

# **EASA Media Anthropology Network - discussions -**

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/>

## **BBC series query: reactions from network members**

Medianthro mailing list  
31 January – 5 February 2007

### **Abstract**

The network received a query from a TV production company seeking to get in touch with anthropologists in the preparation for a BBC series. Each programme will follow a British woman living in a remote tribal community for one month.

This transcript documents network members' reactions and the questions put to the production researcher.

**Subject: [Mediantro] BBC series, query to medianthro network**  
**From: John Postill <jpostill@usa.net>**  
**Date: Wed, 31 Jan 2007 09:39:18 -0000**

Dear network

Last week I received the forwarded query from Catherine Phillips, a researcher with Diverse TV, in Bristol (UK). She is working on a BBC series and is seeking advice from anthropologists. I've just subscribed her to the mailing list as a guest for 10 days (until Friday 9 March) and she'd be happy to hear your suggestions or questions regarding this project.

Best wishes

John

----- Original Message -----

**From: "Catherine Phillips" <catherine.phillips@diversebristol.tv>**  
**Subject: BBC series**

Hi Dr. Postill,

I hope you don't mind me contacting you out of the blue like this. I'm a researcher with Diverse TV, and we're currently making a series for the BBC in which we're hoping to send six British women to stay with six small communities around the world, to live as much as possible as women in those communities do. I think the BBC feel that previous similar programmes have tended to push women's voices into the background a bit - however unintentionally.

I've been looking at the EASA website and wondered whether you could help me. I'm looking for small, very traditional communities, where the women stand out for some reason - whether that's because they're particularly independent, or because they take part in a particular festival or event. Do you know of any remote communities that might be suitable, and any anthropologists that work with them on the ground that I could talk to? Any help or advice you could give me would be very much appreciated! I've attached a summary of the series for your information.

All the best, hope to hear from you soon.

Catherine Phillips

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[-- Attachment #1: Word Document --]

The Series: 6 x1 hour programmes for BBC 2 in the UK.  
It is due to be transmitted in Britain in 2007.

The Programme: Each programme takes 1 woman from the UK to a remote tribe/community, where she will live for 1 month.

The women will be taken in by a host family and allowed to shadow a local

wife. She will need to work, eat and sleep as the other tribal women do, experiencing what is like to live amongst this community, taking her lead from her mentor.

Her experience will give us an insight into how the women in this community live, the everyday issues they deal with, their hopes and fears and also their opinion of the British woman.

In turn the series will reflect on western culture; it is a two-way process of understanding and exploration.

Our Working Method: Dealing with remote traditional communities has social and cultural implications. So every location will be approached with the most sensitive and thorough preparations.

Our team will ensure that we go through the correct channels and listen to the advice and suggestions of those who know the communities far better than we do. This will include:

- \* The communities themselves. The most important aspect of the series is that they are willing and informed participants in the series.
- \* Anthropologists who work on the ground and know these communities and can advise of the best approach and point of contact.
- \* A translator/fixer, a key person before and during the shoots, who ensures that the productions run smoothly and the communities remain supportive and fully informed of the series.
- \* Where appropriate Governmental and Non Governmental Organisation who work with the communities.
- \* National Filming offices who can advise on the legal and logistical implications.

Schedule and Logistics: We intend to start filming the first of the programmes in January 2007. Each crew will consist of 2 or 3 people, and a local translator and fixer. We are aiming to have all female crews, but that is subject to advice and confirmation. The filming period will be for 1 month.

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**Subject: Re: [Medianthro] BBC series, query to medianthro network**  
**From: simone abram <s.abram@sheffield.ac.uk>**  
**Date: Wed, 31 Jan 2007 10:44:05 +0000**

Hi John

Thanks for this query. I have to ask - how serious is it? The attachment states that it is due to start filming in January 2007 and will be broadcast in 2007. I don't think she is really asking for advice from us if the filming schedule is already in place, and I would not want to be thought to have endorsed their approach by this discussion.

I do think, though, that it is about time the BBC started to understand that they must respect disciplinary or professional knowledge. I don't think this kind of pop-colonialism is acceptable, and had they bothered to consult us at the concept-stage, we might have been able to advise them in a sensible way and help develop a concept which was more credible.

While we are discussing this, if anyone has any comments on the recent BBC 'anthropology week' (such as it was), then I would be grateful to hear from them.

Best wishes.  
Simone

Dr S Abram  
Dept Town and Regional Planning  
University of Sheffield

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**Subject:** [Mediantro] thanks for the reply  
**From:** Catherine Phillips <catherine.phillips@diversebristol.tv>  
**Date:** Wed, 31 Jan 2007 10:58:16 +0000

Hi Dr. Abram,

I hope you don't mind me contacting you directly.

We have been consulting anthropologists throughout both concept stages and as the project has developed. We are actually looking for one more possible location, as the others are hopefully in place. As such, while filming does officially start this month, the last shoot would not start until mid-April, which we felt would give us enough time to consult with anthropologists and experts on the ground. We are very aware that working with a small community like this will have a big impact on any community, but we are committed to keeping it as low as possible, as well as compensating communities appropriately. I'm very keen to speak to anthropologists in person if they would like more answers about the project, and to find out what they feel the pitfalls and possibilities for it are. We have absolutely no intention of exploiting people, whether that's the communities themselves or the people who work with them, and we are relying on anthropologists for accurate information.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any further questions.

All the best,

Catherine Phillips

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**Subject:** Re: [Mediantro] BBC series, query to medianthro network  
**From:** "S.Pink" <S.Pink@lboro.ac.uk>  
**Date:** Wed, 31 Jan 2007 11:26:00 -0000

Hi All

I was pleased to hear that Diverse TV has already been consulting anthropologists at the early stages of this project, and would be really interested to hear more about the type and level of involvement anthropologists have had so far.

I think there are some issues about whether this sort of programme making is considered to be 'anthropological' or whether anthropologists are simply seen as consultants helping TV programme makers to turn their own ideas into TV programmes. I guess different people will have their own ideas about the way round this should be, but it would be interesting to hear Catherine's views on this

Sarah

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**Subject: [Mediantro] BBC series, query to mediantro network**  
**From: Peter Hervik <peter.hervik@imer.mah.se>**  
**Date: Wed, 31 Jan 2007 12:32:03 +0100**

Dear Catherine Phillips/List Server

I wonder if it is only the individual anthropologists with access to a specific community that will be told, what the project is about. The rest of us on this network need to know what genre you are talking about, whether it is entertainment or documentary or other. Also, how long is the local visit expected to be in the community and in the final broadcast. What do you see as a "traditional" community?

I am sorry to say that my own experience has been that the television researchers (BBC and Swedish Television) more than anything wanted the contact with anthropologists only to get access to communities or sources. There was no room given to negotiate, how the local community and sources were to appear on television.

Regards,

Peter Hervik  
Political Anthropology  
Peace and Conflict Studies  
Malmö University

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**Subject: Re: [Mediantro] BBC series, query to mediantro network**  
**From: Narmala Halstead <N.Halstead@uel.ac.uk>**  
**Date: Wed, 31 Jan 2007 18:24:37 -0000**

Dear Catherine and list,

To add to the discussion so far, is the emphasis on traditional about remote location? Difference? A group of people situated in a particular past? And or different levels of development? It might be none of these, but, as raised by Peter, it would be helpfully to hear your thoughts on this concept.

The issue about what will be made of anthropological involvement might come across as a territorial one, but as noted, there is a potentially questionable interface here between anthropological and media representations. I think it would be good to see this as a more productive interface -thus, I also wondered to what degree you will be incorporating into your programme the feedback/dialogue with anthropologists and in what ways.

Will this exchange be ongoing? Part of the material on camera?

I sense that there is concern about ethics. This is very slippery when we talk of 'traditional communities'/people. It very much goes beyond an explicit consciousness on the need/care to avoid exploitation. The concept, in itself, raises problems: this is also in terms of the 'symbolic violence' that some anthropologists speak of as being present in the very act of studying others (another 'us' who then becomes the other in the act of being studied).

Thus, I'd like to hear more about how much the programme will be publicly engaging with its 'starting agenda' and how much it will be publicly incorporating and acknowledging the various views of anthropologists, for instance. Like some contemporary journalists, will those involved with the programme place emphasis on a reflexive approach, for instance, by questioning/bringing out their own particular world-views and the boundaries they set up and collapse between themselves and others?

Also, I wondered if it would not add to the programme to situate your final traditional location in a UK site (you may have already considered this) as an instance of finding the traditional ('exotic'?) at 'home,' and in the process, possibly redefining and or bringing out alternative views of a 'different world' as a world across difference? A world where traditional communities are defined through the 'modern' here and elsewhere?

Also, how does the programme understand the notion of women standing out? Would you be considering those women who also stand out by appearing not to stand out?

Best wishes, Narmala

References:

Halstead, Narmala. 2001. Ethnographic encounters: Positionings within and outside the insider frame. *Social Anthropology* 9(3) 307-21  
Hastrup, Kirsten. 1995. *A Passage to Anthropology: Between Experience & Theory*. London: Routledge.

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**Subject: Re: [Medianthro] BBC series, query to medianthro network**

**From: Daniel Taghioff <danieltaghioff@yahoo.com>**

**Date: Wed, 31 Jan 2007 15:21:06 -0800 (PST)**

Dear Catherine

Why do you wish to place a British woman in a "traditional" society? What was the discussion that lead up to this programme idea, what are the antecedants to this programme?

Do you have any expectations as to the outcomes? Is there any kind of tentative "hypothesis" being tested with this experiment?

Also, just to check your boundaries

- 1) What would you consider to be a "traditional" community in a UK setting,
- 2) Would you consider putting a veil-wearing British Muslim into this setting?

3) If not, why not?

Daniel

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**Subject: [Medianthro] BBC series, query to medianthro network**

**From: John Postill <jpostill@usa.net>**

**Date: Mon, 05 Feb 2007 12:01:53 -0000**

Dear all

Just a quick note to let you know that Catherine Phillips, the Diverse TV researcher who is working on a BBC series and sought our advice last week, is busy at present but will be responding to the questions put to her sometime this week.

Best

John