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## The death of multiculturalism?

Channel 4 is under fire for scrapping its multicultural programming department, but it's just the latest development in the reversal of the bias towards multicultural communities, says the station's former commissioning editor

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How would Isambard Kingdom Brunel have felt if he was told that they were dismantling the Clifton Suspension Bridge and scattering its bits to other means of crossing the same gorge? I can't think.

But I can think about the abolition of the multicultural programming department of Channel 4. I was its commissioning editor from 1984 to 1997.

Channel 4 was created in 1982, and adopted the useful shibboleth of multiculturalism. It only meant that someone must do something to include and embrace the (by now settled) immigrant communities. If the medium was the message, blacks and Asians must have their say - and if it was the message, their collective ego had to be catered for.

In the beginning, there were no guidelines as to what this multiplicity of culture would be. Television can take in most things and package them, and it is the medium that has uniquely stretched the word 'culture' to breaking point and possibly deprived it of all meaning.

On taking the job, I knew that multiculturalism was in some measure a political description. The word was coined, and the programming department initiated, to make the ex-colonial populations - and more centrally Indian and Asian immigrants - feel wanted. More important than the information these programmes could impart was simply the fact that they were on screen.

Their journalism may have been stale, the celebrities may have been second rank ones, but that was not the point. The point was to have a dedicated and distinctly Black or Asian presence on screen. TV is often accused of trivialising, but for the multicultural population, to have their own programmes was to gain dignity.

Presence and variety were the principles that governed the first set of multicultural programming, but there were other policy considerations.

The first was to dissociate multicultural programming from whinging anti-racism. It was demeaning. It turned people into simple victims.

The second was to recognise that British TV in its observation, investigation, probing drama and satirical bite had no responsibility to flatter its subjects. Projecting positive images was the job of advertising agencies and politicians looking for minority votes. The multicultural department was not selling blacks and Asians as ads sell soap.

There are potential losses in abolishing the multicultural department, which can and did become the centre of a lot of debate and dialogue between producers, the public and the editors. The first is that the inhibiting considerations, which have been elevated to a liberal creed today, of what one can and cannot say about race, religion, people and cultures are much more likely to bedevil a white editor than a black one. Whole dimensions of truth are and can continue to be subverted by the rule that multicultural programming should be dedicated to propagandist objectives of good race relations.

The other limb of this dismembered baby that may go down with the bathwater is the provision that must be made for the specifically minority interests of the ethnic population.

Reggae and Rap can enter the mainstream schedules under the aegis of music in a way that qawwali music and the legendary Pakistani singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan never would.

Of course Asians can buy videos of qawwali recitals and of the late Nusrat and watch them in the privacy of their homes, or access a cable channel that does exclusively that, but that is not the point.

The point is to have such 'culture' broadcast by a mainstream channel with consistency, to have it recognised as part, however marginal, of the discourse of the nation and moreover to expand its possibilities, to take risks beyond the pap put out by specialist cable networks.

Lastly there is the 'trade union' issue, the social fairness point, that a group of companies owned or staffed by black and Asians ought to be encouraged to grow within the independent sector without compromising the quality of programming.

Channel 4's own statistics demonstrate that the contracts to self-defining 'black' companies are few and far between. There has been a reversal or neglect of the bias I

attempted to introduce in my time, doing the opposite of quota-setting which was looking for penetrative access or specialist knowledge of the subjects.

An editorial body has to have the intimacy with the sub-cultures of blacks and Asians to be able to commission and programme with any relevance. No TV executive, whatever his or her origin, will be able to tell the intimate story of the tearaway Talibanic tendency of the Midlands perhaps, but he or she ought to know which production company and which individuals will deliver the genuine thing. Intimate knowledge of these communities is crucial if this is to happen.

With this new policy of multicultural diffusion, the real challenge will be the facing of the fact that different cultures are underpinned by distinct ethics. Even though British TV has spectrum of the highbrow and the dumbed-down, there are no mainstream editors who understand and empathise with the mindset of jihadis, killers of authors and burners of books, families which force marriage contracts or polygamists (or perhaps I am mistaken about this last).

Neither should there be - but with such a prohibition, one ought to accept that multiculturalism in Britain is mono-ethical. Other frames of morality can be observed but not approved of. They must inevitably be reduced to polite or critical anthropology.

Even before the abolition Channel 4, ratings-led and culturally bled, ceased taking its multicultural programme remit with any seriousness.

An observational documentary on Tihar Jail in Delhi made by Endboard Productions, an Asian-owned company, was assigned a very late night slot, deliberately killing its audience. The producer protested vigorously and the programme was pulled and kept in abeyance. Lahore Law, an observational series about the operation of the Sharia in Pakistani courts, revealing and relevant, though commissioned by the mainstream documentary department was bizarrely scheduled, with the first programme going out early one evening and the next two at midnight in subsequent weeks.

Nevertheless, though treated with contempt by the Channel, the series has been nominated for the prestigious Grierson Documentary Award and may yet prove the point that supposedly populist scheduling can't be the arbiter of value. If it had been commissioned by a specialist editor, it may have had a champion within to argue its merits and to win it a regular, better slot.

By contrast a similar series in my time as commissioning editor called Karachi Kops, an observation in a Pakistani Police station was transmitted by my programme controller at the time, Peter Salmon, at 9pm in a regular weekday slot. The risk was rewarded with very substantial viewing figures and public and critical attention.

