

<p><b>Institution:</b> The Open University</p>
<p><b>Unit of Assessment:</b> C17 Geography, Environmental Studies and Archaeology</p>
<p><b>Title of case study:</b> Changing the way that environment and development issues are represented in the media</p>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b>          Research by geographers at The Open University (OU) in the three research clusters, <i>Space and Power</i>, <i>Culture and Practice</i> and <i>Environment and Politics</i>, has led to changes in how global issues, including environmental change, are portrayed in the media, particularly by the BBC. Building on the notion of ‘interdependence’, the research generated fresh thinking at a strategic level, leading to changes in the tone of broadcasts and the commissioning of new programmes, as well as introducing discussion of ‘interdependence’ into wider public debate. These impacts have been rooted in geographical thinking about spatial relationships in producing places and publics, and media representations of these interrelations.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b>          Global environmental change is one of the most pressing issues facing the world today. Yet there seems little will to confront that challenge, either among politicians or among publics. Research at The Open University has addressed the mass media, specifically the BBC, as a key means by which this inertia might be challenged. There are three main interlocking aspects to this research.</p> <p>The first is rooted in Massey’s (Professor, The Open University, 1982–2009, Emeritus Professor 2009–present) theorisation of relationality [3.3], which highlights the importance of transnational relations in producing people and places. Recognising and communicating the interdependencies inherent in these geographical relations is an important part of acknowledging and representing geographies of responsibility [3.4]. It is crucial to developing the fuller social and cultural imagination, ethics and philosophy required by the anthropocene, as the impact of human activity on the life of the planet becomes clearer [3.2; Nigel Clark, Senior Lecturer, The Open University, 2000–12].</p> <p>The second draws on Barnett’s (Reader and Professor, The Open University, 2003–13) theorisation of the relationship between media and democracy [3.1], which highlighted the need to engage diverse publics, as well as identifying the indeterminacy of these publics.</p> <p>It is from this work that the third aspect of research has developed. Smith (Senior Lecturer, The Open University, 2000–present) identified the need for a new vocabulary to move debate and action about global environmental change forward. His work confirms that there is public disengagement from the environmental messaging of government and the research and policy community [3.5; 3.6], and that this is not simply because the public is not adequately informed. Smith developed an ‘entangled web’ model where, for example, climate change is seen as being constructed globally through interactions between media, a host of other actors, and diverse publics who already engage with climate change in innovative ways. This research led to the successful (2006) Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grant on Interdependence (Smith and Clark) and to joint publications produced for academic [3.4] and non-academic audiences [5.8].</p> <p>The action research undertaken by Joe Smith between 1997 and 2013 saw him co-directing 12 <i>Real World</i> seminars with senior media decision makers, researchers and the policy community to discuss media handling of issues such as risk, sustainability and representations of the global South. These seminars were funded by Department of Environment (now Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs), WWF UK, Bowering Group, Vivendi, the Tyndall Centre and the ESRC Global Environmental Change Programme. Building on earlier research into public disengagement from the main environmental messaging of government and the research and policy community [3.5] Smith used qualitative research methods (recordings, note-taking and interviews) during the seminars, to diagnose challenges to effective media handling of complex global issues [3.6].</p>

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Thus, drawing upon excellent research undertaken by erstwhile (Barnett, Clark and Massey) and current (Smith) members of the Geography department at The OU, cultural imaginations around environmental change and global interdependencies have been opened up. The research has had impact in directly informing richer representations of patterns of social, economic and ecological interdependence, and of more dynamic interrelations.

### 3. References to the research

1. Barnett, C. (2003) *Culture and Democracy: Media, Space and Representation*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press. ISBN: 0-7486-1399-4, 978-0-7486-1399-1
2. Clark, N. (2011) *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet*, London, Sage. ISBN: 0-7619-5724-3, 978-0-7619-5724-9
3. Massey, D. (2004) 'Geographies of responsibility', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, vol. 86, no. 1, pp. 5–18. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.0435-3684.2004.00150.x>
4. Smith J., Clark N. and Yusoff K. (2007) Interdependence, *Geography Compass* vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 340-359 ISSN 1749-8198.2007.00015.x
5. Smith, J. (ed.) (2000) *The Daily Globe: Environmental Change, the Public and the Media*, London, Earthscan. ISBN: 978-1853836640
6. Smith, J. (2005) 'Dangerous news: media decision making about climate change risk', *Risk Analysis*, vol. 25, no. 6, pp. 1471–82. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1539-6924.2005.00693.x>

All journal articles appear in peer-reviewed journals. The monographs have also been subject to peer review prior to publication and all have had considerable significance in their field.

### Research funding

\*2013–2016: £461,000. Awarded by Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) to Joe Smith (Principal Investigator) and Co-Investigators: G. Reville and Z. Zdrahal for a project entitled *Earth in vision: BBC coverage of environmental change 1960–2010*.

\*2011–12: £65,000. Awarded by the AHRC/Department for Culture Media and Sport Placement Fellowship Scheme to Joe Smith (Principal Investigator; Appointed Fellow: Bradon Smith) for a project entitled *Culture and Climate Change*.

2011–12: £7,500. Awarded by Frederick Soddy Trust to Joe Smith (Principal Investigator) and Co-Investigators: R. Tyszczyk, N. Clark, M. Butcher) for a project entitled *Atlas of Interdependence*.

2010–13: £36,000. Awarded by the Ashden Trust Culture and Climate Change to Joe Smith (Principal Investigator); for a PhD studentship (Student: K.C. Payne), publication and podcasts.

2009: £7000. Awarded by the Geographical Association to Joe Smith (Principal Investigator) for a project entitled *Interdependence Report*.

\*2008–10: £15,000. Awarded by the ESRC to Janet Newman (Principal Investigator) and Co-Investigators: J. Clarke, C. Barnett for a Research Seminar Series entitled *Emergent Publics*.

\*2006–08: £22,000. Awarded by Natural Environment Research Council (NERC)/ESRC Research Seminar to Joe Smith (Principal Investigator) and Co-Investigator: N. Clark for a Seminar Series entitled *Interdependence Day*.

2001–03: £16,000. Awarded by Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research to Joe Smith (Principal Investigator) for a project entitled *Cambridge Media and Environment Programme Seminars*.

\*1996–97: £5,000. Awarded by the ESRC Global Environmental Change programme to Joe Smith (Principal Investigator) in support of the first *Cambridge Media and Environment* seminars, which became the BBC *Real World* seminar series.

\* These grants were awarded at the end of a competitive process. All grants were peer reviewed.

### 4. Details of the impact

Impacts of research at The Open University on environment, development and the media fall into three areas:

#### A. Communicating 'interdependence' and global environmental change in wider media

The notion of 'interdependence' as a way of theorising transnational relations has informed public

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debates via:

- i. a series of sell-out public Interdependence Day events held at the Royal Geographic Society (RGS) (350 participants on each occasion) and Southbank's Bargehouse (1000 participants);
- ii. three *Interdependence Reports*, produced with the New Economics Foundation (the last in 2009; **5.6**), which gained wide attention and obtained coverage in a range of news outlets. The Secretary for State for International Development at the time, Hilary Benn, who contributed to the volume *Do Good Lives Have to Cost the Earth* [**5.7**] which directly drew on their arguments (e.g. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8461727.stm>, 17 January 2010). The reports thus shaped modes of political thought.

### **B. Impacts on content and tone of mainstream programming**

Since 2008, Smith's arguments about the need to expand the range of tones and voices on climate change [**5.3**; **5.5**] have led to a shift in the BBC's approach to programming. Specific seasons and programmes widened the range of contributors and perspectives (more global; more varied in content; more direct testimony and thus engaging diverse publics) in response to the seminars and the research underpinning them.

Complementing his work on the *Real World* seminars, Smith worked as a consultant on climate change for BBC Vision and News. Since 2004 he has advised senior decision makers on climate change in order to foster the cultural imaginations required in the contemporary anthropocene period. Smith and colleagues' seminar work underpinned the commissioning of groundbreaking material such as the world's first climate change political thriller, *Burn Up* (BBC 2, 2008), and a *Springwatch Special* (BBC 2, 2010). *Burn Up* launched with 2.6 million viewers and 12.3% market share (46% higher than BBC 2's prime time average), and average viewing figures for the *Springwatch Special* were 2 million. Smith was academic adviser for both programmes. TV producer John Lloyd (originator *Blackadder* and *QI*), who participated at the *Real World* seminars, stressed their 'astonishing' impact, commenting that 'none of this would have happened without Joe Smith' and concluding that 'It is a textbook example of how essential it is to continue funding "pure" academic research because, without it, the "practical" world would hardly change at all'.

Shifts in BBC programming have been directly attributed to the seminars organised by Smith, and often specifically to him, by academics [**5.4**]; bloggers [<http://memex.naughtons.org/archives/2008/07/04/5287>; **5.9**]; reports [**5.1**]; and media, including two *Mail on Sunday* stories (19 November 2011, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2063737/BBCs-Mr-Climate-Change-15-000-grants-university-rocked-global-warning-scandal.html>; 26 November 2011, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2066706/BBC-sought-advice-global-warming-scientists-economy-drama-music-game-shows.html>).

For instance, a storm of climate contrarian newspaper and blog activity around the seminars charged Smith and his BBC partners with shaping BBC policy on climate change:

'Billed as its "scientific adviser" was Dr Joe Smith of The Open University, the self-described "action researcher" who, as Harrabin's partner in the CMEP [Cambridge Media Environment Programme], had helped organise all those seminars to brief BBC staff on climate issues, notably the gathering in 2006 which played such an important part in leading the BBC to adopt a more committed stance in its coverage of global warming.' (Booker, 2011, p. 73; **5.2**)

(Also see: <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/jamesdelingpole/100223342/the-bbc-long-ago-became-a-mouthpiece-for-green-lunatics-why-does-it-pretend-otherwise/>.) Although failing to represent the nature of the meetings accurately, these pieces do demonstrate the continued and ongoing impact of Smith's research on BBC programming.

### **C. Directly commissioning new work**

Based on research insights about the need to engage diverse publics in new ways, Smith also co-commissioned five hours of BBC World Service radio programming as part of the Creative Climate project (*Climate Connections*, 2009 and 2010, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/programmes/2009/11/091118\\_climate\\_connection\\_listing.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/programmes/2009/11/091118_climate_connection_listing.shtml)) and six BBC World News broadcasts (*Hope in a Changing Climate*, 2009, <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/whats-on/ou-on-the-bbc-hope-changing-climate-0>, & and *Earth*

Reporters, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-radio-and-tv-13359848>). These programmes covered pressing issues at the intersection of environmental research and action.

The reach of these programmes is evidenced by the audience figures: advertisers on the channel accept viewing figures of 70 million on first BBC World transmissions, and the BBC World Service Radio slots reached approximately 40 million listeners. The TV and radio shows reached further audiences (tens of thousands) via their free online screening on the Open University, BBC and TVE platforms. These commissions were directly informed by the research outputs outlined in section 2. They pursued the research conclusions regarding the need for more plural and dynamic representations of environmental change by means of a diary motif that is threaded throughout the broadcast and web content in the Creative Climate project.

In a mould-breaking move, the research and policy communities are represented in the films by a much more diverse body of leading contributors, including researchers and policy experts based in the global South and, specifically, young women scientists. Smith (working with BBC Comedy Executive Producer Jon Plowman) also commissioned ten short films arising out of a competition for young film-making talent [http://www.bbc.co.uk/filmnetwork/features/creative\\_climate\\_shorts\\_2](http://www.bbc.co.uk/filmnetwork/features/creative_climate_shorts_2). Collectively, these have been viewed at least 20,000 times online, and screened at film festivals, including the British Film Institute Festival, Futures Film Festival (winner) and Screentest 2013, and are evidence of Smith's role in producing new cultural imaginations of environmental change.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. BBC Trust (2011) *BBC Trust Review of Impartiality and Accuracy of the BBC's Coverage of Science*, London, BBC Trust. Available at: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our\\_work/science\\_impartiality/science\\_impartiality.pdf](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/science_impartiality/science_impartiality.pdf)
2. Booker, C. (2011) *The BBC and Climate Change: A Triple Betrayal*, London, The Global Warming Policy Foundation. Available at: <http://www.thegwvf.org/images/stories/gwvf-reports/booker-bbc.pdf>
3. Butler, R., Smith, J., Margolies, E and Tyszczuk, R. (2011) *Culture and Climate Change: Recordings*, Cambridge, Shed.
4. Hulme, M. (2009) *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*, Cambridge University Press (Section 7.2).
5. International Broadcasting Trust (IBT) (2011) Submission to the BBC Trust's Review of Impartiality Science Reporting, IBT London.
6. Simms, A., Johnson, V. and Smith, J. (2009) *The Consumption Explosion: The Third UK Interdependence Report*, London/Milton Keynes, New Economics Foundation and The Open University.
7. Simms, A. and Smith, J. (2008) *Do Good Lives have to Cost the Earth?* London, Constable Robinson. It has chapters from 18 'household names' including David Cameron and Hilary Benn. David Miliband, as Foreign Secretary, has reflected on the term 'interdependence' in his speeches from 2008 (for a recent example see conclusion of this speech <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/07/david-milibands-ditchley-lecture-after-decade-war/>, July 2013).
8. Tyszczuk, R., Smith, J., Butcher, M. and Clark, N. (2012) *ATLAS of Interdependence: Architecture, Geography and Change in an Interdependent World*, London, Black Dog Publications. Won external funding to support visual elements and web version.
9. Blogs: <http://bishophill.squarespace.com/blog/2011/11/20/who-is-joe-smith.html>
10. Individuals that can be contacted: BBC Environment Analyst (the impact on BBC News), Director, International Broadcasting Trust (commissioned research and IBT briefings from Smith, and collaborated with him in organising the seminars), CEO Quite Interesting Limited (impact on programme makers), President AE Networks (how the research informed strategic thinking at BBC), and Professor, Kings College (the research and its relationship with the seminars, consultancy and impact of related projects).