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# Let the people speak – The Community Programmes Unit 1972–2002

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## Abstract

Fifty years ago, the controller of BBC 2, (now Sir) David Attenborough supported an initiative to expand the range of voices and opinions on the BBC through a specialist Community Programmes Unit (CPU). The Unit formed in 1972, a time when the function of broadcasting was subjected to intense public scrutiny in the run-up to the delayed Annan Committee, which finally reported in 1977. Using archival sources, this article builds on the limited literature on the CPU to provide a fuller account of the content it created, the contexts it used and the challenges it faced in its 30-year duration.

## Keywords

BBC, access television, community programmes, Open Door, Open Space, Video Diaries

This article provides an account of the BBC's Community Programmes Unit (CPU), a particular participatory initiative that formed in 1972 when the BBC was half its current age and broadcasting was subject to considerable scrutiny in the long run-up to the delayed Annan Committee, one of the regular government-commissioned enquiries into broadcasting which were scheduled to happen every decade to tie in with the renewal of the Royal Charter. It was a time when industrial action regularly affected broadcasting, and energy shortages saw television transmission curtailed at 10.30p.m. In the BBC, access or community television was, like local radio, tolerated rather than nurtured, yet the Unit survived to produce innovative new content such as the regionally produced discussion strand *People Make Television* (1974–1977), and memorable formats such as

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*Video Diaries* (1990–1999) that utilised new technologies to representing individual experiences.

The CPU's importance is threefold. Firstly, it created the broadcaster-as-publisher model in the UK, subsequently adopted by Channel 4, and now by streaming sites such as YouTube and post-mediated social media platforms such as Twitter. Secondly, it created innovative content that extended the topics and subjects on British television. Finally, it used the new technology of video to develop and refine techniques that have now become familiar elements in the television grammar of reality television and in first-person documentary. It did this despite considerable animosity directed towards it from government, from the broadcasting and associated unions, and from within the BBC itself.

This article builds upon the work on access television (Corner, 1994), on the emergence of the CPU, (Dovey, 1993; Harvey, 2000) on the *Video Diaries* strand (Humm, 1998; Keighron, 1993; Kilborn and Izod, 1997), and on the position of the Unit within the BBC (Born, 2004; Hendy, 2018; Oakley 1990; Oakley with Lee-Wright, 2016). These texts have been supplemented by material that has become available at the BBC Written Archives Centre and through the *Radio Times* Genome project, to produce this more complete account of the unit that has yet to receive fully the attention it deserves. Unfortunately, very little of the content produced by the Unit is available to view. Links are provided in this article to some extant material.

Archival research into the establishment of the CPU demonstrates the attitudes held by many in the BBC towards the inclusion of members of the public in the broadcast sphere. In particular, a 1972 report by the Controller of Television, David Attenborough highlights the importance for the BBC of finding ways to respond to criticisms about the relevance of its national content. Crucially, it introduced the 'broadcaster-as-publisher' model to UK broadcasting more frequently attributed to Channel 4. Paul Bonner (the Editor of News and Current Affairs and first Head of the CPU) submitted a report for the Annan Committee that identified that participatory content could have more relevance in regional and local production contexts. This article identifies some of the issues raised by community programmes, and the gradual incorporation of new technology and techniques that have now become established televisual conventions.

## Broadcasting in the seventies

In 1970, just after the BBC published their vision for the decade in *Broadcasting in the Seventies* (BBC, 1969), Harold Wilson, Prime Minister of the Labour government (1964–70) appointed Lord Annan as the Chairman of the next broadcasting committee. However, when Labour lost the election later that year to Edward Heath's Conservative government (1970–74), the broadcasting committee and legislation were taken off the parliamentary timetable. The BBC's publication of their vision for broadcasting left it exposed to the criticisms of a commercial print media whose long-standing hostility to the BBC as a licence-fee funded organisation is well established. Although the Annan Committee stalled, the print media continued to debate the function of broadcasting, the proposed fourth channel and the purpose of the BBC.

In 1972, the Minister for Post and Telecommunications, Christopher Chataway announced that six ‘community’ television franchise licences would be made available to companies who could provide ‘specially designed content to appeal to the local communities in the areas that they served’ (Lewis, 1978: 67). Whether in response to this announcement or to more general criticisms of the BBC service, Attenborough, in conjunction with Bonner and Rowan Ayres, producer of the *Late Night Line-Up* (1964–72), formalised their ideas for community programming which would extend levels of participation in the broadcast sphere to members of the public.

As Controller of BBC2 (1965–68), Attenborough had been responsible for the development of popular new television content from *Monty Python* to snooker, and he is now best known for the programmes he makes on the natural world. But it is his role in the establishment of the Community Programmes Unit (CPU) that is of importance here. Despite being hotly tipped as the next Director General of the Corporation, Attenborough had decided to go back to programme-making. However, in one of his last Board of Management meetings he proposed the formation of a BBC unit to make ‘community’ programmes with members of the public (BBC WAC R78/2/540/1). The programmes could respond to the views being put forward in the media by campaigning organisations, and the unit would provide the BBC with a mechanism to demonstrate its responsiveness to the issues being raised in the media debates. His proposal cited examples of community programmes on the emerging local radio network, developed by Frank Gillard who was also responsible for the national radio format *Any Questions* (1948–t). The weeknight review programme *Late Night Line-Up* had also explored ways to extend opportunities for alternative voices to respond to content that had been presented in other BBC programmes in studio discussions that raised different perspectives and experiences to those in the original content. An example is in the *Late Night Line-Up* episode transmitted on 14 June 1967 which discussed the issues raised by the transmission on BBC2 earlier that night of a *Man Alive* (1965–81) investigation into homosexuality (BBC iPlayer, 2021). Issues discussed, by the poet Maureen Duffy, a Conservative politician Ray Mawby and social psychologist Michael Schofield, included a debate about whether the original programme should have been transmitted in the 8p.m. slot.

As well as discussing controversial topics such as this, some editions of *Late Night Line-Up* commissioned segments from groups and organisations outside broadcasting, which could be problematic. A notable example was an episode in which the video activist John ‘Hoppy’ Hopkins, filmed a police raid on his production company, which was transmitted in full, as part of a discussion about drug legislation (Hartney, 1996). Programmes such as these, or the audience’s or institution’s responses to them, may have contributed to the long-established format coming off air, in December 1972, after nearly 3000 editions.

At the Board of Management Meeting on 7 December 1972, David Attenborough presented *Community Programmes*, a five-page report that proposed an experimental series to start in April 1973. The report defined community programmes as follows

‘Access’ or ‘community’ programmes, which are spoken of so frequently in the current debates about broadcasting, are taken to be programmes which are made by viewers who

have applied for air time, and for which professional broadcasters supply the technical facilities necessary for production and transmission, but play only a minimal part in editorial decision. (1972: 1)

According to the proposal, the advantages of community programmes were, importantly, that they could bring ‘voices, attitudes and opinions that, for one reason or another have been unheard or seriously neglected, by mainstream programmes’ (ibid). These concerns were raised by many of the organisations in the ongoing debates around broadcasting, and the proposal highlighted that the unit could ‘counter the commonly held belief that television production was dominated by the attitudes and assumptions of university educated elites’ (ibid).

Additionally, the CPU, placed in BBC 2, would contribute to the channel’s remit to represent minority interest programming, and the production context of a specialist unit could explore ‘stylistic innovations, new ways of handling film or videotape which professional broadcasters have either ignored or rejected’ (Attenborough, 1972:1). As video did not reach the union-regulated minimum broadcast quality (that also ensured that non-professionally produced content was not transmitted), it was not a production technology and was only transmitted in exceptional circumstances of news, in the absence of higher quality images. Elsewhere in the report, portable technology (16 mm film and video) is referred to as ‘new methods in use in the underground’. Community programmes could explore new ideas, formats and methods of representation, and incorporate new techniques and portable technologies, only if production was outside the closed-shop environment of the television studio.

*Late Night Line-Up* had transmitted several editions that Attenborough acknowledged had given groups a considerable say in putting the programme together, not always unproblematically (as in the example of John ‘Hoppy’ Hopkins). Attenborough argued to the BBC Weekly Television Meeting in December 1972 that while ‘community programmes’ would give ‘very considerable editorial freedom to contributors’, the experimental series would be managed through a gatekeeping process not yet fully defined, but decisions about inclusion in the series would be ‘taken at a high and very responsible level’ (BBC WAC, R78/2,540/1: Access Programmes). An undated, unattributed internal memo in the same archival file confirmed that a committee had been formed of the Director of Television Programmes (still Attenborough at this point), Editor of News and Current Affairs Paul Bonner and Controller of BBC2 Robin Scott as permanent members, who would co-opt specialist members such as the Head of Religious Broadcasting as necessary (BBC WAC, R78/2,540/1: Access Programmes). The Committee would oversee the Unit ‘responsible for organizing and producing the programmes, and for investigating applications to ensure that the requests are responsible ones’ (Attenborough, 1972: 2).

Attenborough warned against thinking that these programmes would ‘be made exclusively by the lunatic fringe, or that they would form an unbroken series of vociferous radical manifestos’. Instead the aim was ‘to provide a lively varied and entertaining series that was not a corner for cranks nor weighted in one particular direction’ (Attenborough, 1972: 3). The programmes would strive to be relevant and interesting, but Attenborough acknowledged that there was a likelihood that content might be ‘rather dull output’

(Attenborough, 1972: 4). Internal opposition to the CPU included Lady Avonside, the BBC Governor for Scotland (1971–76), who still had ‘the gravest reservations’ about this type of content, even with the additional safeguard that required contributors to sign an editorial code (BBC WAC, R78/2,540/1: Access Programmes, Open Door Application Form 1972). This code would protect the Corporation, ‘as *publishers* from legal proceedings for libel, contempt of court and so on’ (Attenborough, 1972: 3) [author’s emphasis]. There were concerns raised by management about content, and by unions about working practises and broadcast quality, which were clearly outweighed by external pressures on the BBC to demonstrate its responsiveness to concerns being stoked by the print media. The experimental series, originally titled *Open House*, was renamed as *Open Door* (1973–86) (as a concession to BBC staff, management and governors that this, was not, in fact, going to be open to all) and approved and scheduled for transmission in April 1973 by Director-General Charles Curran (1969–77) (BBC WAC, R78/2,540/1: Access Programmes, Board of Management meeting minutes, 1972).

## Open Door

By February 1973, more than 50 groups had applied, and the unit had enough content for six programmes. Groups who progressed through the application process pitched to the entire staff team who voted on which ideas to develop. Successful groups were assigned a producer with whom they discussed their aims and concerns, and the format, style and length of the item. Programmes were scheduled as the final transmission of the Monday night schedule, which enabled flexibility about duration and minimised the risk of offending large audiences. Each would be at least 40 mins long and feature up to four different contributions, with every fourth programme envisaged as a response slot, where both studio and remote audiences could respond to what had been transmitted and previous participants could reflect on their own or other contributions. The editorial code that disallowed participants from producing ‘content that was gratuitously sensational, offensive or in infringement of any law’ was extended by an additional proviso that groups had to submit ‘sufficient information about their intention and would be subject to the final decision of the BBC, the ultimate sanction was the forfeiture of airtime’ (BBC WAC R78/2/540/1: Access Programmes. *Open Door* Application Form).

The first series consisted of 17 items and represented 15 groups and one individual, mainly in single-issue programmes. *Radio Times* described the first episode as a ‘live weekly programme in which people and groups are given a chance to have their say in their own way’ (BBC Genome, *Open Door*, 13 October 1974). As it turned out, concerns about experimental techniques and new methods from the underground were unwarranted; the lack of budget to film contributions, and the failure of video to reach the minimum broadcast quality ensured that the first series mainly consisted of live studio discussions in which the groups introduced themselves and the issues that concerned them. There was one exception in the first series: the Basement Youth Project screened *Tunde’s Film* to a studio audience followed by a studio discussion about the issues raised (15 April 1973, [London Community Video Archive, 2018](#)). The first programme in the series investigated different attitudes to lifestyles, and saw The Responsible Society, who

presented a 'socially responsibility vision of contemporary life' paired with Neville Schulman, who proposed a libertarian and individualistic lifestyle (9 April 1973).

*Open Door* did not – nor was it expected to – attract vast audiences; however, it was still seen as a success and was recommissioned for another series in the last slot of Monday night transmission. In the second series, which ran from October to December 1973, programmes again responded to 'single issues' and were produced by special interest or campaign groups as studio discussions to raise (usually) uncontroversial issues in an uncontroversial way. Programmes continued to feature pairings of groups who shared similar concerns, as with the London Trade Unions and the Old Age Pensioners Trust (22 October 1973). This was the first edition of the programme that raised concerns at management level, when it was described in the Board of Management meeting on 1 November 1973 (in an unattributed comment) as 'very much under the communist influence' (BBC WAC R78/2, 807/1, 1973: *Open Door*). A Conservative politician suggested that this showed the programme 'was an open door for every extremist, revolutionary and subversive clique to propagate its views' (Oakley 1990: 17).

However, another episode, introduced by The U and I Club (17 November 1973), a self-help group of cystitis sufferers, achieved an unusually high level of audience engagement. The combined audience for the original transmission and the repeat was 396,000 viewers, and 12,000 of them wrote to the organisation c/o the BBC, suggesting the active participation and engagement of one in six viewers (BBC WAC R78/2, 807/1, 1973: *Open Door*). This potential to engage audiences in new ways was a useful mechanism for the BBC to respond to concerns raised by campaigning groups in the media; further, it prompted discussions about new formats or programmes also produced by the CPU, which would allow groups to air those concerns and voice their opinions on topics not discussed in other programmes.

The opportunity to produce items outside the studio had only been taken up by groups who had produced films funded by other organisations, such as the BFI who funded the Basement Youth Project to make *Tunde's Film*, screened and discussed in series one and an observational documentary on the life of travellers, made by the Gypsy Council (2 December 1973) in the second series. However, by the third series (January–April 1974), more groups explored non-studio production. 'It's Starting to Happen' (20 January 1974), an item produced by the people of Balham about their community, was filmed on electronic newsgathering kits (ENGs; portable video that used broadcast-quality tape) that unions had agreed to accept for use in news production. As the CPU was a specialist production context in which the broadcaster was the publisher of the content, the BBC could distance itself from lower production values in content made by amateurs. Elsewhere in the series, the National Association of Hospital Broadcasters made 'Down Your Ward' (3 March 1974), a parody of popular radio series *Down Your Way* (1946–92), and two Oxford residents, Maggie Black and Lucy Willis made 'Jericho' (1 April 1974), an observational documentary about the district of Oxford in which they lived (YouTube, 2013). Originally a working-class suburb (built to house the workers of Oxford University Press), the Jericho district experienced many of the issues of national concern at the time: the speed of change, poor housing, race, immigration, education, poor infrastructure,



unemployment and poverty. The film within the context of a particular local community demonstrates how these factors intersected and manifested in a particular locality.

### **Broadening access**

By the time the Annan Committee was re-announced by Edward Heath's Conservative government in March 1974, over 100 groups applied who 'would not, under normal circumstances, have had the opportunity to have their interests represented on national television in the first six series of *Open Door*' (Bonner, 1975: 1). The existence of the unit and the content that it was producing enabled the BBC to present material based on experience to the Annan Committee. Paul Bonner's submission to the committee, *Broadening Access – The Regional Potential of Access Television*, identifies some of the limits to the effectiveness of community programmes on a national basis alongside the success of content produced by the regional CPU output. Strands such as *The People's Television* focused on social campaigns that had a local significance, and *People Make Television*, where according to the *Radio Times* content was 'produced by the public. Skilled help and advice is available from the BBC's Community Programme Unit' (BBC Genome, *Open Door*, 13 October 1974).

Bonner advocated the development of access television on a regional basis as 'local issues usually have a greater impact on people's lives than national ones' (Bonner, 1975: 3). He suggested that the majority of groups or individuals, who applied to *Open Door* 'wanted to deal with local issues, and, unless such issues have parallels up and down the country, or are in some other way of national relevance, it is not likely that they will get on the national network' (Bonner, 1975: 1). To manage a regional approach, Bonner proposed establishing a network of 20 to 25 Community Broadcast Officers, to operate as 'enablers' to 'channel' interested groups into one of four levels of identified access programming. The first level offered interested groups or individuals the opportunity to make a CCTV (closed circuit television, a narrowcast technology not designed for broadcast) video that could be used for local campaigning purposes. The second level provided access via a local radio initiative, and the third via a regional radio or television project. The fourth level, presumably considered the highest form of access according to this hierarchy, was national television via the CPU, which would allow for 'projects percolating up the chain from local involvement to national appeal' (Bonner, 1975: 4). By the end of 1974, every BBC regional television production centre offered this basic format to groups campaigning on mainly local issues (*BBC Yearbook*, 1975: 46). A year later, every commercial, regional franchise transmitted some form of participatory content that was often explicitly framed as access (*ITV Yearbook*, 1975: 27).

*Open Door* and other CPU initiatives enabled the BBC to respond to discussions about misrepresentations and under-representations being levelled at broadcasters. The CPU had an important voice at conferences such as Voluntary Action in Television at the Royal Festival Hall in February 1976, which sought to influence the shape of the proposed fourth broadcast channel. Discussions about particular functions of educational programming and broadcasting as a conduit for social usefulness took place between voluntary groups, campaign groups and broadcasters working in access, community or educational



television. The unit's experience was invaluable to these discussions, having given airtime to groups as varied as Hunt Saboteurs, the Women's Institute, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Chiswick Women's Aid, Black Workers, Asians in Britain, Gingerbread (a one-parent family association), Recidivist Anonymous Fellowship Group (a 12-step group), Tran-sex Liberation Group, National Council for Civil Liberties and the League of Friends. In addition, the unit had made programmes with ad hoc groups established to draw attention to particular minority interest, regional or local issues, such as unemployed black youth, co-operative workers, women's groups and vegans. Such subjects extended the range of representations in terms of regional, national, racial, sexual, gender and class identities as well as experiences. The success that the unit had with the levels of engagement in The U and I Club episode was seen as an example of the social usefulness of community programmes and was the basis of a new self-help format in development in the unit, to provide support for organisations campaigning on particular issues, and to raise awareness of those issues.

## Subjective dimension

In another submission for the Annan Committee titled *The Subjective Dimension in Broadcasting – An analysis of the progress, pitfalls and potential safeguards for access broadcasting*, Frances Bonner suggested that the production context could be extended to the representation of minority groups, such as unemployed and differently abled people, those with health issues and those from rural communities, rather than just minority interest groups. He used the phrase 'the subjective dimension' to propose that programmes should be made by the people for whom they had the most relevance. To demonstrate this, he cited an *Open Door* item made by visually impaired people as one of the most 'socially useful', as it educated the audience in 'the ways that blind people would like assistance in carrying out everyday tasks' (Bonner, 1976:2). Bonner recognised that this approach might be contentious if it was employed in relation to political issues such as Northern Ireland, immigration and trades unions, but it could also be 'a useful safety valve' and a way of introducing difficult topics into the realm of television current affairs in a combative broadcast climate.

Regional access programmes enabled particular communities to raise their concerns that were, they felt, both misunderstood and ignored by the national and mainstream media. By employing the same 'right to reply' mechanisms, viewpoints from other regions could be put forward to counter or agree, and thereby present a less partisan perspective while allowing opposing groups airtime. Bonner cited an item produced in 1976 for *Open Door* by the Bradford-based British Campaign to Stop Immigration (28 February 1976) as an example of output that could reflect regional concerns that were not considered in the national broadcast agenda. The programme, he said, resulted from a build-up of pressure from 'many English people in the Midlands and North' who felt that there was 'a conspiracy of silence' in the media about the effects of immigration (Bonner, 1976: 1). The description that appeared in the *Radio Times* was, unusually, written by the group rather than by the CPU or the BBC Press Office, and stated that

This programme is dedicated to the silent majority who until now, because of a sinister veil of censorship, have never had the opportunity to give their views to the British public. The freedom of speech should be granted to all. ([BBC Genome, Open Door, 1976](#))

After the transmission of the programme, the Standing Conference of Pakistan Organisations in the United Kingdom and the Indian Workers Association brought injunction proceedings against the BBC. The issue was resolved through the 'right to reply' mechanism, that enabled a response or counter programme, seen as an effective means to maintain the overall impartiality of the series ([Bonner, 1976: 2](#)). Controversial opinions could therefore be expressed, as long as alternative perspectives or counter arguments were also represented. In this example, Lord Pitt, Deputy Chairman of the Community Relations Commission, gave a personal response later in the series (15 May 1976). Another example of the effectiveness of the 'right to reply' mechanism was demonstrated when a segment by the Free Palestine group (26 November 1976) attracted the attention of the Leader of the Opposition, Margaret Thatcher, before being duly 'balanced' by a programme made by the Anglo-Israeli Friendship League (7 March 1977) later in the series.

As well as being able to manage contentious subjects, such as the above, through the right to reply mechanism, the programmes made by the CPU demonstrated the absurdity of 'fears that the public would abuse this opportunity by obscenity or sedition' ([Bonner, 1976: 4](#)). Participating groups wanted to represent their opinions, in a context familiar to viewers using accustomed conventions of television, particularly the authoritative address, to demonstrate the importance of their cause and the validity of their claims. Initially the use of new technologies was restricted by union regulations and broadcast quality, so opportunities for experimental techniques were minimal. In any case, even the most innocuous content could receive many complaints, such as the episode that paired the British Motorcycle Federation with two male flower arrangers (22 October 1976), or the rather unfortunate pairing of the Society of Destitute Animals and the British Association of Retired Persons (7 April 1974) ([BBC WAC R78/2,540/1: Access Programmes](#)).

By the time the Annan Committee finally reported in 1977 and recommended the Open Broadcast Authority, the CPU had established a production context where participation and impartiality could be effectively managed for programmes and series alike. The unit produced more formats, such as [Write On! \(1976–1981\)](#), which presented itself as 'a mirror on the world' and as 'a genuine correspondence column of the air' ([BBC Genome, Write On! 21 November 1976](#)). [Grapevine \(1975–1979\)](#) provided a self-help and support network for campaigning organisations and local groups that, according to an unattributed programme proposal, suggested that the 'content of the programme will be very much dictated by the response from viewers. Suggestions that have already been made by community groups range from forming a tenant's association, running a community festival, organising a food co-op, to ways of helping people with personal problems. We would welcome active participation in deciding the content of programme ideas' ([BBC WAC R78/2,540/1: Access Programmes](#)).

*Open Door* ran almost continuously from October to May and continued to provide space for unheard opinions and raised rarely represented issues. In doing so, and to the Corporation's credit, contributions were sometimes critical of the BBC itself, such as 'It Ain't Half Racist, Mum' (1 March 1979), an episode produced by the Campaign Against Racism in the Media (CARM), presented by cultural theorist Stuart Hall and actress Maggie Steed ([Black British Archives, 2021](#)). CARM posed some difficult questions in the *Radio Times* description, where they asked

Do you think the words 'immigrant' and 'black' mean the same thing?

Do you regard the National Front as a 'legitimate' political party?

Is mugging a 'black' crime?

Is immigration a crucial issue facing Britain today?

Is television neutral on the question of race?

If you answer yes to all these questions, you are probably believing all you see on TV. Find out more as we open the door on the BBC, ITV and the British press. ([BBC Genome, Open Door, 1979](#)).

In the programme, it was suggested that, far from being part of the solution in bringing difficult issues into the realm of public discussion, the BBC was in fact part of the problem, and the closing titles named particular BBC personnel (see [Schaffer, 2014](#)). One of those named, Alan Protheroe (Editor of Television News) saw the programme's transmission as 'an abrogation of our [the BBC's] responsibilities' ([BBC WAC R78/2,540/1: Access Programmes, Weekly Television Programme Review minutes, 1979](#)). BBC presenter Robin Day felt he had been traduced in the programme and threatened legal action against the Corporation. He eventually settled for an apology before the broadcast of the repeat episode transmitted on 13 June 1979 ([BBC WAC R78/2, 540/1: Access Programmes](#)). The episode caused the BBC considerable embarrassment and reignited animosity that led to the CPU being referred to by some in the BBC as the Communist Party Unit and seen as 'the enemy within' ([Oakley with Lee-Wright, 2016: 216](#)). The CPU was strongly criticised for making the programme, and for allowing what was considered a gross misrepresentation of the BBC and some of its staff. Nonetheless, senior BBC management allowed the programme repeat to be aired ([Hendy, 2018](#)). Margaret Thatcher cited the CARM programme and its repeat as examples of what she saw as the BBC's poor editorial judgement, a theme she continued to pursue when she became Prime Minister two months later.

While the Annan report had recommended the establishment of an Open Broadcasting Authority independent of ITV and BBC, with content production initially funded by the government, the election of the Conservative government altered the shape of what was to become Channel 4 to a commercially funded (by advertising sold by ITV), national, public service 'broadcaster as publisher' with responsibilities under the 1981 Broadcasting Act to inform, educate and entertain minority audiences, interpreted by the new

channel, to the government's chagrin, as ethnically diverse minorities. A new role of Channel Controller was created for Paul Bonner, the original Head of the CPU, who had 'impressed the Board [of Channel 4] so much that they wanted him to be in a major position at the channel' (Hobson, 2008: 12). The channel's adoption of a 'broadcaster as publisher' model, and its remit to represent the interests of minority communities had some crossover with the work that the CPU had been doing, although in the BBC2 remit, it was in the representation of minority interests.

Alongside the launch of Channel 4 in 1982, the BBC's new Director-General, Alasdair Milne took up his post, and the Corporation tried to define a new relationship with a government hostile to its funding model, values and Director-General. The political climate and the CARM episode led to more scrutiny being placed upon the selection of participants for CPU programmes, and the number of officially appointed internal and external advisors invited to selection meetings increased (Oakley with Lee-Wright, 2016: 218). In 1983, *Open Door* was replaced by , which created opportunities for individuals rather than campaign groups to tell stories about their lives. The new series was scheduled in a 7.30p.m. Monday evening transmission slot and demonstrated higher production values in response to its elevated place in the schedule. Successful applicants tended to have stories told from the 'subjective dimension' and many episodes were charming personal portraits of individuals who assumed they had something interesting to say or had an unusual interest or a hobby, told in quite a traditional way. But the campaigning element that was such a strong element of both *Open Door* and *Grapevine* became diluted by the foregrounding of the lived experience of an individual in a particular situation.

This emphasis on the individual and on individual stories was enhanced by the arrival of Hi-8, a lower cost, semi-professional video technology that reached the minimum broadcast quality, and Hi-8, alongside Betacam SP and higher quality ENGs, started to transform video into a production format in broadcasting and 'enabled a new flexibility of inputs to mainstream television production' (Couldry, 2000: 185). Initially most evident on Channel 4, particularly in its coverage of video art, *cinéma vérité* techniques that were new to, or rarely used in, television, became introduced to broadcast production. Video had a number of advantages, the reusability of tapes being an important economic factor, but the diminishing size of the technology and its capacity to record in lower light levels, introduced factual domestic locations to the television screen. The ability to self-film often resulted in an extended and confessional direct address to a hand-held camera in hushed tones from an intimate domestic location, such as a bathroom or bedroom, emphasising the privacy of the content and authenticity of the subject. While these techniques developed in often feminist, self-representational video art, it was through the development of the *Video Diaries series* (1990-1999) that they became televisual conventions that signified emerging forms of reality television.

### Video Diaries – beyond access?

According to Oakley, the CPU organised a 'group think', 'where people considered how to harness the opportunities created by the new cameras' (2017: 226) and an idea

emerged, which extended the subjective dimension of *Open Space* into a long-form, first-person documentary. Lower-cost video equipment could be left with the participant for an extended period, who would be given instructions in its use and a supply of tapes. Participants took advantage of the ability to self film, and experimented with ways of representing their experience that did not follow existing televisual conventions. The resulting footage would be edited with the participant having substantial input. The Head of the CPU, Jeremy Gibson approved it and brought in Bob Long from Channel 4, as executive producer of the new series, *Video Diaries*.

*Video Diaries* adopted the same gatekeeping processes as *Open Door* and *Open Space*: applicants wrote in and, if identified by the CPU as having a 'compelling story to tell' (Dovey, 1993: 167), were given the opportunity to make an extended first-person documentary about their experiences that ran counter to dominant ideologies. Participants were loaned a Hi-8 video camera and trained in its use by the CPU producer they had been assigned. The training covered the basic functions and capabilities of the camera, and particular techniques for filming, lighting and recording sound. For example, emphasis was given to the need for participants to supply 'cutaway' shots from each location to facilitate the editing-out of extraneous or irrelevant material. Such emphasis was necessary because 'amateurs do not film with the conventions of broadcast or narrative-driven editing in mind, they do not follow the establishing, long, mid, close-up pattern of shots in an unfolding narrative' (Sherman, 1998: 258). However, it was perhaps not anticipated quite how high shooting ratios would be: they averaged 150:1 (Keighron, 1993: 24) and sometimes reached 200:1 (Dovey, 2000). The economic advantage of the reusability of video tape was therefore eliminated by the extended time in the edit suite, as the hours of footage were edited into an engrossing story, apparently 'in line with the wishes of the participant' (Corner, 1994: 185); but unless the participant was present for the duration of the edit, the piece became based on the opinion and subjectivity of the editor, rather than the participant.

The first series brought previously rarely represented experiences and circumstance from a subjective dimension and offered insights through personal accounts that often countered existing understandings. 'Pagan Belfast' (21 April 1990) was an account of Robert Wilson, a young pagan returning to the city of his birth, featuring a representation of the province that moved beyond politically problematic sectarianism and the broadcasting restrictions then in place. Another episode in the first series, 'Spike and Clinton', documented the experience of two children leaving the care system (19 May 1990, 9p.m.). 'Just for the Record' (26 May 1990) was a self-reflexive social documentary on the process and rituals of bereavement and community. 'My Demons' (12 May 1990) adopted a harsh *vérité* style, where the camera was used as a catalyst that forced and witnessed the subject's father's onscreen confession of the violence he had subjected his children to: 'It made a very powerful and disturbing diary, only made possible by the trust Willa Woolston felt towards CPU and the confidence which stemmed from her retaining editorial control' (Oakley with Lee-Wright 2016: 225). It was nominated as the Best Single Documentary at the Royal Television Society for 1990. The format used emerging techniques enabled by the more compact technology that also suggested authenticity and intimacy, through the use of domestic locations, direct address in close up, that underpin

some of the earliest reality formats, and the series overall developed as a first-person documentary format.

The following year, the entire second series of *Video Diaries* was awarded a BAFTA for 'innovation'. The series featured an account of an English football fan's trip to the Euro championship in 'On the March with Bobby's Army' (11 May 1991), the remorse of an imprisoned bank robber in 'The Man Behind the Gun' (8 June 1991), and the photographer Jo Spence's account of dealing with a terminal illness and estrangement from her brother, titled 'Surviving Memories' (1 June 1991). Arguably, only one episode of the second series, 'Promise You Won't Let Them Out on the Street' (20 July 1991), was made by a traditional access participant, disabled activist Steve Cribb.

This award 'was the clearest indication that *Video Diaries* had moved out of the ghetto of worthiness into which access programming was invariably dumped and was now residing in the vicinity of documentary proper' (Keighron, 1993: 24). The inclusion of media professionals – those whose work is already informed by the principles, conventions and techniques of representation that standard access projects aim to challenge and expose – moved the project further away from the access principles of the CPU. In the application process, there was an emphasis on 'selecting those who might make autobiographical statements' (Harvey, 2000: 165), such as in 'The Man who Loved Gary Lineker' (29 August 1992), the story of a Afghani rural doctor whose love of the football he heard on the BBC World Service led to him travelling to the UK to meet the then England football team captain.

It became harder to view *Video Diaries* as 'access television' as so few projects went ahead from the large number of applications that were received (Kilborn and Izod, 1997: 82). The CPU received an average of 'eight applications a day from would-be diarists, [and] far more when the series was being transmitted' (Keighron, 1993: 25). Yet out of the 3000 who applied to take part in the first series of *Video Diaries*, only four people were successful (Humm, 1998: 233). At the 1994 Edinburgh Television Festival session on 'DIY TV', Bob Long, Executive Producer, noted that, 'on average, just half of the available slots in any series were given to traditional access participants, that is those who had written in' (Long in Humm, 1998: 233). The low levels of success for applicants were disappointing, particularly as Couldry reminds us, access slots 'occupy only a very small percentage of overall media output' (2000: 186). While at first the CPU sought to 'change the view that the BBC only represented its invited guests' (Attenborough, 1972: 1), the gatekeeping processes of *Video Diaries* and the pressure on transmission slots, now meant that an increasing amount of the content was created by existing media professionals, such as Nick Danziger who made 'War, Lies and Videotape' (10 December 1993) and Chris Steele Perkins, creator of 'Dying for Publicity' (25 September 1992).

Ratings for *Video Diaries* showed that the audience for individual programmes increased during transmission, suggesting that 'people were sitting down, flicking through the channels and being "grabbed" by *Video Diaries*' and audience figures reached a million viewers for most programmes (Dovey, 1993: 168). The strand's offspring *Teenage Video Diaries* (1992–1994) achieved audiences of 1.5 million (Barker, 1992) and Chris Needham's account of a young wannabe rock star 'In Bed With Chris Needham' (13 June 1992), whose diary documents the tribulations of a young heavy metal bassist, who has no

bass and whose mum wants him in bed before 9p.m., was watched by over two million viewers in two transmissions.

*Open Space* continued throughout the decade, but as mainstream formats had progressively ‘bowdlerised’ the techniques of the CPU (Born, 2004: 77), access slots were given to media producers and the first-person documentary became a familiar format. Lines between access and mainstream programming merged under the broad umbrella of reality television, as they increasingly followed similar conventions. Perhaps the most successful and even the best remembered participatory content was produced in a project, with special status inside the CPU: *Video Nation* (1994–2011), created by Jeremy Gibson and Bob Long of the CPU and approved by BBC Controller Alan Yentob in 1992 (just before he became Controller of BBC1). The project offered a new form of participation that combined the national and the local and managed to continue as an access initiative even after the closure of the CPU.

## Conclusion

When the CPU’s final content was transmitted in 2002, the 30-year-old access project had changed the face of television within and beyond the BBC in a number of ways. Firstly, it had developed and refined the broadcaster-as-publisher model; secondly, it had enabled the adoption of new techniques and technologies and the establishment of new conventions that are now recognised elements of televisual grammar; and thirdly, it had created a place where diverse identities, opinions and lifestyles could be expressed.

Perhaps the most surprising realisation is that the unit managed to survive as long as it did: it outlived five prime ministers and six director-generals. It created hours of programming on issues that still have a relevance and an even more marked urgency today. The Unit’s coverage of issues of poor housing, discrimination, race relations, immigration, poverty, pollution, traffic, gay and trans identities as well as the space it gave to a wide array of campaigning groups is as necessary, if not more so in the current climate, than it was 50 years ago.

The most striking finding of this article is that so many of the concerns that prompted the formation of the CPU – that television was dominated by the assumptions of a university-educated elite; the misrepresentation, under-representation or absence of representation of minority groups or individuals; and a lack of relevance on a national basis – are not just still issues, but have now become crisis points for BBC television, alongside the claims of bias levelled at the organisation from all sides of the political debate. New partisan divisions have also emerged that confound the traditional positions of political parties, and there is an urgent need for the BBC to present a far more compelling and relevant offering to all licence fee payers. While the number of BBC television channels has doubled (now that BBC3 is due to come back to being a broadcast service), the opportunities for people to participate in the broadcast agenda have been minimised, even though the technology now exists, that would enable them to do so in interesting, economic and innovative ways. In its centenary year, the BBC is, not unusually, under pressure from all sides in preparation for further broadcasting committees and regulation and the inevitable questions about the licence-fee funding mechanism. It



also needs to address concerns that too much of its content is not relevant to enough of its audience, and other familiar criticisms of its national agenda. One way, perhaps, for the BBC to show its relevance to the public would be to update and reinvigorate the intentions of the CPU in both regional and national contexts, so that the BBC can provide a platform to let the people speak.

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