

# England's multi-cultural society not reflected in Channel 4's output



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Ofcom is presently consulting on the terms for renewing Channel 4's licence ([see here](#)). Earlier this week, the Advisory Committee for Scotland posted its thoughts on Advice to Ofcom ([see here](#)), find below the full submission from the Advisory Committee for England (ACE).

## ***Duration of licence***

ACE supports Ofcom's proposal to re-license Channel 4 for a further 10 years. The broadcaster is part of our national broadcasting landscape and it needs a stable period of time to plan and carry out its progress in this new digital age.

## ***Channel 4's remit***

The history of Channel 4 is well known. It was set up 31 years ago with some specific briefs which included:

- To appeal to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society
- Develop new production talent
- To exhibit a distinctive character

Its latest Annual Report re-affirms these aims:

*"Channel 4's guiding light is its remit, as laid out in legislation by Parliament. At its heart the remit requires us to be innovative, experimental, distinctive and diverse. It is multi-faceted, with different components, such as supporting and stimulating well-informed debate and inspiring people to make changes in their lives. The remit also suggests how we can deliver outcomes – for example by investing in high-quality media content and nurturing creative talent. It applies across the full spread of our genres – from comedy and film to news and education."*

The report continues:

*"Channel 4 continued to perform disproportionately well amongst hard to reach groups – in particular, profiling strongly amongst ethnic minorities and young audiences, in comparison to the other PSBs. We maintained our portfolio share amongst BAME audiences, following declines in some previous years, and the gap between the viewing share for white and BAME audiences continued to be narrower for Channel 4 than for the other public service broadcasters."*

Although this is to be welcomed, Channel 4 hits the nail on the head when it implicitly recognises, that it cannot be complacent:

*"In order to fulfil our public service remit – to innovate and experiment in television and appeal to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society – we optimise returns from our commercial activities."*

### **Observations**

ACE welcomes the offer of Channel 4 to diversify geographically and set a 9% quota but it is concerned that, like other PSBs, the eye has been taken off other parts of its diversity remit. ACE feels that Channel 4 needs to address further its portrayal of ethnic and cultural minorities.

These observations are based on the content analysis of random weeks of Channel 4, as opposed to the positive gloss expected in its Annual Report. Content analysis of a typical week suggests that, at the moment, Channel 4 relies on a diet of Bollywood movies, Big Fat Gypsy type programmes, many of them repeats, and urban serials such as "Top Boy".

There is a lack of distinctive factual or original material which meets the remit under S264 of the Communications Act, Public Service Broadcasters: "to reflect the lives and concerns of different communities and cultural interests and traditions within the *United Kingdom*, and locally in different parts of the *United Kingdom*". "Unreported World" is held up in Channel 4's latest Annual Report as an exemplar of diverse programming but ACE would argue that it should do a similar "Unreported UK" strand.

This is important because the 2011 Census shows that 14% in the UK are from Black Minority Ethnic communities. While Channel 4 explains that it is hitting higher than the PSB average among 16-34 year old BMEs, it says nothing about those who are over 34.

ACE also observes, through content analysis in the same weeks, that the BBC is just as bad in failing in its PSB remit. In a spirit of being helpful, ACE suggests that Channel 4 could steal an even bigger march, creating extra advertising revenue in the process, if it were to engage these communities in creative, risk taking and diverse programming. For example, Ofcom allows programmes to be sponsored and product placement as long as these are transparent and so Channel 4 has the latitude to experiment in this way without breaching compliance guidelines.

### **News**

The Advisory Committee for England also feels that the significant position that C4 holds as a provider of national and international news also bears examination in the renewal process. Issues of plurality are now much more significant, and confused, than when the C4 licence was first issued.

C4 news provision is recognised as of high quality, and dealing with, for example international issues in greater depth than the main bulletins of the BBC or ITV. Aside from the BBC, C4 is the only other public-owned provider of free-to-air national and international news. The boundaries of what is broadcast news and what is not is already blurred with most newspapers producing on-line versions of their coverage.

This, as Leveson has recognised, will become even more blurred as smart screens become the norm in most sitting rooms, reflecting agendas which are not constrained by Charter as is the BBC, or by terms of the ITV licences. Given therefore C4's special position, would it be appropriate to examine the channel's news brief, in terms of its commitment to diversity; its non-metropolitan story count and an investigation to what extent the range of its coverage is dictated by the resources of its news provider, ITN?

### **Targets**

At the moment Channel 4 sets its geographical quota at 3% across all the UK nations. It proposes to raise this to 9% by 2020. The BBC has a target of 17% Nations production by 2016.

ACE recognises the disparity between public funding between the BBC and Channel 4. But since Channel 4 is currently delivering 5.4% production in the Nations, a 9% target by 2020 does not seem ambitious.

However, how will targets reflect ethnic and minority diversity as well as geographical diversity? in some areas of London and cities like Leicester, the ethnic minority groups are in fact the majority. The current BME population proportion in the UK is 14 percent.

ACE is not being prescriptive but is asking how a commonsense approach can be applied to setting a realistic but challenging target rather than a quota to diversity in its fullest sense.

ACE is also concerned that quotas for production in the “Nations” can be an easy way to appear to demonstrate a commitment to geographical distribution of production while ignoring talent and diversity of approach in the English regions.

ACE would like to see a commitment for a more equal distribution of out-of-London production, although members realise this is difficult without more regional production bases that are sustainable. Commissions should be about talent and not quotas. But this is an old conundrum. Without such a commitment, it is more difficult, though not impossible, for regional production companies of any scale to emerge. And if they are not encouraged to emerge, then diversity of voice, and of culture, is far more difficult to nurture.

### ***Conclusion***

ACE is disappointed that a broadcaster which pioneered innovative programming by radical thinking commissioners helped by its defunct Multicultural Unit appears to “play it safe” when it comes to portraying England’s racially diverse landscape. ACE does not think the issue is one of quotas or returning to what Channel 4 has promised to deliver: programming which appeals to a culturally diverse society.

Channel 4 will naturally dispute the very notion that it is not serving its diverse communities as it did in the past. Indeed in a recent appearance before the Culture, Media & Sport Committee, its Chief Executive defended his Channel’s adherence to the PSB remit. So it should be able to show, by analysis, how it meets its remit without resorting to semantics and statistical tricks.

The idea that Bollywood movies after midnight, Big Fat Gypsy Weddings, Made in Bradford or five minute films during Ramadan are enough is not acceptable.

Channel 4, and other PSB broadcasters, needs to push the boundaries and explore the real stories among its diverse audiences in a regular way, as it does for example in its investigative journalism strands. Public Service Broadcasters are compelled to make programmes for all its viewers.

Channel 4 surveys its audience and can drill down into the demographic makeup. If the raw data were released, ACE suspects it would find a huge disconnect with older BME communities who are turning to other non-terrestrial channels to get their education, information and entertainment. In which case, it builds up their argument of why they should contribute towards the cost of a PSB which they feel ignores them.

**Barnie Choudhury and Graham Creelman on behalf of ACE**

**Ofcom Advisory Committee for England**