

Grow up Media!

Sunday, 26 July 2015

Something absolutely appalling happened last week on the BBC.

A Top of the Pops show from 1980 was re-shown, on prime time, and in it DJ Simon Bates talked for a few minutes with Jonathan King, who had come in from America with an interesting new toy, the Rubik's Cube.

Of course, social media carried the obligatory shock/horror Tweets from outraged of Tunbridge Wells but the majority of comments were from viewers delighted to be reminded of happier days.

It's not the first time I've featured in a repeat of Top of the Pops because, a few years ago, when I was cut from one of the shows, I wrote and complained to the then Director General, Mark Thompson. He, intelligently, correctly and bravely, wrote back saying that, indeed, this was wrong and that I would not be chopped from future repeats. A couple of tabloids howled expectedly but, as a result, I've remained in the programmes. Just as well since, in the 1980s, I featured monthly doing segments from America and erasure from repeats would mutilate most of the shows.

But this Stalinesque culture of censorship does exist in the British media, where content is based on perceived reaction from those who shout loudest and, thanks to social media, those voices of protest are more likely to be heard than in the good old days of green ink mail being simply consigned to the bin.

The Rubik's Cube incident is amusing as there was a strike at the BBC at the time and Simon Bates had called me in New York, knowing that I was coming back on a visit to London, asking me to pop onto the show which had no live acts, audience or stars that week, to provide visual variety to the studio format. I went to FAO Schwartz, the big New York toy shop, to see if I could find something interesting and saw, sitting forlornly on a back shelf, these multi coloured boxes. I asked the assistant if they were selling and was told not at all. They were new and of no interest to the public.

Being a good media hack - I was doing a weekly show for Radio One called A King In New York and a Radio Four slot called A Postcard From America, the young person's answer to Alistair Cooke's Letter From America (I was in my 30s) - I decided these squeaky cubes in primary colours would do nicely on TV and so featured them with Simon. As a direct result they became very popular later in the decade.

I went on to become quite a media force in that period - with a weekly column in The Sun, in the era when millions read the paper, and getting up to 9 million viewers a week on BBC2 with my Entertainment USA and No Limits programmes.

But in this era of New Puritanism, where deeds of the past are being judged by the morality of the present, the media has decided to try to expunge memories from the collective consciousness. So you get TV repeats cancelled if they feature Jimmy Savile or Dave Lee Travis, museums removing paintings by Rolf Harris, old It's A Knockouts consigned to the bin if Stuart Hall presented them, and vast areas of charts ruled by Gary Glitter and others wiped from the history books.

TV, radio, press - terrified of condemnation by the green ink brigade - no longer assess content by whether or not it would be good, entertaining or informative but by whether or not it might provoke tabloid outrage. So we see old footage or commentary by anybody convicted of any crime quietly ignored. And those whose past may, on examination, have been less than morally satisfactory, will soon be forgotten too. Bye bye John Peel shows, Rolling Stones or Queen music, the artistic endeavours of Kenny Everett and Benny Hill.

God knows whether these days new stars like One Direction or Robbie Williams lead squeaky clean lives. One assumes groupies and rent boys are now mere historical anomalies. Those heady days of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll are long gone and even some who behaved impeccably are becoming tainted by false allegations and accusations.

Of course those periods when many young people desperately wanted sex with celebrities did exist. Some idol worshipped. Some did it for money. It was, of course, illegal if you were same gender and under 18, until the late 1990s - so some slight inflation of imagination, particularly regarding ages, might be necessary when rewriting the past. Who cares? It's a great story!

And politicians, who, likewise, allow policy and budgets to be controlled by the green ink brigade, happily go along with this and set up expensive inquiries wasting billions of tax monies better spent elsewhere.

Grow up Government! Grow up Media! Stop simply allowing "it's a great story" to dominate your decisions and start carrying informative, entertaining, illustrative shows and articles. Some viewers, listeners and readers are perfectly able to view or read or hear material without flinching. You cannot cover World War Two without mentioning Hitler or Stalin. Times change. Live with it.