

Interview - Adrian Monck

Written by E-International Relations

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Adrian Monck is a Managing Director as well as Head of Communications and Media at the World Economic Forum. He has received several awards during his time as a journalist, particularly for his work in Bosnia, Rwanda, and the Dunblane massacre. Following this, he headed up the City University's Department of Journalism from 2005-2009, in which most of his work centred around trust in the media.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I don't really have a field, but I try and follow economic thought. The emergence of female economists questioning long-held assumptions of the field, new themes in economic history especially around colonialism and work on inequality are all generating new insights. For example, I still find it extraordinary that people with Anglo-Norman surnames have a 25% better chance of getting into Britain's elite universities.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

As a self-identifying "outsider" (like many journalists), most of what I understand about the world has come through experience. I thought the world was both more conspiratorial and more rational as a younger person. I now think that organisational cultures and biases play a much bigger part in decision-making. Having held positions of responsibility I see more clearly the limitations of power and the way organisations shape, define and restrict their leaders. The authors I most identify with in my thinking on journalism are Anthony Downes on journalism's role in democracy, and – the master – Walter Lippmann. Also, I see journalism in a tradition as very much tied to religious preaching and sermonising, so I find historic accounts of religious orders and preachers like Wyclif fascinating. (Probably some nominative determinism going on there!)

Could you explain your role at World Economic Forum? What challenges do you face when trying to improve social engagement?

I am charged with managing our relationship with the global public. In the pre-digital days that relationship was mediated by newspapers and broadcasters. These days you can build your own media, as the TED organization has done, for example. We are best known for bringing leaders together in Davos, but we produce an incredible volume of work on everything from inclusivity and gender to plastics. The biggest challenge remains people's stereotypes about the aims of the Forum. Far-right propagandist Steve Bannon characterised the Forum's attendees as 'The Party of Davos' – feeding the imagination of people who see the world run as an elite conspiracy. Former McKinsey consultant turned agitprop columnist, Anand Giridharadas, thinks organizations like ours provide an elite charade for doing good. In truth, these opinions do three things: satisfy a psychological need for blame; degrade dialogue as a valid tool in solving problems; and feed cynicism. None of these are helpful. So, we aim to bridge information gaps about the way the world works and tell positive stories about how progress is achieved.

What role has the media played in recent political events, such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump?

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The media has been largely by-passed by modern politics. It has been weakened profoundly by a digital revolution that undermined both its business model and its influence. Its tradition of recruiting heavily from elites has served it poorly in the face of social change. Advertising revenue has moved to Facebook and Google. Subscription-supported media tends to be elite or business-focused. The only other actors are governments, through public service and propaganda networks (e.g. *Russia Today*), and bail outs from billionaires (e.g. *Time* owned by the Benioffs, the *Washington Post* by Jeff Bezos, *The Atlantic* owned by Laurene Powell Jobs). The real story of both Brexit and the last US presidential election is the emergence of social media. Lack of regulation and oversight for paid advertising online, poor electoral laws and weak regulatory authorities, added to the opportunities for corporate and state actors to become involved in funding or supporting political campaigns has completely overwhelmed ageing democratic systems.

With the rise of ‘Fake News’ are we experiencing a crisis of trust between the public and the media?

Deliberate misinformation is as old as the media itself, just look at an example like the Zinoviev letter in Britain in the 1920s. The crisis is one of elites. Traditional media performed a gatekeeper role that helped manage consensus and, for better or worse, set the boundaries of political debate. That role is broken. The old gatekeepers are frantically chasing “authenticity,” which they associate with populist parties. Their attention helps feed and nourish the populists whilst doing nothing to restore the broken gatekeeper role of traditional media. In fact, trust is itself a misleading term. We surely want a public that thinks and evaluates information critically. The heuristics through which that critical thinking is suspended is “trust”. The problem I see is not one of trust but of attention. Political information is competing with so many other more attractive rivals and the rewards for acquiring political information in mature democracies are very low. So poor provision and low incentives equals civic crisis.

In the current political climate, do you think the freedom of the press is under attack?

Journalists are being jailed and murdered around the world in ever greater numbers. This is profoundly disturbing for anyone who cares about the independent provision of information in the world. It is associated with the reversal of democratic norms, the rise of authoritarianism, and organized crime. None of these trends should be treated with complacency. The biggest dangers currently come from state actors deploying propaganda and misinformation, ownership concentration, and the lack of publishing responsibility taken by the main distribution channels for news. These are creating a toxic information environment in which important journalism risks becoming lost or simply not supported.

The World Economic Forum’s Annual Meeting in Davos has often been criticised as an event which trades in exclusivity. How do you respond to these sorts of critiques?

The World Economic Forum’s Annual Meeting is the only global attempt to bring together active leaders to address longer term issues. In the 1970s it warned leaders to take the environment seriously. In the 1980s it helped provide a platform for those wanting to end the Cold War. In the 1990s it warned of growing social inequality as others celebrated the triumph of free markets and the end of history. At the turn of the twenty-first century it heralded the incredible digital changes of global connectivity. Today it helps explain and prepare leaders for the coming challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Its flaw is that it is based on the optimistic principle that dialogue and breaking people out of siloes can help advance thinking. That isn’t always true. But when it fails, it is a fault of optimism – and those are good faults. And many times, it succeeds, as evidenced by leaders returning year after year.

To what extent do you think institutions of global governance, such as the World Economic Forum, produce real change?

Many institutions have either no mandate or a very limited one. We still live in a world of nation-states. The global governance mechanisms in place are largely a function of the settlement that ended WW2 and reflect a reality in global power relations and the world economy that no longer exists. There is no democratic institution at the global governance level, so there’s certainly no political mandate for change. However, the pressing global issues we face,

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especially climate change, increasingly require global actors – not just nation states – to be involved and many of these actors remain comparatively weak, which in itself makes real change at global level hard to achieve. That doesn't mean we shouldn't try to achieve progress on big issues, but we need to do so with our eyes open.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Learn another language. Even in the age of machine translation and AI, the discipline of understanding another culture on its terms is vital to human understanding.