

**CHANNELS**



## **MINORITY TELEVISION**

Yvonne Neverson

The demise of *Black on Black* and *Eastern Eye*, Channel 4's major ethnic programmes, brought about by Farrukh Dhondy, the new Commissioning Editor for Minorities at Channel 4, has caused much debate within both the industry and the black community. Although commissioned by and shown on Channel 4, both programmes are products of London Weekend Television (LWT). By deciding to end them Dhondy has forced a mainstream television company to rethink its strategy for ethnic programmes and opened up wider issues of black programmes which need addressing.

Channel 4, with its remit to show programmes for ethnic minority audiences, has shown not only those made by established mainstream companies such as LWT but also the productions of the smaller, independent black companies consisting of mainly black journalists and writers. Both the mainstream and black independents have, by the very programmes they have produced, shown different opinions as to the sort of black programmes that both cater for and reflect the black audience.

It is the ethnic audience which is of the greatest importance in the current debate. It is not only a question as to the sorts of programmes and their content that is under discussion, but whether they should continue to be addressed to an exclusive minority audience and how far, by continuing doing so, they in themselves both reflect and define black culture.

To begin to answer some of these questions some examination is needed of how and why these programmes came into being. LWT began a weekly, half-hour documentary series called *Skin* in 1980 which went out on the air at Sunday lunchtime. It concentrated mainly on social problems within both the Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities, report-

ing on a range of topics that included Asian women workers, Southall riots, the Deptford fire and the Nationality Bill. The teams who worked on these programmes included Samir Shah, Trevor Phillips, both now producers of *Eastern Eye* and *Black on Black*, and Lincoln Browne, who had presented LWT's earlier documentary series on the Afro-Caribbean community, *Babylon*, from which *Skin* had in turn developed.

The Sunday lunchtime slot, limited airtime and the investigative style of journalism, concentrating on problems within both communities, were felt by the teams and LWT to be too restrictive a format to include other more general issues such as music. It was also felt that the format did not permit a more positive image of black people the achievers, with talents in different fields other than in sport or entertainment.

About the same time as *Skin's* revision by LWT, Channel 4 was being established. In response to the 1981 riots that spread amongst black communities in London, Liverpool and Bristol, mainstream television recognised a potential audience they had hitherto largely ignored and Channel 4 was given a specific remit to produce programmes for ethnic minorities. Channel 4 duly commissioned LWT to produce two regular general programmes for the Afro-Caribbean and Asian audiences, both an hour in length, going out late evening, mid-week and consisting of a variety of items: film reports which ranged from self-help projects to black businesses, studio interviews with black commentators, writers, poets from the Caribbean, Africa and the UK, and studio performers playing to a live audience. Research done in the first six months of the two series showed that they had reached 89% of black and 93% of Asian viewers who had found the programmes either 'very' or 'fairly' enjoyable. No research amongst the same sections has been done since and until a proper survey is conducted to find out the range of regular viewers and their reasons for viewing, it is difficult to assess whether the programmes have become television institutions, and much of the current debate will remain in the realm of self-interested opinion and speculation.

LWT's opinion is that the magazine format, despite its shortcomings, is the best way to both inform and entertain black audiences. The problem here is that it has, so far, been the *only* regular slot.



Eastern Eye's presenter, Aziz Kurtmia (photo left) and Black on Black's hosts Trevor Phillips, Pauline Black, Victor Romero Evans, and Louise Bennett (above).

How can its appropriateness then be measured? This conviction is challenged by the black independents, those black journalists and writers who had established companies which made programmes shown on Channel 4.

This independent sector is very much part of the black experience in this country of initiating and establishing groups, organisations, institutions which range from co-operative schemes, hostels for the homeless black youth, community centres for the young and old, black businesses which include hairdressing, restaurants, travel, all of which are initiated by active participants, motivated either by self or community interests. As many of these projects have grown, establishment institutions, realising either a community need or a potential market, responded in two ways: by either supporting projects financially or directly competing for the same market - the black population.

In television, a relatively new field of experience for the black community, it is the black audience which is sought after not only as viewers but as participants. The independent sector has, so far, produced a range of programmes from *Black Arts in Britain* (Bacchanal, 1984) to *Contemporary Politics in the Caribbean* (Caribbean in Crisis, 1985). Because they are not restricted to a fixed format, they are more flexible than the mainstream in defining black culture. Mainstream reaction to the independents is to regard them as the committed voice of black people and as a justification for the continuance of their own programmes with their problematic format. There is, however, one fundamental issue agreed by both this independent sector and the mainstream: that the ultimate aim is to have black people working behind and on screen involved in the technical and production processes. Yet the question of black people in television is often posed as two alternatives:

either that black programmes should cater for a very specific audience or that black people should be involved in the mainstream. This kind of dichotomy implies that black people have a choice which in reality does not exist. Black people are not in any position in this society to choose whether or not to have their own programmes. For any black programme-maker to refuse the ethnic programmes would only mean the likelihood of not being offered anything else.

Yet in accepting minority programmes another dichotomy is created: between the black programme-makers of the independent sector with committed voices from the ethnic communities and the programme-makers who are black as defined by the mainstream. Because mainstream identifies skin colour as the only criterion for minority programmes (with no political, cultural, or religious bias) this does not go any real way to defining black culture and creates a contradiction. The mainstream preference is to select those black people with whom they themselves can share cultural and class values of individual achievement. But this narrow definition makes no allowance for the range of black cultural experience. Moreover, the teams recruited to *Black on Black*, as opposed to just the presenters for example, were relatively inexperienced and, unable to obtain training or opportunities with LWT, they departed to take up new posts elsewhere. This process has now left a vacuum at LWT.

One way to excuse this problem is to look to the impact of ethnic minority programmes on the mainstream. The idea behind this is that once the ethnic programmes are on the screen, then mainstream programmes will take up minority items. In reality, little of this has actually happened. Rustie Lee's recent appointment to the popular entertainment show *Game for a Laugh*, is the kind of example

quoted of the 'galvanising' effect of minority programmes. Yet it raises questions. How can the effect of *Black on Black* be so evaluated given the media's penchant for perceiving and portraying blacks as good entertainers? If so, does this mean that this is the only area in which *Black on Black* has had an effect? If it is not due to the mainstream's stereotype of blacks, is it because of the programme's high entertainment value? And if this is not the only area such programmes can influence, why has the current affairs department not

been so 'galvanised'? This outlook adds yet another dimension to the role of blacks in the media: that entertainment is to be regarded as a positive place for blacks in the mainstream.

Farrukh Dhondy has reacted to the content, slots and airtime of ethnic programmes and intends seeking to broaden the scope. One solution towards this change of policy is to give ethnic programmes better slots than previously enabling a wider audience to see a whole range of programmes from documentaries, one-

offs, and magazine programmes on a regular basis. If those programmes done by independents fail to attract larger audiences, then it is debatable as to whether or not they are creating ghettos. Equally, if the mainstream only regard ethnic programmes as entertainment value then they will assist this ghettoisation and persist the stereotyping of black people. The impact of the mainstream ethnic programmes has briefly introduced to television black people, personalities, issues and talents, all of which should now be developed further.

A great many members of Actors' Equity were proud to perform, raise funds and work to help the men and women of the NUM. We did so in gratitude for the struggle they waged for all working people, and that includes the entertainment industry.

**ACTT**

*Sends greetings to all NUM members and women's support groups who have fought so well.*

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