

## Alternative Programming and the NHS

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Television, like most popular fields of endeavour, tends to be improperly remembered for its high points. Whilst the then three UK channels were enjoying what has been retrospectively dubbed a 'Golden Age', in the 1970s and early 80s the Fourth Estate ruled the airwaves, with programmes like ITV's *World in Action* and *This Week*, and the BBC's Current Affairs department supplying most of its channel controllers. But there was also a fifth column quietly flourishing: an informal network of social action broadcasters with friends in the trade unions and academia, part of the 'countercultural' force Jonathan Powell identifies. It now seems improbable, but this tendency was actively nurtured at the BBC.

One key arena was the then burgeoning department of adult education, initially called Further Education, and re-named Continuing Education in 1978. Perhaps best known for important social initiatives like the adult literacy project *On the Move*, and its language courses, which enabled the newly mobile holidaymaker to make the linguistic best of his or her travels, this was multimedia education before the term had been invented. But the department was also turning out series which, even now, would be deemed provocative, with titles like *Trade Union Studies* and *Multiracial Britain*. Privileged to work as a director on both these, I was party to this efflorescence of committed television, and to the inevitable conflicts it caused.

One film I made with the writer Mike Phillips for the latter series, in 1979 - *We Are Our Own Liberators*, about some of the black self-help groups of the day – was completed just before the Southall riot took place. One of my contributors was hospitalized with a skull fractured by a police truncheon, in the same events that killed the New Zealand-born teacher Blair Peach. I updated the film for transmission with this all too relevant information, only to be told that 'this was not current affairs'. Our writ ran large in social affairs but, once the field was claimed by the shock troops of news and current affairs, we were ordered to the sidelines. It was a quaint example of the sophistry of a management that allowed quite radical programme-making, as long as it did not get too much notice.

The other department that spawned some even more left-field programming was the Community Programme Unit. This emerged from a happy accident when a team from the legendary BBC-2 show *Late Night Line-Up* were dispatched to the Guinness brewery in Park Royal to canvass views on the 1972 BBC Autumn schedules. Invited in out of the rain to the works canteen, they were subjected to a cogent critique of the BBC's bourgeois preoccupations, which led the show's then Editor, Rowan Ayers, successfully to argue for the setting up of a unit to make programmes with and about people largely excluded from the media. For nearly 30 years, until 2000, the CPU made what was called 'access television' with members of the public (*Open Door*), self-help groups (*Grapevine*), disaffected youth (*Something Else*), the deaf (*See Hear*) and many other groupings, including the innovative *Video Diaries*.

I was one of the launch producers of *Open Space* in 1983, a series which consolidated the CPU brand in a long-running documentary strand that was largely issue-led. Working with external advisers, we strove to choose the most important programmes that members of the

public proposed to us. In the first run, I decided to produce three films about the National Health Service, which had already emerged as a key battle-ground during the first term of the Thatcher government. The war with the unions that Thatcher dubbed 'the enemy within' would erupt the following year in the Miners' Strike – the subject of another important *Open Space* correcting the very partial reporting of the time. But the NHS was Europe's largest employer (after the Red Army, as Stephen Iliffe notes) and the icon of the post-War Labour project. Its workers wanted their concerns about its future raised.

*The Consultant's Tale* was made with the NHS Consultants' Association, a pressure group committed to the inclusive principles of the NHS, at a time when relaxation of the consultants' terms of contract was being engineered to help grow the private health sector. Featuring Peter Fisher, a consultant physician at the Horton General Hospital in Banbury, who is now President of the NHSCA, it drew attention to those less flashy aspects of hospital care that do not usually fill our screen, but on which most people rely, and articulated the response to the usual privateer's plaint, "If I can afford to, why shouldn't I take a cab rather than wait for the bus?" The answer is, the cabbie should be driving the bus.

*The Doctor's Tale* featured the work of the Princes Park Health Centre in Liverpool 8, and its founding father, the late Dr Cyril Taylor. He was Chairman of the Socialist Health Association and his then ground-breaking approach was to recognize the social context of health, and to engage with the housing issues, social services and general poverty that impacted on so many of his patients' well-being. This and the early adoption of on-site specialist primary care made the centre a pioneer. As GPs were from the start private contractors within the Health Service, and have been progressively enriched by new contract terms, Princes Park remains unusual in all its practitioners being salaried staff.

*The Nurse's Tale* was made with a psychiatric nurse at St Bernard's Hospital, Ealing, fighting the cuts being imposed by the Paddington and North Kensington Health Trust. St Bernard's was targeted for closure - as part of the infamous 'care in the community' decanting of long-term psychiatric patients to free up hospital estate for lucrative sale – and so was the much-loved children's ward at St Charles, North Kensington. This was not the only film we made where relatively deprived communities felt that so-called 'rationalisation' of health services to new 'centres of excellence' invariably involved closures that deprived those least able to travel to them.

'While some of these battles were lost, the challenges from people like those featured in our programmes helped reassert the NHS's value. Its long-term survival has been guaranteed, not least by huge injections of cash by the Labour government after 1997. Such dialectical struggle also helped focus the broadcasters. During the early 1980s, both at the BBC and in the newly established Channel 4, programme-makers were generally encouraged in the making of issue-driven programmes that challenged government policy. Thatcherism was not just a radical force in British politics, but a centripetal attraction for combative journalism. For much of the decade the BBC had the confidence generally to support and transmit contentious programmes, but conflict with government, in particular over the programme on Northern Ireland, *Real Lives* in 1985, eventually led to the sacking of Director-General Alasdair Milne. With the institution of a new regime under Deputy Director General, John Birt, there was a progressive retreat from the field of battle (details about *Real Lives* can be found at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/historyofthebbc/resources/pressure/real\\_lives.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/historyofthebbc/resources/pressure/real_lives.shtml))

Channel Four had been set up in 1982 with an mandate to cover areas neglected by the BBC and ITV. Although supported by advertising, it was non-profit making, aimed at minority audiences, and funded by a levy on ITV. Several producers and others from the more radical departments of the BBC went to work for the Channel. As the decade progressed it was increasingly left to Channel Four to carry the oppositional role in series

like *The Eleventh Hour*. On the NHS, campaigning programmes such as Yvette Vanson's *Kentucky Fried Medicine* (1988) revealed the dystopia of US private medicine as a warning about Tory policy driving in that direction.

But, when Michael Grade took over as Chief Executive of Channel 4 in 1988, he aimed to increase its audience share. Many argue that this implied the advance of market forces at cost of the 'alternative viewing experience' which the Channel's first Chief Executive, Jeremy Isaacs, had set out to create.

With the resignation of Margaret Thatcher in 1990, television lost its polar bugbear. Such simple binaries have no place in the post-modern world. The decay of bipartisan politics, the fragmentation of television audiences, the desperate search for programmes that will attract, and a generally risk averse culture have all contributed to the decline of dangerous, difficult and alternative programming.

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