

World Communications Day Lecture 2012

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Thank you for the opportunity to deliver this year's World Communications Day lecture.

I aim to speak about what I see as the main trends in religion in Britain and the impact this has on programming of Religion on the BBC.

My work in the broadcasting of religion in Britain has given me twelve years at the coal face of religion on TV, 10 of those commissioning religion for both Channel 4 and the BBC.

Religion has been half of my career, the other half centred around news and current affairs. I didn't study theology but somehow I've found myself shaping how religion is accessed and represented on TV.

I thought I would start off by just explaining how Religion works at the BBC.

My current role is a bit of a strange one in the BBC. As an organisation we both make programming as well as broadcasting programmes produced by outside companies. Normally the function of production by the BBC, referred to as in-house, is separate from the function of commissioning. In my case and in the case of my current affairs colleague, I have been asked to both commission religion TV and to run the in-house religion and ethics production department.

The in-house department is based in Salford and has been in the Greater Manchester region for close on twenty years now. There was of course a time when all religion on the BBC would have been made by the department but that hasn't been the case now for many years. This comes as a shock to many but in reality this is the norm across the whole of the sector.

The department makes radio and TV programming from Thought for the Day to Songs of Praise. Its output is to be found on many platforms from Radio 2 to BBC 3.

I commission all the TV output but each individual radio channel has its own bespoke commissioners. My job in this area is as Head of Department to manage with my teams how we deliver our programmes for the radio channels unique needs.

Across the BBC there are roughly around 600 hours of radio and 170 hours of TV. This can fluctuate year on year dependant on commissions and events that fall into our lap, such as the Papal Visit in 2010.

What isn't the case is the childish argument that Religion on the BBC is in decline. The hours show it isn't but how it's made and by whom has changed and as I mentioned earlier it changed a long time ago.

Independent companies now deliver alongside the in house department sections of Pause for Thought. On Television shows like the Big Questions and The Life of Muhammad have come from the independent sector. Even within the BBC there are other areas making religion. Mark Dowd's radio pieces before the Pope's visit were made by radio current affairs, BBC Northern Ireland makes Sunday Morning Live as well as a number of Songs of Praise's and BBC Arts made the excellent BBC 4 documentary fronted by Andrew Graham Dixon on the art of reliquaries last year.

This diversity of talent behind and in front of the camera and radio microphone is essential for the wellbeing of the subject area.

A thought not always appreciated by people who look to a time before the BBC dedicated twenty five percent of its TV output solely to independent producers and threw a further 25 per cent in a creative market place open to in-house, independents and anyone with a programme to sell.

In the world of Religious broadcasting across Europe I have experienced in the last decade a bunker mentality that suggests that the world does not understand us and that we are marginalised and ignored. A view I appreciate that is also echoed by fellow travellers who are viewers and listeners.

It's what we say is a glass half empty approach rather than a glass half full. Me – well I'm a glass half full kind of guy, always have been. Why? Because I believe in looking forward and looking backwards only to learn from success and failure not to try and live in the past when everyone has long since moved on.

When I was at Channel 4 to publicise Richard Dawkins series the Root of all Evil? there was a poster that showed the Manhattan skyline whilst the twin towers were still around. The strap line said 'Imagine a world without Religion?'

I want to pose the question today – Imagine a world without Religious Programmes? And why should we fight to get them right?

Well let's look around us, some countries in Europe want to ban hijabs and nikaabs, Mosque building and minarets are front page news, some Christians feel persecuted about living by their faith in secular western societies, we have wars in Iraq and Afghanistan portrayed as new crusades, extreme Jewish settlers in the West Bank building on Palestinian land, terrorists in Pakistan killing their fellow countrymen because of faith differences, homophobic laws passed in African countries, the rise of evangelical Christianity worldwide and its impact on liberal societies, debates about female Bishops, the infusion of religion into politics worldwide...how can Religious programming not be needed?

So if it's needed then why are we even having a debate about its present and future?

The academic Linda Woodhead said in a talk recently that the religion section for any book shop is usually found under spirituality or mind body and spirit. This wasn't a positive from her point of view and she paints a picture that many of us in broadcasting understand very well.

Before I worked in religion I made a few documentaries that today we may class as being about religion but in those pre 9/11 days they were simply good current affairs stories from corruption in the Halal meat industry to social cohesion issues in England's former mill towns.

Back then though religion on TV was either Christian worship, ethical documentaries such as Everyman, Heart of the matter or witness,

lifestyle programmes and occasionally the odd minority faith programme to mark Ramadan or Passover.

For many years Everyman and Witness were the flagships for the BBC and for Channel 4. They were in the heart of the schedules, won awards and had real impact. Then something started to happen.

From 2001 to 2002, I worked on Everyman and the films were, by and large by then, more ethics than religion. There was a reason for this, the times had changed and people were generally more secular. Religion on TV meant programming that was unfairly called 'God slot' programming or it was more mainstream and about ethics or lifestyle to appeal to an audience that didn't necessarily want to watch the type of shows that were more traditionally about religion.

At this moment 9/11 hadn't changed our approach as broadcasters enough to go from the odd film to really understanding the religious motivation behind acts of this nature.

In 2003 I ended up at Channel 4 and was responsible for the strand witness. Again it was as if 9/11 hadn't happened. I inherited films as diverse as documentaries about evangelical clubbers in Ibiza and Christian athletes competing in the commonwealth games in Manchester.

Safe to say then that at this moment in time religion on TV was firmly in the section of the bookshop marked for spirituality or mind body and spirit. In fact I would go further than that. These documentaries were broadcast at 5pm on Saturday evenings. They weren't in the lifestyle section they were in the equivalent of the store room.

Why? Because no one was watching major religion and ethics documentaries any more, the trend right then was clearly 'this ain't working', but unfortunately none of us were attempting to understand, why? Instead of addressing this disconnect we simply decided to hide or even worse dilute away the religion, from what was in the documentary area, quickly becoming a market failure genre.

I say all of this because I have been asked hundreds of times by journalists and students if the events of 9/11 increased people's interest in religion and made my job easier. The questioner always points out the

numbers of books available on religion post 9/11 and the increase in reporting of issues that touched on religion in the media.

The trouble with this theory is though as true as this is about the general upsurge of interest in religion as a whole in the country - it was a good two to three years later before Channel 4 delivered the award-winning *Inside the Mind of the Suicide Bomber*, a film that featured the first interviews on film with failed Palestinian suicide bombers. Three years before the land mark series *The Children of Abraham* and a good five years before the genre defining *The Cult of the Suicide Bomber* - a series that was in the finishing stages of its edit on that fateful day in July that London was attacked by Mohammed Sadiq Khan and his partners in crime.

What happened in those three years? Professor Grace Davie talks about low levels of religious literacy in the UK as a result of decades of shift towards secularism and a belief that religion was a spent force in the public sphere, and it's for this reason it probably took three years to catch up. I remember on 12 September being on a mobile phone in Euston station explaining to a senior manager at the BBC the concept of suicide in Islam and the notion of why martyrdom is used by the perpetrators to describe their act.

I also remember having a conversation about the scheduling of a film about the four patron saints of the UK whilst at Channel 4 and casually offering either Saint George's day or all saints day as possible transmission dates. You could literally see the tumble weed roll across the table before I put these highly intelligent and supportive people out of their misery by giving them the actual dates.

But a lack of literacy doesn't have to mean that religion isn't important to the broadcasting schedules. Radio audiences on channels such as Radio 4 have never really had that disconnect but in TV the audiences are different, more general and with much more choice and you would have to be naive to see that for many years the positioning of religion in the schedules was in decline.

I wouldn't have taken on the task back then at Channel 4 and three years ago at the BBC if I didn't believe it was possible to turn it all around.

I even have a three-step strategy for this. It's basic but I am happy to share it with you.

Step 1

You have to make the broadcaster fall back in love with the subject. If they are cutting back the hours, squeezing the budgets and putting documentaries out in anything but prime time then it's pretty clear that something isn't working. Obviously not all programming is designed to go out in prime time but a lot of it is and quite frankly should. The broadcaster needs to feel that the programming is special – in either delivering a good audience or in delivering it attention. No channel controller will say 'no' to programmes that win major awards, get shortlisted for said awards, get great press and in general make their channel stand out for the right reasons. This doesn't mean shock tactics or sensationalism – Songs of Praise on the BBC is a weekly Christian music and faith show. Last year it celebrated its 50th anniversary. Why? Because people still like it, the team work hard to make it feel fresh after such a long run and what channel controller doesn't want a few million committed viewers every week. If the viewers fall drastically then a controller may fall out of love with it but it's our job to ensure that never happens, even after 50 years we must innovate and make sure everyone stays in love with it. And I am happy to say that people still are – in and out of the BBC.

Step 2

Is once the broadcaster is back in love with subject they will want more of it and will want to get it out to as many people as possible. The end result is more viewers know about it, come to it and like it. My experience in my last job and in my current role is that this works every time. If you sit in front of a controller and say this is going to be exactly what people want to see, this is relevant to the big questions of today, this is going to get written about and this will pick up the odd award – they go for it. Of course you then have to deliver!

My experience is that getting the broadcaster interested in a subject generally means the viewers come to it and really appreciate it.

Last year on BBC 2 we transmitted the first series that told the story of the Life of Muhammad. This generated press interest, was broadcast in the heart of the schedule – midweek at 9pm – delivered on good audience figures and has been nominated for mainstream television awards. It also addressed that religious literacy disconnect. Not many people know detail about who he is and his life and message but they are interested in his impact today. It's more amazing that it hadn't been done before rather than why was it done at all.

Step 3

Is now you have the broadcaster's attention and the viewers interested in the output – you have to keep constantly updated so that they keep watching and keep wanting to get behind it. At Channel 4 I had a very successful time with documentaries about Religious based conflict, particularly terrorism and occupation in the middle east. We won Royal Television society awards, were nominated for the Emmys, BAFTAs, Griersons etc. We got great newspaper press, the ratings weren't too bad and we increased the numbers of hours of religious programming I commissioned significantly. Then the nominations started to dry up, the newspaper articles got smaller and fewer and the ratings started to look less healthy. The hours then started to reduce.

Why was this happening? Not because the programmes were bad just that we had probably made too many of them and the viewers and reviewers were bored. At times like this you have to almost go back to step ONE but this time from a better position. You aren't trying to win the broadcaster's affection – this time you are trying to keep it. For me this meant lots of audience research. The end result was the research told me that people wanted to know more about the basics of religion, they wanted to know less about the conflict and more about its roots in history and theology. Hence projects such as How God made the English, The Bible's Buried Secrets, The Seven Wonders of Buddhism and Jerusalem: The making of a Holy City. They refresh the genre and fit into this thirst for knowledge that's out there.

So for me, that's the real answer to the question about 9/11 and did it make my job easier. Yes it changed people's relationship with religion overnight but it didn't on its own make my job any easier. Better, more

relevant ideas did, ones that tried to make sense for our audiences of the new world we were now in. It may have started three or so years late but after that, the trend in documentary making changed across all broadcasters and in my opinion saved the genre from collapse.

I'm not naive to think that any one programme will effectively erase the lack of literacy and knowledge in this subject area. We can and should try though, it's better than the opposite stand point – as espoused by the glass half empty brigade.

Of course there are areas of the BBC's religion output that are in a very different space. Radio 4 goes from strength to strength. Daily service and Songs of Praise are older than any of us can comprehend and I can't see a time when they will diminish in popularity.

But fashions change and reacting to them is important. In the case of factual documentaries that change had to be a revolution to save it from collapse but in many other areas it's more about evolution. Songs of Praise does not look like it did fifty years ago but at its heart it has the same values.

The average age of the Songs of Praise viewer is 65. Very different to the age and general demographic profile of say the Big Questions. Both though are central to the offering of religion and ethics on the BBC. You can say the same about the Moral Maze and Good Morning Sunday on radio, different audiences but both very important.

Why? Because our audiences are very diverse and we can't expect to service all of them with the same output. We need to make programmes that interest the religious, the non religious, the non religious literate and the general viewer. Clearly not all of these groups will come to every show. But with some of the complaints I receive there seems to be a belief that this should be the case.

Clearly as I have set out that cannot be the case. Traditional boxes now do not necessarily represent society as many of us may imagine it. There are lots of different beliefs out there, within faiths there are new approaches, new cultural communities and practises. Understanding the new demography of Britain and what some of these groups are interested in is essential for those of us engaged in religious

programming. Also this level of understanding is needed by the critics who want to return to a time that has long passed both in terms of the industrial working practises of the media and of how society is now shaped.

Think of the, in my opinion, excellent Easter the BBC delivered on radio and TV with services, documentaries and unique projects such as The People's Passion on Radio 4 and The Preston Passion on BBC 1. You had something for everyone from full-on services to drama. Significant amounts of the schedules and budgets dedicated to make the output as diverse and as religious as possible. From Easter services, the Pope's message to thousands of people participating in a public event in Preston.

This is the future for me. It's in diversity of output but as the Easter programming illustrates that diversity is relevant to the subject area. So no multifaith Songs of Praise, it will, whilst I am in the job, remain a Christian programme. And it can remain so because on Sunday mornings be it on TV and radio we have real religious, cultural and intellectual diversity available through Sunday on Radio 4 and The Big Questions on BBC 1.

Last Sunday on the Big Questions we debated the issue of grooming of girls for sex by some British Pakistani men. Last year on BBC 3, I commissioned a film from British Pakistani Adil Ray about why this was happening, where it was happening, who was involved and what can be done.

No sweeping of a difficult subject under the carpet and again like the programming post 9/11 and 7/7 a great example of how religion and ethics can compliment the news agenda.

News on any radio and TV channel is for many people of a religious persuasion an issue when it comes to the reporting of religion in society today. Many see it as polarising and giving undue prominence to aggressive religious voices. It's probably not a fair reflection of the whole of news but it is something I think about when looking at ideas to tackle.

Be it Nicky Campbell making a film about the perceived persecution of Christianity in the UK, Simon Sebag Montifiore explaining why there is

such a battle to control Jerusalem and the impact on the psyche of people throughout the world or Rageh Omar trying to bring to the masses some basic knowledge of who Muhammad was and why that matters today. These are not accidental commissions but an attempt to delve deeper beyond the sound bite.

Do I think aggressive religious voices have no place in our schedules be it in news or in my programming? No. Of course they have a presence but in context and without undue prominence and that is what documentaries and debate on TV and Radio can give.

There may be many of us who would wish that some of these aggressive voices both religious and secular would heed the Pope's message about silence. They won't of course but I do and I understand exactly where the message is coming from. If you look at programming such as the acclaimed series, *The Monastery* and *The Simple Life*, it's clear to see just how much they illustrate the line from the Pope's message "it is hardly surprising that different religious traditions consider solitude and silence as privileged states which help people to rediscover themselves and the truth which gives meaning to all things."

When we get that right we really get it right but the key message I take from it is not in direct programming about silence and meditation. For me it's more the state it leaves you in. Silence and contemplation make you hear and think more clearly.

To survive and prosper we have to keep on listening and thinking about the world around us and what our listeners and viewers require from us. We cannot ever become a traditional offering only, the subject and the audience is much, much better than that.

Thank you.