

About 4 Andy Duncan Faithworks Lecture 21st June 2005

Thank you for inviting me to give this lecture. Faithworks does an important job helping churches and Christian agencies make a dynamic and effective contribution to their communities. Its aims are ambitious and its achievements admirable. And because of the leadership of Steve Chalke, it understands better than many organisations the critical part the media plays in portraying the life of the communities and churches it works with.

So it's an honour to be the first media person to address you.

At least I hope it is. As the Archbishop of Canterbury observed in his thought-provoking speech last week on the state of British journalism, the relationship between reporters and reported is often adversarial, even gladiatorial.

Although you don't look like lions and I don't feel like Daniel, it's my luck to be the first media person to put their head above the parapet since then. Dr. Williams made some telling and trenchant observations. But I'm not here today as an apologist for every shoddy newspaper report or misjudged television programme. And, as you might expect, I have a rather more optimistic view.

While the Archbishop quite properly warned of the abuses of communication that can arise from an increasingly market-led and consumerist media, there's another story to be told. Sadly though, 'Media a Force for Good' Shock is one headline you seldom see.

Faithworks has identified trust as something that is 'an essential building block of every healthy community' but that it is also under threat. In previous lectures you've heard politicians talk about the roles Government and the churches can play in reducing what's

been labelled the 'trust deficit'. I want to use this lecture to explore the potential of just one powerful section of the media – television – as a means of building trust in society.

Because the television universe is now so vast, I'm going to concentrate on that bit of it that is still very much part of the everyday viewing experience – the public service channels. And because it's my job, I'm going to look at the contribution Channel 4 in particular can make.

First, I must lay some cards on the table. I don't come to the job without my own set of values and beliefs. For the record, I am a practising Christian on what might be called the Evangelical wing of the church. I wouldn't be at Channel 4 if I felt the organisation, its culture, or the job itself, were in any way at odds with my Christian values. These inform my behaviour, my relationships with colleagues, and the everyday judgements I make. This was also true at Unilever and the BBC, where I worked before. And I feel just as comfortable – in fact more comfortable – at Channel 4.

But I am clear that I'm not there to promote one point of view over others. More than anything else, Channel 4 as an organisation and a television channel is a place for exploring, defending and celebrating diversity. Of views, cultures, political and religious beliefs and of the glorious and sometimes terrifying range of human experience. More of this later, because I think it lies at the heart of the trust issue.

And when I say my religious beliefs influence my judgements, this doesn't mean they determine which programmes to show or not to show. Although ultimately I'm responsible for the channel's output, I'm not involved in all the day-to-day detail of commissioning programmes. My job is to make sure that both the organisation and the output truly reflect the

About 4 Andy Duncan Faithworks Lecture

remit that makes Channel 4 so special.

That remit embodies values - innovation, creativity, diversity and distinctiveness - that go to the core of what Channel 4 is, what I call its DNA. These are what define the output. My own beliefs inform and infuse my work, but they don't drive it.

In that sense, Channel 4's Chief Executive could be Muslim, Jewish, Christian or atheist. In order to do this job the only beliefs you really need are in the fundamental power of television to deliver a public service (to 'do good', if you like), and in your professional capacity to help achieve that potential. I don't need my Christian beliefs for that. But I find they help.

Of course, just as not all programmes do good, not all programmes are good. Channel 4 is not perfect, nor is any channel. We show our share of fluff and sheer throwaway entertainment. We're a commercially funded service that must compete in the marketplace to survive. But entertainment was always part of the public service package alongside information and education, and television is a marvellous medium for fun. We want our viewers to laugh and relax with us. We also want them to watch our more challenging stuff.

And that's where I want to start - by setting out those areas where I believe public service television and Channel 4 in particular is a force for good, helping build and reinforce values that engender trust.

This must operate at all levels if television is to achieve its potential for good. Trust between programme-maker and subject, broadcaster and viewer, between the many different kinds of people who view, and trust that the goal of a tolerant, engaged and mutually supportive society can be realised, even though our default responses are so often suspicion and selfishness.

Our religious programmes have a special part to play in this, and I believe they are doing what no other channel is even attempting. They are pushing boundaries to bring religion centre-stage and front-of-mind for a mass audience. They are crucial to our efforts to make a more

tolerant, open and informed society.

But first let's look at the relationship between viewers and broadcasters, and how the bond of trust that has built up over some decades, means that television still has a powerful potential for good.

In pan-European research carried out last year, television was found to be trusted more than the United Nations, national judicial systems, religious institutions or trades unions. And much more than the printed press, national governments, political parties, the EU and big companies. Who won the coveted top two positions of public trust? The army (which says interesting things about the role of the modern military in Europe) and - good news for Faithworks - voluntary and charitable organisations.

We also know that, in the UK, television is a highly trusted supplier of news and information and the most-used medium for this purpose. Long-term research by broadcasting regulators shows that television far outstrips other media in the trust stakes. Even broadsheet readers trust television reporting of UK news five times more than what they read in the newspaper.

There are good reasons for this. Television - and the five public service channels in particular - operate to strict Codes in a highly regulated environment. Dr. Williams may have concerns about how some television news is packaged today, but impartial and accurate reporting is a legal requirement and a point of honour for the news operations that supply the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Five.

The press, as we know, does it differently.

The public service broadcasters are proud of their record in maintaining the public's confidence and they work hard to keep it. Television's careful evolution in this country as a regulated 'public good' rather than a market-led free-for-all - together with the BBC's critical influence on everything that came later - mean that, unlike broadcasting systems in some other countries where politics or the market primarily shape the message, I believe we have television that can be trusted.

About 4 Andy Duncan Faithworks Lecture

And when we do get it wrong, we own up.

Viewers trust Channel 4's news and current affairs to do things differently from other channels and break stories ignored or uncovered elsewhere in the media.

I'm particularly proud of Channel 4 News. It's the most comprehensive national and international news programme on any channel and its special reports – like Lindsey Hilsum's from Iran - illuminate major domestic and international stories in a depth that other news programmes just can't accommodate. And it makes time for the full-length arts and environment reports that are missing from other news agendas.

We're different in another way too. We're not afraid to confront those difficult issues where politicians sometimes refuse to engage with real public concerns. As a result, many people feel their views aren't being represented, trust in politics breaks down, and something called 'the mood of the country' is then determined by certain newspapers by default.

Immigration is one of these issues.

It's a notoriously tricky area dogged by complex arguments and racial prejudice. We confronted head-on the polar opposites in the immigration debate in two programmes, Let 'em All In and The Immigration Timebomb.

Roughly equal numbers of viewers were 'appalled and disgusted' – often using much the same vocabulary - by each. But between the two, I believe we tapped into that public concern and exposed views to scrutiny - on both sides of the debate - that would not otherwise have been aired for a mass audience.

Being exposed to extreme views is a relatively unusual experience for British television viewers, we are so used to balance and impartiality in programmes. But it is sometimes important to stray from the safe middle ground into dangerous waters in order to elucidate an issue and challenge entrenched views.

We were in deep waters again with The Torture Season, a series of programmes that explored

the issue of torture. In Guantanamo Guidebook we replicated some of the methods used by the US and, most controversially, tested the effects on a group of volunteers.

Predictably, advance publicity prompted an angry response. The pressure group Action by Christians Against Torture had not seen the programmes but condemned them as "sick entertainment, only one level above the doctor who cuts up corpses on TV". (A reference of course to Channel 4's pioneering first screening of an autopsy.)

The post-transmission duty log however, told another story. "I wanted to thank you for airing such an intriguing, effective, and highly relevant programme." "It opened my eyes. I didn't know these things were going on and I'm glad you made these programmes". "The programme became increasingly difficult to watch. It caused me discomfort to have my views challenged, but ... you have shaken me from my complacency". "A brilliant exposure... of methods ... wholly immoral and abhorrent", "Really important programming".

And so on. Though the programmes offended some viewers, the balance of response was clearly positive.

This raises an important question about the ways in which television engenders or corrodes trust in society. Is it better to ignore those things done in our name that we'd rather not think about? Or expose them to public debate? I believe we serve the public and, in the final analysis, society, best by confronting difficult issues rather than being complicit in their concealment. You can't build trust by dodging through a minefield of no-go areas

We choose to confront, expose, explain – and in the process I'm afraid we also offend.

Earlier this month in the Only Human series, a programme called Make Me Normal showed a group of young people who very rarely appear on television. They are autistic. In this documentary they spoke honestly and movingly about the difficulties they face 'fitting in' with other people.

About 4 Andy Duncan Faithworks Lecture

There are some who think television should not have exposed these vulnerable human beings to public gaze. It's exploitative, unfair, immoral even.

It is always a matter of judgement of course, but in this case I don't share that view, and neither does the head teacher of the special school the young people attend. Her job is to prepare them for life in a society that understands little and cares less about the communication and social problems they face. We understand so little because we know so little. Television can and must address that lack. Because she understood that, she let the cameras in. I believe we all benefit as a result.

These are difficult and sensitive areas. I agree with Dr. Williams that the public interest defence has been degraded by those who use it as a flimsy excuse for exposing a footballer's affair or breaching a bereaved family's privacy. But I also believe that most people – tabloid readers included - can sniff this kind of rotten hypocrisy a mile off.

We're not in that business. Yes, we want to bring people to our programmes with surprises and sometimes shocks, but everything isn't always what it seems. It's easy to form an opinion on the basis of a provocative title – Make Me Normal, Bollocks to Cancer, or The Boy Whose Skin Fell Off – but I believe the majority of our viewers know and trust us enough to make a proper exploration of the subject, and then make up their own minds.

Many of these sensitive programmes are part of our remit commitment to education. Through the hundreds of hours of programmes for schools we make every year, and those of broader educative value and wider social purpose throughout our schedule, we contribute to a better-educated, more enquiring and politically engaged population.

Jamie's School Dinners resulted in nothing short of a popular uprising and a change of government policy. This is about more than banishing Turkey Twizzlers from school lunch tables. It's about all-round improvements to family life and the raising of children.

Even here though, 'Saint' Jamie caused offence to some viewers with his liberal use of the F-word at times of stress – which was most of the time during the making of this series. This raises another perennial bone of contention for those who believe that television should uphold only exemplary standards of behaviour and who would prefer not to know that others live their lives differently. Do we really need to see dysfunctional families on Wife Swap or young people behaving badly in the Big Brother house? Surely this just exposes the worst of human behaviour for us to gawp at, or feel superior to?

My answer is that television probably still presents a rather sanitised view of life as it is lived by the majority of people in this country now. Young people swear. Families break down. People have problems and want to talk about them. We reflect some of that flip side, showing real interaction between real people.

But look beyond the shouting and swearing to the people themselves. There are positive values, transformatory experiences and examples of personal growth to be found in all of these programmes. For many viewers they offer positive examples and practical inspiration for their own lives, and that's something I'm certainly not ashamed of.

I make no claims for Big Brother as social or moral education. First and foremost it's an entertainment show and a very important one for us commercially, because it attracts young viewers. I can understand how the language and behaviour of those it features may often be at odds with those of an older generation.

But look more closely. Big Brother winners are all role models in their way; not only because over past series they've included ethnic minorities, a gay man and a transsexual – as well as an Evangelical Christian - but because in the final analysis viewers choose people whose values they identify with and admire. And, as my predecessor Mark Thompson pointed out to the Churches Media Council recently, those values are invariably honesty, integrity, constancy and kindness.

One of the four purposes of public service

About 4 Andy Duncan Faithworks Lecture

television established by our regulator Ofcom is: “to make us aware of different cultures and alternative viewpoints, through programmes that reflect the lives of other people and other communities, both within the UK and elsewhere”. Indeed across an amazing range of issues, television can open up a subject and even inspire people to follow up and explore more.

So both our remit and Ofcom’s ‘public service purposes’ require us to take a broader, more tolerant and more representative approach to reflecting modern society than some people think is strictly necessary or desirable.

This is what we do, and this is what viewers expect and trust us to deliver.

But the television landscape is changing fast. Channel 4 and the public service broadcasters are by no means the only players in the game. The market is expanding and digital switchover, when it comes in less than ten years time, will take television choice into a new dimension again. The advantages of plenty are massively expanded choice for viewers and the opportunity for many more specialist channels, including dedicated religious ones.

But I think there is a danger too of polarised views, separatism and sectarianism. In the US, the top ten TV shows for black audiences and white audiences are completely different, a situation we would find unwelcome and unhealthy here.

In the UK, we are already a fractured society where television is the only mass medium that still regularly brings people together for a shared experience – a royal wedding, the European Cup Final, Jamie re-educating the tastebuds of the fast food generation. If television itself splits into a thousand fragments, we’ll end up talking to ourselves in our own small communities of interest, rather than reaching out to each other.

We will only hear the news and views we want to hear, and we’ll learn less of other lives and unfamiliar beliefs. The world outside our own will seem increasingly threatening because we know so little of it.

Does this matter? I think so, because in order to trust we have to know. Tolerance and understanding of others – fundamental New Testament values – can only be built on knowledge and respect. Condemnation so often springs from ignorance and fear.

This in my view is one of television’s most important responsibilities and – for Channel 4 – one of its central purposes. Television can use its unique and ubiquitous place in people’s lives to build a wider trust in society and the many different lives, faiths and values that make or break it.

This is where Channel 4’s religious programmes really come into their own.

In common with other public service broadcasters, we must show a certain amount of religious programming. But this is where the similarities end. The Songs of Praise and Morning Worship approach has never been for us.

Because of our remit to innovate and to cater for a culturally diverse society, the religious brief is broader and deeper than for other channels. And we put most of our religious programmes into the heart of peak time. We don’t hide them away. We want them to be seen and talked about.

Here’s a small taste of what we do.

[TAPE]

Because of our remit, our religious and multicultural outputs are often joined at the hip, and our religious programming is more obviously multi-faith than that of other mainstream channels. So in the recent past we’ve given extensive coverage to the Hajj and Kumb Mela and last year we showed the extraordinary ITN film, Karbala: City of Martyrs. This followed British Shia Muslims on the first pilgrimage to the Iraqi city’s holy shrine of Hussein after 30 years of persecution under Saddam.

Through this film, we learned more about life in post-Saddam Iraq than from any news or current affairs report. We saw for the first time

About 4 Andy Duncan Faithworks Lecture

the wild religious fervour and choreographed dances of self-flagellation in their full, explicable context. And we understood more about why these two branches of Islam diverged in the first place. This was all fascinating enough, but most of all we gained an insight into the religious lives and convictions of British Muslims.

There have been other films providing similar striking insights. Children of Abraham traced the common roots of three great religions, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, to Abraham and his two sons Isaac and Ishmael, visiting sites of common religious significance and worship in what is, for all three traditions, a Holy Land.

Over a million people watched Jewish Law, a short series showing Orthodox Jews living lives of strict observance and surprising humour in a Manchester suburb. For such a reclusive religious community, these revelatory films could not have been made without a carefully established trust between filmmaker and subject. As a result we now understand more.

All of this isn't just a benefit to wider society. We know that our programmes – like Sharia TV - about Islam and the lives of British Muslims, are particularly appreciated by that community because they counter the weight of coverage devoted in the news to militant Islamic terrorism.

Operation Muslim Vote – a religious commission shown just after the Election – was particularly appreciated. “It was groundbreaking stuff. The reality of the British Muslim community has never been seen on TV before in this way. It smashed the stereotypes ... and demolished the image of stern, strict, hate-filled Muslims.” “I think I speak for a lot of people – it was really liked by the Muslim viewers. It was very fair and the commentator allowed the people to speak for themselves”.

More than any other broadcaster, I believe, Channel 4 is trusted to give a fair and proper portrayal of sensitive religious material and this in turn has strengthened our religious output because it gets us closer to the real issues where faith and politics, faith and society collide.

Here we've made good use I think of the excellent communication and theological skills of our religious leaders. Among them the Bishop of Durham recently produced two compelling films for us on the Resurrection and the nature of evil. Dr. Rowan Williams himself presented a four-part series on the interface between faith, politics and society that appeared in the heart of peak time soon after his appointment in 2003.

It's not our job to patrol moral or religious boundaries or to give prominence to one faith among many. Our aim is to promote respect for others by providing information and insights that wouldn't normally be part of many viewers' everyday experience. And we look for subjects that touch a contemporary nerve that will appeal to a mass audience.

Last night Spirituality Shopper finished its run. Committed Christian Jonathan Edwards explored the modern 'pick-and-mix' approach to religious values and practices. Despite initial scepticism on the part of his 'shoppers', he proved that there are many unexpected entry-points to spiritual awareness and religious faith.

People are interested if only we can present matters of faith in ways that have meaning and relevance for them. We're not about preaching to the converted, or preaching to anyone else. We try to open up new worlds, new ideas and new possibilities for people to make use of and take forward for themselves.

We also look to innovate. We saw in the tape a clip from God is Black. In this two-parter, theologian Dr. Robert Beckford looked at the rise of black Christianity worldwide. His conclusions for the established church in Britain were controversial, agenda setting, and aired in the heart of peak time. It's all too rare that a Black Briton can be seen fronting a factual programme on mainstream TV. If you're going to see it, it'll probably be on Channel 4.

It was also a good example of what Mark Thompson referred to in his Churches Media Conference speech where he said that 'at Channel 4 and the BBC, we've brought considerable flair to our treatment of the UK's minority religions. We need to direct more

About 4 Andy Duncan Faithworks Lecture

of that creativity and sense of freedom to Christianity as well'.

Another example, provisionally called Priest Idol, is currently in production. We're working closely with the Church of England on this three-part series planned for the autumn. In it we follow a priest as he sets about reinvigorating the spiritual and community life of a small church near Wakefield.

As we said in our Annual Report this year, we're aware of the paradox of having to deliver our remit in a society in which many people have a profound religious faith while many others are either sceptical or simply ignorant of the main religions practised in Britain today. We have to find ways of addressing all those diverse strands in modern society.

That's why we came up with the concept of The New Ten Commandments.

Like many innovations, it divided opinion. The two-hour programme was built around an on-line vote to decide which of the original ten are still relevant today and what new ones people wanted to introduce. Three from the original set survived. God failed to appear in the final ten, but the number one new commandment was reassuringly familiar – in essence a version of Jesus' words from the New Testament about 'loving thy neighbour'. "Treat others as you would wish to be treated" gained universal support from all demographic groups and more votes than all the other commandments put together.

Some viewers thought this programme disgracefully disrespectful; but many others welcomed its fresh approach: "It was well done and treated the subject of contemporary morality in a lively, interesting and serious way. As a clergyman, I particularly appreciated the way... you allowed all the religious spokespeople to comment amongst the secular, giving... time to all perspectives. Thank you for an excellent piece of television."

So this is just some of what we do.

I believe that public service television has an honourable record of building public trust by delivering impartial news, informing and educating people – and occasionally by shocking and challenging them too. In a changing media world it acts as a counterweight to the pre-packaged, short order offerings of the purely commercial market. It is still in the business of widening horizons.

Channel 4 and the BBC in particular have uniquely privileged positions as publicly owned broadcasters. With that privilege comes a special responsibility to do what others in the media market cannot or will not.

To protect and enhance the 'quality of communication' that Dr. Williams reminds us we need to function at our best. To make television that enlightens rather than reinforces prejudice. Television that reminds us that we are part of a wider society and a common humanity.

I intend to ensure that Channel 4 lives up to that responsibility.