

Festival of (Me)dia – Conference Report

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The Festival of (Me)dia was a weekend long event (April 13th – 14th 2024) that took place as part of the larger 'DIY TV: The History and Influence of the BBC's Community Programmes Unit' project which was made possible with support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The aim of the project is to preserve and disseminate the history of the Community Programmes Unit (CPU). From its formation in 1972, the CPU handed over creative and editorial control to non-professional participants, in order to extend the range of voices and issues being presented by the BBC. The Festival of (Me)dia provided a space for members of the CPU to talk about what it was like to be involved in the Unit as it developed over the 30 year period it was operational.

The first of the two days focused mainly on the birth of the CPU and how it developed into Open Space. The weekend was introduced by Dr Jo Henderson, one of the leaders of the project, who delivered an early keynote summarising the goals of the festival which centred around preserving the legacy of the CPU and engaging with some of its key aims. This followed on from an increase in interest in the CPU brought about by an exhibition at the London gallery Raven Row, entitled 'People Make Television.' The focus then moved onto the development of the CPU and to the questions of why and how it took on the form that it did, through a lecture delivered by Tony Laryea, a producer and director for the BBC.

Mike Bolland, a producer for the BBC, then provided an overview of the work that the Unit did in its early days, as part of his discussion of Open Door which was a show that allowed members of the public to talk about their own issues without being edited by the BBC. Included alongside the story of his experiences were various clips from the CPU that showed footage broadcast on the BBC. One of these was a Grapevine video showing the development of community information and advice regarding sexual health for young people who would otherwise not have access to this information. The importance of the work of the CPU was demonstrated clearly through this early talk.

Sue Davidson, an executive producer, then led a talk about Open Space, which was a development from Open Door, and the evolution of access strands and how this challenged the usual way in which TV shows were produced. The day closed with a brief Q&A with Tony Laryea which mainly centred around some of the “difficult programmes” he had to produce during his time working with the CPU. This included a discussion on how the selection process worked for Open Space and how this meant that often producer’s personal beliefs conflicted with the groups that they were working with.

Jeremy Gibson’s talk on Video Diaries and the issues that the unit faced welcomed the second day of the conference. Video diaries were made by members of the public filming aspects of their own lives with a handheld camera. Many examples of Video Diaries, which Jeremy Gibson produced, were played including one which featured diarist Kevin Allen’s road trip to see the 1990 World Cup in Italy. He documented first hand his experiences at a time when English football fans were known for their hooliganism and as a result were facing a difficult time travelling through Italy. Another featured the diarist Willa Carroll who was talking about the emotional problems she experienced as a result of the physical abuse she suffered in her childhood with her sister. A talk led by Tony Steyger, a producer and director, then looked at Teenage Diaries which, similarly to Video Diaries, gave people (in this case, specifically young people) the opportunity to make videos about their lives and experiences. Jeremy Gibson and

Tony Steyger then led a quick Q and A that was elaborated upon their discussions in the morning.

Tony Steyger then continued the discussion with a talk on the idea behind Video Nation which included a discussion of some of the difficulties the unit experienced. Video Nation was a project which aimed to give marginalised communities an opportunity to express their opinions on matters that were important to them. One of the issues described in the talk was how the unit also worked with right-wing groups that the members of the unit did not identify with politically. An example video was shown of one of the programmes that they made which conveyed the opinions of people in West London who were campaigning against immigration. Continuing the talk on Video Nation, Mandy Rose, a producer, delivered the day two's keynote lecture in which she discussed specific aspects of Video Nation, talking about what it was like to work with different groups of people about things which mattered to them.

The conference was brought to a close with an engaging Q&A which ended up focusing on the importance of diversity within the editing process of news shows specifically, which is still an issue today, 50 years after the birth of the CPU. The values which the CPU promoted back in the 1970s still need to be actively strived for today.