

Written evidence submitted by Professor Tony Dowmunt

Access: the importance of people's active participation in Public Service Broadcasting

[Written evidence submitted by Professor Tony Dowmunt – Department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London, in a personal capacity]

Biography and summary:

Tony Dowmunt is currently an Emeritus Professor, co-supervising PhDs, mostly in the field of radical and 'alternative' documentary practices. He also co-directs the London Community Video Archive which is preserving community-made videos from the 1970s and '80s, to enable them to be used as a resource for contemporary debates and activism. His research interests have included 'alternative/community media' (both in the UK and Indigenous Australia). He has written articles, and edited three books – *The Alternative Media Handbook* (Routledge 2007), *Inclusion through Media* (Goldsmiths/Equal 2007) and *Channels of Resistance: Global Television and Local Empowerment* (BFI 1993). His long involvement in this area of work has convinced him of the continuing importance of 'access' for 'non-professionals' to television as a public good.

Here he argues that the history of 'access to TV' from the 1970s to the 1990s provides valuable lessons for how we should view the present and future of a genuinely democratic Public Service Broadcasting system, supporting and building on many of the suggestions of the Media Reform Coalition.

Access: the importance of people's active participation in Public Service Broadcasting

1)

In the early 1970s an article called *The Mirror Machine* was published in Sight and Sound magazine. In it, the American filmmaker George Stoney, describes the coming of portable video recording:

Those of us who have spent the years between trying to find a simpler, less threatening way to introduce viewers to the viewed, even viewers to themselves, find these new little mirror machines heady stuff. (Stoney 1972, 9)



These ‘mirror machines’ were used on both sides of the Atlantic by people normally excluded from TV production, to make their own programmes. This was well before the ubiquity of camcorders, let alone smartphones and You Tube – and more than a decade before the start of Channel 4. There were just three TV Channels - two controlled by the BBC, the third by ITV - all delivered through a network of earthbound TV aerials. By today’s standards this was an extraordinarily limited, and also highly exclusive and excluding medium.

2)

At the same time there had been a growing awareness of, and resistance to, this exclusivity: for instance, back in 1972 John Berger cautioned his audience in *Ways of Seeing*:

[...] there is no dialogue yet. You cannot reply to me. For that to become possible in the modern media of communication, access to television must be extended beyond its present narrow limits.¹

There were a few people within broadcasting who took understood this and campaigned for greater access to TV. One of these was Brian Groombridge, author of *Television and The People*, who stressed that:

We have a sense that we know we exist because there we are on the screen. And if you do not appear, if you or your people do not appear, or only appear in certain roles, you are diminished by that (1990, 6).

Around the same time, Rowan Ayres – the editor of BBC2’s Late Night Line-Up – had decided to send a film crew down to a local Guinness factory – with the aim of finding out what the workers felt about the new TV schedules. The BBC team, apparently, were ‘staggered by the level of hostility and distrust, especially the assumption that the BBC would edit the film to make them look inarticulate’ (Oakley and Lee-Wright 2016, 215). So Late Night Line-Up screened the discussion completely unedited. Ayres went on to set up the Community Programme Unit (CPU), which produced a wide range of programmes over the 30 years of its existence. Their aim was to enable people to ‘have your own say in your own way’ - as the opening credits of their first series expressed it. The numerous series’ that resulted included *Open Door* and its successor *Open Space*, *Something Else* aimed at young people, *See Hear* for the Deaf community, *Video Diaries* and *Video Nation*. From 1992 the CPU also housed the Disability Programmes Unit.

3)

This was a radical project within mainstream broadcasting, extended in 1982 by the launch of Channel 4 – designed at the time to shake up the BBC/ITV duopoly. There were aspects of the Channel’s original remit that felt like a CPU mission statement, particularly in the way it obliged them to ‘appeal to tastes and interests not generally catered for by ITV’ (Nicholas & Price 1998, 22) – a statement that acknowledges that television at that point excluded a range of voices and communities. Channel 4 in the early 1980s set about dealing with this exclusion in a variety of ways, for instance commissioning series’ by and for women, minority ethnic groups, and the LGBT community. The Independent Film and Video Department worked with the film and TV Union, the ACTT, to set up the Workshops Declaration: this enabled Channel 4 to fund small collectives – often community-based – to make programmes.

4)

The significance of the ‘access’ project in this period, both in the CPU and Channel 4, is exemplified by how the 1984 miners’ strike was represented on television. Despite the massive political and cultural divisions of that year, mainstream media at the time reported the strike overwhelmingly from the Government’s perspective – to the extent that Alan Protheroe, the Deputy Director General of the BBC –

confessed that he felt ‘haunted’ by the contrast between BBC news coverage of Orgreave and amateur footage presented in a later Open Space programme that told a very different story about police tactics on the day (Oakley & Lee-Wright 2016, 221).

The alternatives to the kind of mainstream coverage that ‘haunted’ Alan Protheroe came mainly from the CPU and the Independent Film and Video Department of Channel 4. Perhaps Channel 4’s main contribution during the strike was the funding they had provided for a number of the film and video workshops under the Workshops Declaration. Many of these then worked together to produce the *Miners Campaign Tapes*ⁱⁱ. A series of six of these were made, and tens of thousands of VHS copies were circulating in mining communities and solidarity groups during the strike.

5)

Thatcher defeated the miners, and by the 1990s her ascendancy was also reflected in what was happening in television, which was forced to become more and more subject to market forces, rather than primarily a public service. For instance, Channel 4’s funding had initially had come directly from the ITV companies in return for their right to sell advertisements on the Channel; the Broadcasting Act of 1990 made the Channel responsible for selling its own advertising, tying it much more closely into the TV marketplace. The CPU were able to carry on throughout the 90s, and did continue to innovate, in particular with the development of *Video Diaries* series, and then *Video Nation*, which provided new ways of looking at social issues from perspectives outside of the ‘mainstream’. However, despite the success of these two slots, the CPU was eventually killed off by the BBC, leaving a vacuum that has yet to be filled. Peter Lee Wright worked at the CPU and pointed out that

the loss of a broadcast space dedicated to the articulation of popular voices and views, and to the marshalling of dissent, must be a contributory factor to contemporary disillusionment with democratic politics and the electoral process. (Oakley & Lee-Wright 2016, 224)

Similar pressures were being exerted on Channel 4. At the end of the 1990s Michael Jackson took over as Chief Executive, who told the Guardian that Channel 4 was longer interested in being ‘a minority channel for minority audiences’ (Gibson 1999). The Guardian also quoted a Channel 4 ‘insider’ describing how the channel saw British culture in the late ‘80s:

Back in 1982 to be black, Asian or gay was very much a defining characteristic for people and not in the mainstream. But now you’ve got gay cabinet ministers these things are very much part of the mainstream. Our remit still enshrines that we should appeal to certain types of audiences, but we can do that in the mainstream. (ibid)

This new and relentless focus on the ‘mainstream’ came from Jackson’s concern that the Channel’s positioning was, as he said, ‘particularly important in an age of multi-channel television’ in which ‘television executives are no longer in charge of television – viewers are[...]’(ibid). Of course, Jackson sees viewers as consumers of programmes who are ‘in charge’ only in so far as they can turn on, off or over. They are certainly not ‘in charge’ as citizens, members of communities or minorities, and TV Executives like Jackson remained ‘in charge of’ what gets produced for the television screen.

6)

Now we have multiple TV channels with a variety of ways of accessing them, and a massively increased sense of how we can choose between them as audiences, enhanced by the interlinking of the Web and TV distribution; and, of course, we have the Internet itself as a source of audiovisual information and entertainment.

It is certainly true that in mainstream TV we also have a hard fought-for and massively increased presence of working-class people on TV, and much greater diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, people of colour, and (dis)ability – particularly in the new forms of (so-called) ‘reality television’. However, despite this increased diversity, the BBC, as Greg Dyke the former Director General recognized in 2001, continues to be ‘hideously white’ⁱⁱⁱ. There has also been research suggesting that the mainstream representation of working-class people in ‘reality television’ is highly manipulated towards certain dominant, middle-class values. Bev Skeggs’ work, with others, has suggested that many of these ‘reality’ formats develop stories where ‘the working class are exposed as inadequate and in need of training in middle- or upper- class etiquette standards’ and establish these standards as being ‘normative and universal’ (2011, 2).

So, the focus of our broadcasting system in the UK – in ‘Reality’ formats and elsewhere - is now on attracting the individual viewers or consumers, rather than on addressing us as

empowered citizens in our different communities. Of course, it has been argued that the Internet makes up for this exclusion in the broadcast media, but almost all of social media is highly individualised and private in comparison, as Roger Silverstone argues:

[...] it is increasingly clear that on its own, that is without a link to other more inclusive media like television, or the radio or the press, the internet is a private, exclusive and fragmenting medium (2008, 52).

7)

Nevertheless, we all now do have massively increased access to the means of media production (via camcorders and our smart phones) and distribution (through the Internet) and this has certainly opened up some new spaces. Only a few years after the BBC axed the CPU, Mark Thompson, when newly appointed as Director General of the BBC in 2004, said:

We look forward to a future where the historic one-way traffic of content from broadcaster to consumer evolves into a true creative dialogue in which the public are not passive audiences but active, inspired participants. (Thompson 2004)

Two years later, in a Press Release about their 'Creative Future' initiative, the BBC acknowledged that:

Increasingly, audiences of all ages not only want the choice of what to watch and listen to when they want, they also expect to take part, debate, create and control. Interactivity and user-generated content are increasingly important stimuli for the creative process. (BBC Press Office 2006)

So, the word 'access' has now been replaced by the terms 'Interactivity' and 'user-generated content', but the concept of active participation, apparently, remains alive and a 'true creative dialogue' with its audience is still seen as a crucial part of the BBC's remit as a public service broadcaster. However, much of the current interest in 'user-generated content' is due to its being a cheap and fashionable way to source material for programmes, rather than from a genuine enthusiasm for democratic participation. 'We are encouraging viewers to send us film of extreme weather' - said David Holdsworth, head of regional and local programmes for BBC West Midlands - 'The aim is to open things up a bit' (Brown 2005, 8). Soliciting sensational material from viewers to bolster conventional programming may save the BBC money, but it is hardly opening up the institution in terms of real democratic access. Most people are still absent from the process of representing themselves.

8)

What are the contemporary ramifications of this absence? Roger Silverstone has argued that:

[...]access to, and participation, in a global system of mediated communication is a substantive good and a precondition for full membership of society, and that distribution of such a right must be fair and just (2008, 147)

In the UK context we have had a recent, vivid illustration of the unfair and unjust distribution of access, highlighted by Jon Snow of Channel 4 News, in his 2017 James MacTaggart memorial lecture at the Edinburgh International Television festival. A couple of months before, the Grenfell Tower block of public housing flats in West London had caught fire, causing at least 80 deaths and over 70 injuries.

The Grenfell Tower disaster taught me a harrowing lesson – that in increasingly fractured Britain, we in the media are comfortably with the elite, with little awareness, contact, or connection with those not of the elite. [...] Amid the demonstrations around the tower after the fire, there were cries of “Where were you? Why didn’t you come here before?” Why didn’t we know? Why didn’t we have contact? Why didn’t we enable the residents of Grenfell Tower – and indeed the other hundreds of towers like it around Britain – to find pathways to talk to us and for us to expose their story? (Snow 2017)

These ‘pathways’ are precisely what was beginning to be opened up in the few decades of the ‘access’ movement, and this is the significance of our ‘loss of a broadcast space dedicated to the articulation of popular voices and views’ (Oakley & Lee-Wright 2016, 224), evident in the protests around Grenfell, and in many other sites of democratic deficit.

9)

Jeremy Corbyn – in his MacTaggart lecture of the following year (2018) – addressed this loss by proposing that ‘the BBC should be [...] democratised and made representative of the country it serves’. He suggested ‘we need to find ways to empower those who create it and those who consume it over those who want to control and own it’. The Media Reform Coalition (MRC), who advised Corbyn, have produced more detailed proposals for how this could be achieved:

External commissioning policy, moreover, should be rebalanced, with the revenue currently going to large multi-nationals cut back in favour of smaller, independent

producers. An increasing proportion of funding should be earmarked not only for smaller producers, but also specifically to support the development of alternative models of ownership in the media industry, with quotas introduced for commissioning to media mutuals and cooperatives. (2018)

This is very welcome, and sounds not unlike the ideas behind the film and video workshops funded under the Workshops Declaration, mentioned earlier. Dan Hind and Tom Mills – both associated with the MRC – have themselves elaborated the MRC proposals by advocating the setting up of publicly funded and locally controlled ‘local media co-operatives’ (2018, 164) whose main function would be the nurturing of independent investigative journalism. This is also very welcome in the current, contested News climate, but doesn’t fully address the more radical demands for ‘access’ and the experiments that attempted to answer them, described earlier. There is a need for many more concrete ways in which people can be enabled to represent themselves, which the access movement of the past was all about.

Jon Snow concluded his 2017 lecture with this imperative: ‘The media must reach out, connect and empower’ (ibid). The access and community media experiments of the 1970s and 80s explored effective methods of doing just that, and they need to be revived and expanded as an important part of how Public Service Broadcasting should be conducted in a digital age.

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Notes:

ⁱ See Berger 1972 – at 28:40

ⁱⁱ <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/theminerscampaigtapes> - accessed 9 October 2018

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2001/jan/07/uknews.theobserver1> - accessed 11/09/17