

# IN MY VIEW



Current affairs may be out of fashion, but programmes about major social issues can still get big audiences, writes **Dan Chambers**

## TV's current affairs

When I started working in television in 1991, and began pouring over the schedules – in a somewhat unhealthy, nerdy way – it was clear that one of the key parts of all broadcasters' weekly output was current affairs: *Panorama*, *Dispatches*, *World in Action*.

Although it's often denied in front of Select Committee hearings or Ofcom annual reviews, anyone who works in TV knows that the broadcasters' commitment to current affairs has slipped over the years. *World in Action* was replaced by current affairs-lite in the form of *Tonight with Trevor McDonald*; *Panorama* began a merry dance around the schedule; *Dispatches* was recently confined

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to 8pm on Mondays, against *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*.

I don't know whether we have become a less political nation or whether current affairs output has failed to reflect the times and just wasn't good enough. Either way, ratings dropped and so it was demoted in status in the schedule. And, hardly sur-

prisingly, as the programmes were placed in tougher and tougher slots, the audience numbers spiralled yet lower.

From where I'm sitting, it's hard to draw a big audience to a straightforward current affairs show, but it's clear there is an insatiable appetite for TV that tackles serious issues – through entertainment. Five's *So You Think You Can Teach?*, where celebrities struggled to teach primary-school children, raised interesting questions about the state of teaching. BBC2's *Who Do You Think You Are?* succeeds in making genealogy interesting while Channel 4's *Jamie's School Dinners* led to a change in government policy.

These shows aren't replacements for current affairs. There are lots of subject areas that can only be sensibly handled with more straight-talking reports. But there are a lot of subject areas that can both provide entertainment and tackle important social issues. In *The Estate*, for instance, interior design experts Colin and Justin will be transforming a council block in their native Glasgow to see whether an improved living environment can have an impact on issues such as social disorder.

*How the Other Half Learns* will follow two sets of teachers and pupils, one from an inner city comprehensive, one from a leading public school, as they trade places. And in *So You Think You Can Nurse?*, we'll send three well-known faces into hospitals to see if they can cope with the pressures of the ward.

Fifteen years ago, these important topics: the state of the NHS, social housing and education would have been tackled almost exclusively by series such as *World in Action*. Now they're being covered in a more accessible way. Programmes such as *The Estate* are clearly not replacements for current affairs but it's interesting that some topics once considered too worthy and a turn-off for viewers now seem to hold the promise of delivering big ratings.

Dan Chambers is Five director of programmes



## COMMENT

# Racist? How dare you!

The media doth protest too much in the face of Sir Ian Blair's accusation that it is institutionally racist, says **Tess Finch-Lees**, there's plenty to suggest it does indeed have a problem



**TESS FINCH-LEES** is an anti-discrimination specialist

WHEN Metropolitan Police commissioner Sir Ian Blair accused the media of institutional racism, their reaction was outrage. At the risk of being crossed off Mark Thompson's Christmas card list, I believe the media is guilty as charged.

Leaders in any industry set the tone, culture and values of their organisations. In the police, as in the media, these are mostly, in ex-BBC director general Greg Dyke's memorable phrase "hideously white", but at least the police recognise they have a problem and are accountable to the public for dealing with it. Within the media we have a situation where insular, omnipotent, largely homogeneous moguls control whether or not an issue gets aired, how it is framed and how any subsequent debates take place, if at all.

When challenged to defend the difference between the coverage they gave the murder of a white lawyer and an Asian builder, we saw the editors of various news outlets suddenly close ranks. They cited "human interest" as a key factor. Does that mean the white man was more human than the Asian?

Attempting to rebut Blair's accusations, Sheffield University's head of journalism studies, Professor Peter Cole, maintained that black murders are associated with gang warfare: "We are not terribly concerned about what nasty people do to each other... We are much more interested when the individuals affected are from a world where attack is unusual". He goes on: "The killing of the very rich will be a story, because the very rich are a story anyway. Inevitably, there will be particular features that will determine the extent of the coverage." Being white and a lawyer, for instance? We live in a society where wealth is structurally concentrated in the hands of

the white majority. If this is what drives the newsworthiness of a crime story, then Blair's case is surely proven beyond doubt.

Take also the recent cartoon debacle in which Islam is depicted as synonymous with terrorism. To have the temerity to challenge this racist rationality, is to invoke the charge of being "politically correct", as though it is shameful to avoid "forms of expression that are perceived to marginalise or insult groups of people who are discriminated against", as defined by the *OED*. It is disingenuous for those in the media to defend their "entitlement" to free speech for the sake of it while dismissing a concept that might make their gratuitous attacks on the powerless and voiceless seem socially unacceptable.

John Simpson's BBC Radio 4 report on the French unrest in November shows that you don't have to be racist to use inadvertently racist language. He described the 1968 events in France (carried out by predominantly white students) as protests underpinned by a cause. He went on to use the word "riot" to describe the recent unrest (involving the predominantly black and Muslim population), that was underpinned by a grievance, not supported by ordinary people. Each incident was allocated adjectives that are value laden, ie the white "cause" and the black "grievance". Similarly, the BBC's Caroline Wyatt acknowledged the offence caused to 5 million Muslims by *France Soir's* re-publication of the Muhammad cartoons, while speculating that the sacking of its editor "may anger many ordinary French people". The word

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"ordinary" in both these reports is not innocuous. However inadvertently, it betrays a mindset of us and them. In what sense are Muslims or non-whites not ordinary in what is supposed to be an egalitarian society?

What about journalistic resources? How are they allocated? Live 8 (sycophantically supported by the media despite African acts being excluded in favour of white "stars"), and even the Radio 4 theme tune, generate more coverage than a genocide in Darfur and a raging famine in Niger. I've been told by a prominent broadcast news editor that Darfur tends not to feature because "our audience doesn't holiday there". Would we tolerate this response if the victims of the genocide were white?

The media's reaction to Blair's criticism was telling in itself. Knife-wielding editors lunged at him, lest he corrupt the minds of the masses. The industry might benefit from a pinch of humility and introspection, rather than closing ranks and stifling debate. Isn't that what they criticise the "PC brigade" for doing? Instead they used the Soham murders to deflect attention from the real story, ie themselves. For his sin (ill-advisedly using Soham to make a legitimate point) Blair apologised. But no one has apologised for publishing images of the girls – known to cause pain to their parents – in order to score points.

The police are accountable to a diversity of stakeholders whom they represent, whereas the media is accountable to Ofcom, another hideously white organisation with as much credibility as Jeremy Clarkson chairing an environmental summit. But, there are some chinks of light. The BBC deserves praise for *The Secret Policeman*, which exposed institutional racism in the police. But I won't hold my breath for an equivalent fly-on-the-wall exposé of journalistic shenanigans. The very idea! *Tess Finch-Lees is an anti-discrimination specialist, writer and social commentator. She has advised companies including Barclays, BP, Philip Morris Company and Shell on diversity issues*