with insurgents [3.3].

The underpinning research has also focused on a broad range of types of memory and the representation of empire and colonies. In *Singapore from Temasek to the 21st Century* [3.5], Hack stressed the significance of changing conceptualisations and representations of Southeast Asian territories across time through maps, advertising and other media, terminology and narrations. This expertise was influential in the free education materials prepared by Hack to accompany the BBC series *Empire*.

Key research findings have highlighted, for example, the way British strategies naturally led to an acceleration of the process of decolonisation, and that the previous emphasis on 'winning hearts and minds' in the British way of counterinsurgency had been vastly exaggerated. They included a broad understanding of how contrasting communities' memories (contrasting by ethnicity, class, and ideology) had an impact on public and historical interpretation of events from the Fall of Singapore to the end of empire.

3. References to the research

1. Hack, K. and Blackburn, K. (2012) *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore*, Singapore, NUS Press.
2. Hack, K. and Rettig, T. (2006) 'Imperial Systems of power, colonial forces and the making of modern Southeast Asia', and 'Demography and Domination', in Hack, K. and Rettig, T. (eds) *Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia*, London, Routledge, pp. 3–38 and 39–104.
3. Hack, K. and Chin, C. (ed.) (2004) *Dialogues with Chin Peng: New Light on the Malayan Emergency*, Singapore, NUS Press.
4. Hack, K. and Blackburn, K. (2008) 'The Bridge over the River Kwai and King Rat', in Blackburn, K. (ed.) *Forgotten Captives in Japanese-Occupied Asia*, London, Routledge, pp. 147–171.
5. Hack, K. and Margolin, J. (eds) (2010) *Singapore from Temasek to the 21st Century: Reinventing the 21st Century*, Singapore, NUS Press.
6. Hack, K. as Chair of OU Ferguson Centre for African and Asian Studies. (<http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/ferguson-centre/index.shtml>), including its new series of working papers by Hack, Lotte, Hughes et al on Mau Mau and other topics, (<http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/ferguson-centre/working-papers.shtml>), and project websites including on Mau Mau legacy and peace museums in Kenya (<http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/ferguson-centre/memorialisation/index.shtml>).

4. Details of the impact

Historians in History generate impact with their research through The Open University's unique, four-decade long partnership with the BBC. The two partners collaborate to ensure that academic expertise informs programme-making, and jointly-produced series are linked to an OU 'Learning Journey'. The programmes end with a 'call to action' that invites viewers to access specifically developed OU online material via the OU's unrivalled OpenLearn public education site (free, online, quality-assured, outcome-specified learning materials which attract nearly 6 million visitors a year), and to request free print items with academic content (in the case of *Empire*, a double-sided A1 poster which shows how the Empire was re-invented as a Commonwealth, and explores how the idea of empire was sold to a nation, the colonies and the world). Visitors are also offered pathways to appropriate OU study.

The reach of such programmes is translated into public understanding of the past through this learning journey. In this example, the impact strategy was designed to ensure that a large audience would understand the complexities of the history of empire and be able to study the topic further. This was achieved by Hack shaping the making of the programme from the inside, and by designing a 'Learning Journey' that linked the programme with educational tools made freely available to viewers.

The OU and BBC series *Empire*, fronted by Jeremy Paxman, drew extensively on the research expertise of Hack who was bought out from other duties to serve as adviser for the series. Hack's research on the British Empire impacted on both the content and scope of the series, contributing to the quality of BBC historical programming/public service broadcasting. This was achieved by

Impact case study (REF3b)

introducing specific themes, locations and approaches, as well as ensuring balance and accuracy.

Regular meetings between Hack, the BBC Series Producers, the main BBC researcher, and the Series Executive Producer, Julian Birkett [5.1], were held from programme conceptualisation in late 2010 until the final editing of rushes, allowing Hack's research to feed into the programme throughout the production cycle. Birkett commented after the production process:

Input from the OU academic was crucial from day one [...] we had discussions with them, both before and after filming. There were several areas where we shifted our emphasis accordingly. Perhaps the biggest one was the sense that the Empire was predominantly a commercial rather than a political phenomenon (the latter being a commonly accepted view). Another was that we were persuaded that relations between the ruling and the subject races could be a complex and subtle affair, and we tried to show this in the programmes.

Hack also countered the non-specialist presenter's impression that the Empire was all but over by 1948. This resulted in a more realistic portrayal of ongoing struggle informed by academic research which was made accessible to a general audience in order to enhance public understanding of this sensitive and controversial historical topic.

The OU's involvement in the series led to an expansion from the planned four to five episodes. Hack's regional research expertise also informed the selection of sites in Singapore as a location, and his expertise ensured nuance, rigour and accuracy, particularly in the Egyptian, South Asian and decolonisation sections.

For the OU (and the BBC), a rigorously-produced television series is the starting point for creating impact on people's understanding and views. To be judged a success, a series must also persuade tens of thousands of viewers to begin a longer 'Learning Journey', seeking out and using directly-produced OU educational materials based on our research. Hence the series' 'call to action' directed viewers to the OU's online and print resources prepared to accompany the programme, and to further OU teaching and research materials related to *Empire* (such as on the Bengal Famine [<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/social-economic-history/the-legacy-empire-the-bengal-famine>], Slavery [<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/the-rise-and-fall-the-slave-trade>], Dundee, Jute and Empire [<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/heritage/dundee-jute-and-empire/content-section-0>]), as well as to history research more generally.

Public understanding of a complex and contested historical topic was achieved. For example, by March 2013, 63,700 hard copies of the printed poster *Empire* had been requested, with a further 18,000 copies available for future distribution [5.4]. The poster combines content, written by Hack, with visually stunning and sophisticated representations of the British Empire at its height in the 1920s, compared with the modern Commonwealth. Additional free digital downloading was also provided, to continue for up to 10 years (2811 downloads to end of July 2013).

Impact case study (REF3b)

Since the series aired in 2012, Hack has further expanded the online material by adding six freely-available 'Selling Empire' lectures [<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/world-history/selling-empire>] (702 unique visitors between January and July 2013), with an annotated and hyperlinked bibliography [<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/world-history/selling-empire-further-resources>]. Public interest in the topic was also engendered by an online Empire Game (c. 2200 unique visitors), which was available throughout the screening of the series. The print item and online lectures remain freely available via the OU's OpenLearn website.

This landmark series attracted an audience of up to 2.96 million viewers per episode when screened from February to May 2012. Between 8% and 11% of the adult viewing population watched at least one episode in this series on the BBC. The BBC iPlayer recorded 1.2 million additional views. '[text removed for publication]' and impact was also measured with OU surveys of viewers who have watched at least one episode of a series. Immediate impact is evidenced by the fact that 53% of respondents to such an OU survey felt they had 'learned a lot' from the series [5.3].

Longer-term impact is evidenced by the high demand for print items and by the fact that 98,660 unique visitors have viewed some part of the *Empire* content on OpenLearn [5.3] and were thus motivated to find out more about Empire with the OU as a result of this series.

The programmes will continue to be available on worldwide DVD, and the print item and lectures will remain freely available for up to a decade, ensuring enduring impact, outreach and accessibility.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. BBC *Empire* series producer (email to OU)
2. Summary of viewer's responses to a BBC survey
3. Open Media Unit Data about *Empire* Series (Newsletter)
4. The Open University 'OpenLearn' evidencing public access and having learned from related content, e.g.: <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/social-economic-history/order-your-free-empire-poster>; <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/a326/empire-series.shtml>
5. BBC websites evidencing further partnership dissemination of online and print material: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00p138b>
6. The *Empire* website has made its way into popular culture, e.g. it is the most cited source on the 'Empire Marketing Board' Wikipedia entry: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empire_Marketing_Board.