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42 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8NW, England.

Telephone: 01-405 6862 (24 hour messages) direct during working hours



FUNDING THE (IN)DEPENDENT SECTOR IN THE LATE EIGHTIES

by Sue Hall & John Hopkins, 10 SEP 85.

Introduction

We have written a 2-part paper in reply to Barrie Ellis-Jones' paper "BFI Policies & Priorities for Development—a Consultative Document". Part 1 accepts the BFI's principal premises without questioning or commenting on them and offers some constructive suggestions on developing further strategies/policies and criteria, to evaluate and feed into these strategies/policies.

Part 2 questions the basic premises and the analysis (quality vs. quantity) which follows. We present an alternative conceptual structure which could be used to inform/create policy.

However, as befits a small organisation, we have chosen to illustrate our arguments with examples drawn from our own experience in the "production" sector (actually, provision of video post-production services) leaving it to others to comment in the light of their own areas of experience.

Part 1 BFI POLICIES: AN IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY FOR THE PRODUCTION SECTOR

The BFI has recently made the following important discoveries which, in turn, have caused it to rethink its policy:

(1) Distinct Currents. Either quality or quantity could be supported by a funding agency and the BFI wants to support quality.

(2) Investments—a new name for grants—should be judged by the dividend they generate, in this case cultural rather than financial.

They also discovered that:

- * 'National culture' is segmented and not homogenous.
- * 'Integrated practice' as a policy is too demanding to be operable by any other than the major industrial institutions (among which the BFI itself). Instead, all smaller operations should be seen as part of a supportive infrastructure that, in overview, demonstrates integrated practice.

(1) DISTINCT CURRENTS

Quality—Degree of excellence (the opposite of quantity).

—Distinctive character (of something)

Quantity—Property of a thing which can be measured

[Synopsis from Concise O.E.D.]

The BFI wishes to encourage productions of a distinctive character with educative dimensions, and naturally they should also be excellent and contribute to the appreciation of cultural forms etc.

How do we (and the BFI) tell if a programme meets these stringent criteria? How do we judge quality?

Quality can be judged (assessed) by both qualitative(subjective) and quantitative(objective/measurable) criteria. Measurements of quantity are easy but judgements of quality are harder.

Quantifying the success of a quality production

This is a limited set of criteria (not all of which would apply to any one production) which would apply after a production has been made.

- * How much did it cost ?
- * How long did it take to produce?
- * How many people were involved in the production process?
- * How much publicity has it had e.g. column inches?
- * How many people will see it?
- * How, if at all, did their behaviour change after seeing it?
 - e.g. Did a discussion follow, and if so, how many people spoke, how long did it go on, did anything else happen as a result? (Miner's Tapes).
 - e.g. Was a collection taken and how much did it raise? (Live Aid)

Qualitatively assessing the success of a quality production

Since qualitative judgements are subjective they should be based on the opinion of several people whenever possible. (The all-too-familiar advisory panel or committee). These people should be changed/rotated regularly and at frequent intervals.

Judgements of quality could also be informed by a theory of communication (see Part 2) which assessors would use to form/inform their judgements.

Planning for quality in a video facility

Organisations, projects and workshops—the repositories of the investments—are faced with the problem of how to be 'interventionist' in economic conditions that are 'inescapable' i.e. if a workshop has to earn more by doing more outside work to keep afloat, how can it simultaneously attempt to produce works of quality and renown?

At first glance, it seems an imponderable in the terms stated or implied by the BFI i.e. work of quality requires educative dimensions, public debate, challenging presentation..and the access production line doesn't have time or resources to take such a hand-crafted, academic approach.

However those of us on the ground have other means of cultural intervention/quality control, even if some of them are based on probability rather than certainty:

- * Positive discrimination by giving lower rates.

—If an RAA has decided by giving a grant that a production is likely to be culturally valuable, charging a lower rate for facilities and services reinforces this judgement.

—Again, if the producer's intention to create any one of these (public benefit, innovative aesthetic content, social purpose, guaranteed audience) can be demonstrated at the outset, a lower rate for the production will give it a better chance of completion.

—To summarise, 'judgement before work begins' can be exercised so as to maximise the chances of quality (of one sort or another) emerging later.

- * Training. It is not clear whether the BFI consider this to be Education or Production—no matter. What distinguishes cultural intervention from commercial practice is the provision of training at favourable rates. This is also positive discrimination because it is encouraging people at an early stage in their development of skills. Its results are inevitably long term. Today's trainees are tomorrow's producers.

- * Information & Advice. This is also something done by workshops but not by commercial enterprises because it does not show a direct return for the time spent.

These examples are intended to show that cultural intervention is achievable by organisations with a high throughput of people & product, albeit on a statistical basis.

It may be held that the 'Miners Tapes' were given the 85 Grierson Award because of their 'quality'. But it is quite obvious that if they had not achieved a remarkably wide distribution (and by maximising their effectiveness) their cultural impact could easily have been overlooked. This distribution was achieved because they were so well fitted to their objective, which was of social rather than aesthetic dimensions. In this case, doesn't quality mean the same as quantity?

Again, 'Framed Youth' began life as a classic 'access' production, not even able to attract funds from its RAA. Later it achieved recognition in part due to the flickering interest of Channel 4 who coughed up a commission for some of the participants. Then the 84 Grierson was awarded, this time primarily on aesthetic/semantic grounds. This time quality originated from access; and 'access' is part of the 'local authority current' which the BFI thinks it isn't interested in.

(2) INVESTMENTS

Assessing investments in organisations for cultural dividends using the BFI's stated criteria

Accepting for the moment the BFI's taxonomy 'Exhibition, Production, Distribution, Education'...each of these sectors has its own requirements and mechanisms.

Thus a separate strategy is appropriate for each sector; and these strategies should be harmonised and related by the BFI to provide an overall strategy set. This set will be the BFI's strategy.

This approach is analagous to the 'stakeholder analysis' that must be undertaken for any enterprise involving a number of interested parties such as a sponsored production.

CRITERIA

for implementing the BFI's policy viz-a viz organisations & activities in the field.

1. Permanence.

- * How well established is it?
- * What is its track record?
- * Can it demonstrate continuity of operation?

2. Visibility.

- * What provision (budgetary & policywise) is there for:
 - publicity/ press coverage/ advertising? What are the extent of ads, press coverage?
 - outreach, local publicity?
- * What is the extent of published articles, papers?
- * What public awareness is there of productions made?
- * What image does it seek to promote of itself?
- * Does it analyse its own promotional activities?

3. Cultural effectiveness.

- How much distribution is achieved?
- Who are the audiences?
- Are any changes in the cultural environment identifiable as a result? e.g. The emergence and activities of women's, black, gay

etc groups has caused the realisation that our national culture is segmented & not homogenous. e.g. The existence of a few Scratch videos has caused the rising popularity of Scratch video as an art form.

What feedback is there from audiences/consumers?

What awards have been won, what festivals shown at?

4. Relations and Influence with Industry.

Is it (well) known in its part of the industry?

What is the substance of the relations it has with the industry and the people in it?

Does it occupy an identifiable or singular place in the industry?

Have any innovations been made that affect the industry: technical, semantic, social effectiveness?

5. Self-analysis.

What parts of its activity contribute to debate and discussion in the film & TV culture?

By what means does it assess its place in the cultural infrastructure and engage in critical analysis of its own performance, and how often?

What are the mechanisms of response to end-users/audience feedback?

True Story

Unfortunately, the authors were overwhelmed by a grant application and so were unable to complete Part 2 of this paper.

Part 2 "The Quality of Communication" (working title)—without quantity, how does the quality emerge; and how to tell when you've got it—will appear shortly.

Paper written for BFI Conference, Sept 85.