



Fear of giving offence is making television bland, says Channel 4's Bellamy

A new, more conservative culture of compliance in British television, which is intended to minimise public offence, is in danger of making the medium bland, according to Channel 4's programme head, Julian Bellamy.

Speaking at the Royal Television Society this evening (4th November), Bellamy argued that creative freedoms needed defending in television because "the compliance spiral that our industry finds itself in threatens to bland out the medium to no-one's benefit".

In his speech, *Channel 4 and the art of intelligent provocation*, he said the creative ambition of television was narrowing and that there was "less surprise and variety" than there should be, adding: "It [television] is increasingly characterised by the *lack* of places in which mainstream audiences can engage with provocative, non-conformist ideas... if a fear of offending the audience begins to proscribe creative freedoms, then I believe the danger to our broader cultural life is clear. Our society will become less democratic. Less enlightened. Ultimately, less free."

Bellamy committed Channel 4 to going further than other broadcasters to support creative risk, adding: "We should be increasingly distinguished by our willingness to defend creative freedoms even when public sentiment risks being offended."

He said Channel 4's role as a "cultural provocateur" mattered more today than it had ever done "because we are now the *sole* guardian of non-conformism and provocation on Britain's most powerful cultural medium".

Channel 4's programme head said the BBC seemed "to be increasingly conservative in its editorial decision making". He added: "After a string of scandals about taste and decency, it seems to avoid disruptive, potentially controversial ideas like the plague. Time and again producers tell me this. And I believe it."

Bellamy described this conservatism as an "unintended consequence of the BBC's method of funding" and the unrivalled public scrutiny that came with it, adding: "We live in an era when greater transparency is expected in the public realm... individuals and pressure groups are incredibly adept at using social media to mobilise public opinion. The press is relentless in measuring and magnifying perceived outrage. It is becoming more uncomfortable for all broadcasters, but particularly the BBC, to stand in opposition to the public mood."

Calling himself a cultural optimist, Bellamy said Channel 4's decision not to renew Big Brother post 2010 represented a "unique opportunity for us to reconnect with our key cultural role". He described that role as "intelligent provocation", continuing: "Channel 4 is at its most culturally valuable when it provokes with a

purpose. Where we challenge it should be because we really believe there is something worth challenging.”

Bellamy acknowledged that “relentless competitive pressures” had forced the broadcaster to take almost £150 million out of its programme budget in the last three years, but he also said he saw a “silver lining” in its financial circumstance.

“It sets out the choice facing Channel 4 in the starkest possible terms,” he argued. “We can either continue playing the percentages, gradually diluting our distinctiveness, managing decline as slowly as possible. Or we can trust to the instincts that have served us well in the past and do everything possible to defend Channel 4’s unique cultural role.

“I genuinely believe if Channel 4 retreats into conservatism we will cease to be a meaningful cultural force. Putting a premium on intelligent provocation, irrespective of financial circumstance, is our best hope of staying afloat.”

Addressing independent producers in the audience, Bellamy said he did not want to be overly “prescriptive” about ideas for the 2011 schedule, but said the channel needed programmes that were “unambiguously entertaining” but also had “social purpose at their heart”. He also called for producers to think radically about how to tackle difficult subject matter “in a way that made a bigger impact”.

Identifying a “real sense of new beginnings” at Channel 4, he concluded: “I want to communicate a genuine and renewed determination to experiment with different ideas; to identify new orthodoxies to question; to discover new ways to take the mainstream out of its comfort zone. We must spurn any temptation to relive past glories, as so many in television now do. This is a moment to be more focused than ever on reaffirming our credentials as Britain’s most forward looking, contemporary channel.”