

Broadcast

Our duty is to show, and care

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If contributors are happy, we have done our job, says Brian Woods

The media hysteria over Channel 4's Benefits Street raises important questions about our duty of care to contributors. One view is that post-Big Brother, anyone who lets themselves be filmed deserves everything they get. At the other extreme, there's the view that producers have a huge responsibility to care for those generous enough to let them into their lives, before and after broadcast.

Love Productions managing director Richard McKerrow recently told The Guardian: "There isn't enough funded aftercare for people who have been brave enough to be on television, whether [the funding is] from broadcasters or the government."

Richard's right in part: there isn't enough, though both C4 and the BBC have agreed extra funding when we've presented specific aftercare cases to them. But this is always informal and ad hoc. Perhaps a more formal structure, a fund that all producers could apply to, is worth considering.

The question is less the broadcasters' willingness to 'do the right thing', and more the producers' and commissioning editors' awareness of what 'the right thing' might be. Not because we are cold-hearted, cynical exploiters, but because this stuff is complicated, and figuring out when and where we might cross the line between film-maker and social worker can sometimes be hard.

Our BBC3 series Growing Up Poor followed six teenagers "struggling to get by" (as we put it in the pre-title). It featured teen pregnancy; young dads debating whether to go out stealing to pay for nappies, heating and food; contributors being arrested; and one especially memorable scene of a 17-year-old girl carefully doing her week's budget and concluding she could afford one pack of fags, before remembering she also needed to buy toilet roll.

They'd all seen the films and were happy that they accurately reflected their lives, but they knew some people might have a go at them, and indeed they did. The reaction was typically mixed: some condemned the government for making kids live like this; others criticised the kids for complaining about not having enough money for food, yet affording cigarettes. Overall, the response was positive – we had been lucky enough to get the balance right between portraying a gritty reality but maintaining viewers' empathy.

Poverty is in fashion right now (and yes, we too have films in production in this area), but it's always been a vital subject for TV to cover. We must show Britain to itself, ideally not to scorn or mock, but to understand, to empathise and to see that our differences are smaller than the things that connect us.

But with every hysterical headline about Benefits Street, it sadly becomes harder to portray the real lives of those struggling most in Britain. Since its first episode aired, we have lost two contributors (though we're still hoping to win them back).

So from commentary-free ob doc to the most constructed of reality, how do we know if we have done 'the right thing'? For me, the test is how our contributors look back on the experience. If they are happy and feel that we have been honest with them and given them support, I'm content that we have done our duty – however a newspaper may choose to spin the story.