

# BBC's *World Have Your Say*: Not every worthy experiment works

By Jim Russell

There's something of a revolution underway in public affairs journalism. Many people agree that traditional journalism no longer serves our society well because it excludes the audience from contributing to the journalistic product. With *public* broadcasting, the loss of audience participation is especially severe. We know our listeners' education and knowledge base is so high that, to be honest, they often know more than we do. If we were to exclude their contributions, we would produce a demonstrably poorer product.

Unfortunately, acknowledging these failings of journalism puts you in the company of people who, deep down, seem to hate traditional journalists, accuse them of arrogance for claiming to know the truth, and aim to cut them down several notches by proclaiming that anyone can practice journalism.

The problem is that traditional journalism has well-established ethics, rules and standards and an editing regimen; the new populist media do not. Blogs, YouTube and dozens of citizen journalism websites definitely thrive on what nonprofessionals contribute, but it's hard to evaluate their output because you don't know what rules they play by. Populism can be fun, if you enjoy an audience chanting "Jer-ry, Jer-ry, Jer-ry" on *The Jerry Springer Show*. But it can also be the ranting of a mindless mob.

Enter *World Have Your Say*, a new show aired worldwide by the BBC World Service that is anything but the stodgy old Beeb. It wants to air an inclusive international dialogue on important subjects. The BBC says that the show's listeners set the agenda. In the words of the show's slogan, "it's the news program where you're in charge."

At worst, as in the first *World Have Your Say* that I heard, it sounds like a program where *nobody's* in charge.

*World Have Your Say* is being broadcast by 15 U.S. stations, though only two in major markets, WCPN in Cleveland and OPB in Portland, Ore. (Detroit's WDET just dropped it. Salt Lake City's KCPW dropped it after only four days!)

## Current Critique



**Ros Atkins, host of the BBC World Service show, on duty in Cleveland. (Photo: WCPN.)**

The rest are small stations or HD multi-cast channels in bigger markets. The show has also co-produced specials with WNYC, WOSU and WBUR and will do the same with KQED, KALW and KJZZ.

My first sample of the show, in July, was a live broadcast from the Public Radio News Directors' annual meeting in New Orleans. That day's question was whether the federal or state governments were doing enough to restore New Orleans. Was it a *national* obligation or a *New Orleans* obligation? The discussion was highly charged and entirely predictable. The producers brought together a lot of angry people to vent and shout at each other. They delivered. But for what purpose besides Jerry Springer-style entertainment?

Though the BBC insists that the program follows its usual journalistic standards, the New Orleans broadcast was thoroughly one-sided in viewpoint. No federal, state or city officials were present, and no one noted that they'd been invited. Many of the speakers confidently accused the authorities of indifference on top of dereliction of duty.

The host, 32-year-old Cambridge history graduate Ros Atkins, could have questioned these assertions but cast himself as the cheerleader for populism, not for truth or responsible journalism.

When *Current* asked me to review the series, I asked the BBC to send me several CDs of past shows, including at least one where things got out of control, as they sometimes

did during the New Orleans broadcast I attended. The CDs arrived with a very proper British note from the program's editor, replying that "overall, we do not have programmes where things get out of control."

That may depend upon what is meant by "out of control." There were times in New Orleans when guests shouted over each other, ignored the host and even refused to relinquish the microphone.

Live shows like these sometimes generate far more sound and fury than light. A listener in Portland canceled his OPB membership, complaining that "People shouting at one another is NOT true exchange, and your overbearing host constantly squealing, 'Talk to each other!' to numerous bewildered callers. Are you hoping people will sort out their differences in 15 seconds of phone time? Seriously?"

## Genuinely thrilling

Of the five shows I listened to, not all degenerated into mob rule or chaos. The BBC sent a recorded show that was populist, exciting and entertaining even without mob-like ranting.

The broadcast "from Issa's house," near Kampala, Uganda, was a kick. "We've never done a show from somebody's home before," Atkins announced, and this was not the home of a statesman or celebrity. The picture painted by the host and the ambient sound were exotic and fascinating: a global broadcast from a home without electricity, a generator powering the satellite dish, light provided by candles, and Issa talking in his garden with family and friends.

Some of the Ugandans' rapid-fire English was hard to understand, but it was worth the effort. It was genuinely thrilling that we were given the ability to listen to and talk with *people we never hear from*. Speaking to the world was, as one of Issa's neighbors said, "a dream come true." There was a magical exchange when a caller from England asked how the Ugandan abstinence approach to HIV is working and got answers from Ugandans. Wow! Double wow!

The show's production is modern, tight and hot, with a strong African beat behind it. Over the opening music, authentic African

voices tease the upcoming show. It is a great sound, inviting all to call and sit with them by the electronic hearth:

“Hello, this is Issa in Uganda. I listen to *World Have Your Say* a lot, but today it’s a bit different—the show is live from my house. I have lots of my neighbors here sitting in my garden, and we are talking to you about our lives in Kampala. If you would like to join us by the fire, you can call on us on country code 44-20-70-83-72-72. . . .”

## What’s beyond the gimmicks?

This can degenerate into production gimmickry, however, when all of the interstitial announcements—such as “the program you’re listening to”—are read by audience members. The producers try to make it sound like a “people’s show,” even though they wrote the script themselves.

Sometimes, the producers show off technical wizardry for its own sake, as when they switched live from Uganda to a breaking story in Lebanon.

Nice trick, but why? The story from Lebanon was not so urgent as to demand the interruption. Liveness *is* appealing, but the process can masquerade as content. Atkins is the earnest and energetic master of ceremonies of a world where everything is urgent and hyperkinetic.

Indeed, once you get over the novelty that people anywhere in the world can talk to one another, you are forced to ask, “But, do they have anything to *say* to each other?” I would say yes, sometimes they do—if the host lets them actually connect with each other. But the truth is that real communication takes time and patience, which are both enemies of fast-paced production.

My limited sampling of *World Have Your Say* makes me wonder whether showbiz-styled “debate” is likely to produce enlightenment. If not, does it belong on public radio?

As an American critical of the show wrote to the BBC, “You have some misguided notion that confrontation is the way to present a story, especially when it involves a controversial topic . . . . We have programs on American television and radio like this, such as those which were pioneered by people like Phil Donahue, but we regard these as entertainment, not news, because they are intended to arouse passions, not to inform and provoke thoughtful reflection.”

Populism also denigrates traditional

sources of intellect—as if there were a sign above the studio door that reads, “We want real people, not people who know what the hell they’re talking about.” True, sometimes credentialed experts *are* boring and predictable, but sometimes they are well-spoken, smart, erudite and insightful. Yet there seems little place for expertise in populist programs.

Atkins says that *World Have Your Say*’s experts are “anyone who can speak eloquently on a subject.” He also says the program is not a call-in where just anyone can get on the air. The staff reviews incoming calls and e-mails for credibility and clarity.

Atkins and Mark Sandell, the program’s editor, fervently defend it. “This isn’t just any old shouting match,” says Atkins. He explains that *WHYS* makes people feel plugged into what people around the world are saying and thinking. “Sometimes that will be messy, sometimes people will talk over each other, but sometimes hearing people really letting go is informative.”

The program from the international Scout Jamboree in Chelmsford, England, featured hard-to-decipher voices of numerous young people speaking heavily accented English and saying the kind of faux-profound things that young people tend to say, such as “Why can people of all different religions get along here at the Scout Jamboree, but not out in the real world?”

The explanation for this harmony, offered by an American scout—“Here, we are scouts, and we can live that scout promise”—seems empty and flat to my admittedly jaded ears. I’d pay good money to hear, just for a second, populism questioned. Atkins might say to one of these bright-eyed kids, “What the f\*\*\* are you talking about?” Instead, he weakly questions the kids and keeps the show light.

When someone approaches a truly challenging moral issue—for example, when an Indian journalist begins to suggest what Scouts could do with their first-aid skills to help flood victims—Atkins cuts off the talk and moves along. He knows this is entertainment and we don’t want to get bogged down in heavy thoughts or possible solutions. Showbiz masquerading as compassion is pretty ugly.

But you have to admit that it *sounds* good to hear these voices from Finland, Nigeria and other distant places seeming to talk to each other. “We really want the media to concentrate on the positive side, rather than the negative side,” says one young woman.

“Tell us if we’re getting it wrong,” Atkins replies solicitously.

Is this really the Mainstream Media volunteering to change its ways, or is it an illusion?

## Why some stations air the show

Dave Kanzeg, p.d. of Cleveland’s WCPN, which carries the show, says he’s enthusiastic about listeners “hearing directly from peers rather than from pundits.”

“It can be raw. It can be intemperate. It can be blunt. But it’s *not* inauthentic. And it is especially important for Americans who, more often than not, aren’t exposed to the unadulterated and very often legitimate disagreement with our worldview that exists throughout much of the rest of the world.”

Kanzeg knows that some people can’t stand hearing “meaningless chatter” from ordinary folks and “the constant anti-U.S.A. drumbeat.” Others “get it’ deeply” and are passionate about connecting with real folks around the world. Says Kanzeg, “It demonstrates that thinking globally and acting locally can be more than merely a bumper-sticker slogan.”

OPB’s Lynne Clendenin sees *World Have Your Say*’s inconsistency and other flaws but still supports a program that “adds a range of perspectives, some not heard typically in the U.S.”

“I think this program is on the right track,” she says. “I don’t know if they’re *there* yet for U.S. audiences, but I think they’re close. I’d like to see stations support this effort. There’s nothing else like it today.”

## I love this experiment, not the result

Like journalism itself, my take on this new program is complex and mixed, and admittedly based on hearing only a handful of programs—the five that the BBC picked for me to audition.

Surely there’s something valid about including listeners in the discussion about important subjects. Hearing about the rest of the world from the people who live there is especially helpful in countries like ours that tend toward insularity and parochialism. And there’s nothing right about arrogant journalists dictating the agenda and terms of the discussion, including who gets to speak and who is left out.

At the same time, even if everyone agreed on these basics, that consensus would stop

short of endorsing every populist media experiment as a good formula to answer these needs and also yield reliable, ethical journalism.

Toward that goal, there will be—and *should be*—a lot of experiments, including some that are odd, overreaching or flawed. For years to come, if not forever, we will be exposed to versions of populist journalism that fail to get everything right. In those cases, we shouldn't be afraid to criticize the failures or to celebrate when someone does succeed.

In the end, *World Have Your Say* is an interesting, very well-produced but flawed piece of journalism. It's also a step toward discovering a workable balance between the needs of good journalism and meaningful citizen participation. ■

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