

**Minutes Regional Audience Council BBC North East and Cumbria
April 2008 at BBC Newcastle**

Present:

Hannah Eyres (Chair)
Frank Swinhoe
Reena Joypul
Ammi Pabary
Stephen Langley
Veronica Alvarez
Jan Harris
Lynne Hall
Nick Francis

Apologies:

Carol Alevroyianni
Alan Coates
Mark Freeman
Eileen Bellett
Wendy Pilmer (Head of Region)

BBC Representatives:

Jaqui Hodgson (Editor, Factual Programmes)
Carol Cooke (Public Accountability Manager)

1. CHAIR'S WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

The chair welcomed four new members and recommended that all members used their networks to get as wide a field of comment as possible.

There were five apologies for absence, including the Head of Region who had sent members an emailed apology explaining that she was attending a BBC management meeting.

2. MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 20 February 2008 AND MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising. The minutes were accepted as an accurate account.

3. PROGRAMME AND SERVICE REVIEW

(1) The White Season

Comments from the council included the following:

- The series was thought provoking and raised significant social, cultural, religious and racial issues.

- The style and presentation of subject matter was complex and might not have appealed to some of the groups of people portrayed in the programmes. This may have resulted in the programmes being viewed by fewer people.
- The programmes reflected a range of regions in the UK.
- Individual programmes could have been better trailed.

White Girl

- The drama was regarded as balanced, compelling and multi layered with excellent writing and good acting.
- The action began immediately and the style of the programme was gripping, producing a good docudrama.
- One member said the content provoked discussion at Middlesbrough SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education, charged with monitoring the provision for religious education and collective worship in schools across the local authority) which pointed out that there was an error in the programme regarding collective worship – a wrong impression was given that children can demand a faith specific approach. As this is a sensitive area and often misunderstood by the press it was a pity that this was not better researched.
- The programme's perceived ethnic agenda made some people feel uncomfortable and unsure as to what they should be thinking. The accustomed precept of an Asian child attending a mainly white school was overturned.
- Members felt that the film prompted them to find out more about Islam.
- Some members said that they would have discounted the programme if they hadn't been told to watch and found it surprisingly enjoyable.
- The violence was shocking and hard hitting, and the girl's mental growth was moving.
- Some people found the drama very depressing.
- The sound quality could have been better as the dialogue was not always clear above the background noise and appeared to be improvised at times.
- One member watched with a friend who was not English and who was horrified that the white working classes were portrayed in this way.
- The message board explored the idea that the film was not about religion, but about the fact that someone living in chaos will clutch at order.
- Members felt that the locations and the portrait of a working class family were accurate and not stereotypical.
- The close ups were very good and reminded one member of the style of the film *Kes*.

The Poles Are Coming

- Members felt that the BBC should do more programmes like this: it was an educational and balanced programme which explored major issues.
- Members felt it would help viewers to respect other people's way of life as it looked at the situation from both the workers' and employers' points of view, without focusing on race.

- Some members felt that young people in schools should be made to watch such programmes. One member said that her 17 year old daughter had learned a lot.
- Some members liked the light hearted style of the programme and found the presenter engaging, and explained the issues without bias, but others felt that this light bantering approach to the serious issues, when sustained throughout the programme, served to trivialise the issues
- The programme was informative and illustrated local problems like housing and the health service and wider problems of trafficking and prostitution
- One member pointed out that for many people the issue of immigration was not relevant to this region but thought that the programme put misconceptions into perspective.
- One member pointed out that people were afraid of the rate of change rather than change itself.
- Several members said they were embarrassed at the condition of white people's lives and their unwillingness to work.
- One member found the graphics and music annoying but another member liked the graphics and felt that the programme was aimed at a younger audience.
- One member felt that the programme depicted young people in a stereotypical way.
- Members commented on the scene in a club where a black person said that the country was in a sorry state due to immigration.
- One member said that the BBC changed the attitude of his father, 'The BBC challenged my dad'.

Chair's summary:

The style and presentation of subject matter was complex which might result in the programmes appealing to fewer people and not reaching the audience depicted in the series.

The trail was very arresting and powerful, but did not give people information on the season, or brand programmes in a way that could be easily understood. Individual programmes were not featured strongly enough which caused members to miss some of them.

Some people however, did not wish to watch the whole season as they thought that it might be depressing rather than entertaining, and felt that the season could have worked better if it had been stretched over a month rather than a week. The timing of the season was very apposite as it coincided with a number of reports on immigration being released.

White Girl could have been better trailed and garnered a larger audience. Members enjoyed the way in which the programme was filmed, appreciated the cast and strong storyline, and felt that the film was informative about Islam. The film was realistic and the locations were appropriate. At times the programme made for uncomfortable viewing as it explored racism from an alternative viewpoint. The sound quality was problematic at times.

The Poles are Coming was educational, and explored the problem of the rate of economic and social change in a good humoured and challenging way, although one member felt that the light hearted approach sustained though out the programme, eventually served to trivialise the serious issues being explored. Some members did not like the music and graphics but others thought that they added a fresh dimension and ensured that the programme would appeal to a younger audience. Members felt that the programme could have been trailed more strongly, so that young people in particular would watch. The programme was felt to explore stereotypical attitudes and thinking; one member said, 'The BBC challenged my dad.' This was a well balanced programme which made many members embarrassed to be English.
Public purposes covered: 2,4,5

(ii) CBeebies/CBBC

CBeebies

- The educational content was very strong and appealed broadly to the right age group although there could be more programming for the higher end.
- CBeebies also appealed to older children
- Diversity was well represented by inclusive programmes like *Something Special* which appeals to children generally as well as children with learning difficulties.

Chair's summary:

The educational content was strong and appealed broadly to the right age group, although there could be more programming for six year olds. Diversity was well represented by programmes like *Something Special* which appealed to all children. The website was felt by all to be excellent. The programmes also appealed to older children, often teenagers who returned to CBeebies after watching CBBC.
Public purposes covered: 2,3,6

CBBC

- The channel was not particularly educational and did not cater well for the top end of the age range.
- There was a gap in the market for young teen programmes who watch *Big Brother* and *Desperate Housewives* rather than CBBC.
- The channel was felt to be very noisy, and the music was not pleasant.
- The channel does not represent the UK to world or the world to the UK.

Chair's summary:

The channel was not felt to be as appropriate or educational as CBeebies. The music was noisy and jarring and there was little programming for the top end of the age range. It was felt that there was a gap in the market for young teens, who were currently watching *Big Brother* and *Desperate Housewives* rather than CBBC. Members did not feel that the programmes brought the world to the UK in any meaningful way.
Public purposes covered: 2,6

4. CHAIR'S REPORTS

Head of Region's Report

Wendy Pilmer's report had been sent out prior to the meeting. Jacqui Hodgson read out Wendy's note explaining that she was leaving the BBC. Members were sorry to hear this news and expressed their thanks for the way in which Wendy had kept them up to date with changes, and taken into account their views and concerns.

Members expressed concern at the disappointing figures for *Inside Out* and wondered about the possibility of the slot being changed. Jacqui explained that the programme was doing well in editorial terms, making programmes of significance, and encouraged people to watch, but said that it was difficult to maintain the audience in the present Friday evening slot, set against *Coronation Street*, and at a time when people appeared to want light entertainment.

Members were pleased that they were now able to access *Inside Out* programmes on iPlayer and would ideally like every programme to be available on iPlayer.

Members enjoyed School Report Day in March and were particularly pleased with the news that Alastair Brownlee was joining BBC Tees as sports commentator.

Audience Council England report

Frank /Swinhoe reported on the ACE meeting and said how pleased he was that so much of what was said in RAC meetings was taken up by ACE.

Jana Bennett had been challenged on the lack of programmes currently made in the regions, and said that she was going to ask Children's to look more closely at this issue. Frank raised the point made in the 2007-8 RAC report on how difficult it was for people to train and get into the business if there was no robust regional production base.

Frank felt that the MACE review did not look closely at the balance between reviewing programmes and service licences.

5. TRUST BUSINESS

The Trust Draft Work plan was sent to all members along with the MACE review.

6. OUTREACH

Carol highlighted the lack of a separate public purpose for entertainment and talked about the recent outreach event on entertainment. Members said they would be interested to see the final report and track what happened to it.

Future outreach on programmes for 4-6 year olds and 7-11 year olds was also discussed. One member mentioned Seven Stories as a possible venue for outreach and another said they had links with primary schools. Another member said that her organisation was planning a party for 250 young people at Durham Light Infantry Museum.

Action

Carol will find out more information for members and start planning online for an event in June.

7. BURNING ISSUES/ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- Frank Swinhoe raised the issue of the Burnopfield transmitter. He had received a response from the BBC, but felt that the information about the more efficient Chatton transmitter should be made public by the BBC.
- Carol discussed a possible visit to Salford to meet key BBC people and discuss the implications of Media City.

Action

Carol will email everyone regarding their availability.

8. KEY ISSUES FOR ACE MEETING

The timing of *Inside Out* should be raised at the ACE meeting

Programmes for Review:

Made in England (DVD and information to be sent out).

Endnote

[We aim to make as much of the minutes available as possible. However, there will be times when sections of the minutes will be withheld from publication. These will be kept to a minimum and clearly marked.]

The reasons for withholding information are consistent with the Freedom of Information Act which applies to some of the BBC's information. See www.bbc.co.uk/foi for further explanation.]