



Jeremy Issacs intended Channel Four to foster “the new and experimental” in British television.

Do you believe that it has fulfilled its potential?



Issacs
1982
-
1988



Grade
1988
-
1997



Jackson
1997
-
2001



Thompson
2001
-
present day



Jeremy Issacs intended Channel Four to foster “the new and experimental” in British television. Do you believe that it has fulfilled its potential?

Channel 4 (C4) seems, on the one hand, to be maintaining their initial ethos of nurturing the ‘new and experimental’, but with commercial pressures to make a profit and please advertisers; they do tend to rely on a vast amount of ‘American staples’. There seems to be little middle ground (*Countdown?*). Either you turn on C4 and see an American show, normally bought from HBO, or you see a reality based ‘experimental’ programme that no other terrestrial channel would dare to air.

On the BBC news website they did a ‘Talking Point’ message board for C4’s 20th birthday in 2002. Most of the messages posted were pro-C4 and stated that it had stuck to its initial ethos. Here are some quotes.

‘Channel 4 has always been groundbreaking and has always dared to produce programmes with content that no other channel would dare. It has always stood by its ethos and despite going close to the mark it has always been the definition of ‘entertaining’ since the word go. You must applaud Channel 4 for being controversial, amusing and always moving forwards. Plus it has Peter Kay.’

Mel, London.

‘I applaud Channel 4 for having the guts to do what others wouldn’t dare. They’ve risked reputation and jumped into many a pool of controversy, to bring us quality, unbiased, realistic television.’

Andrew Logie, UK.

C4 was created in the Thatcher era by an Act of Parliament in 1981 and revised in the Broadcasting Acts of 1990 (cleared the way for C4 to negotiate directly with its own advertising revenue and obliged all terrestrial broadcasters to commission at least 25% of their output from independent programme-making companies) and 1996. More recently, The Communications Act of 2003 requires C4 to:

- Demonstrate innovation, experimentation and creativity
- Appeal to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society
- Include programmes of an educational nature
- Exhibit a distinctive character

C4 first went on air slightly before 4.45pm on Tuesday 2 November 1982 ‘...beginning with an impressive, imperial montage of clips set to the striding sounds of a special extended version

Channel 4

of David Dundas' Channel 3 theme titled 'Fourscore.' (Kibble-White, 2002). The first face to be seen after the C4 montage was *Countdown* host Richard Whiteley. Astonishingly, even today, if you tune into C4 in the late afternoon, you will still be able to see him!

The new C4 organisation quickly became a major sponsor of independently made movies, drama series and documentaries. This encouraged the growth of a large sector of some nine hundred independent program-making companies of varied sizes and production specialisms. C4 has a 'Publishing House Ethos' and attracted much interest from independent producers. The term 'publishing' conjures up images of printed material like books or magazines, however C4 is also a publisher. They distribute work on behalf of the independent companies, making C4 a broadcaster publisher.

C4 was often assumed to be a private company, mainly due to it carrying advertising, whereas the BBC was well known for being a Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) channel. 'Channel 4 as a structure is unique throughout the world. There is no other example of a wholly independent channel, receiving no public money, with a statutory obligation to be innovative, distinctive and to cater for minority tastes and interests.' (Barnett, November 3, 2002).

I wish to discuss a selection of C4 programmes that fit into this experimental vs. American split. When C4 began in 1982, their publicity suggested that every Thursday at 8pm, they would broadcast a populist and entertaining documentary with mass appeal, but most importantly, one that the whole family could enjoy. This was a hard promise to live up to and the flagship Thursday broadcast, *Max Boyce Meets The Dallas Cowboys*, was a very public and high profile flop. Hardly anybody, let alone families, tuned in; within a couple of weeks the Family Choice branding was dropped, and within a few months the entire idea was quietly put to bed.

However, this was not the end of C4's affinity with the documentary genre. On the contrary, I feel the area C4 expresses the majority of its new and experimental ideas are in this genre. The first *Big Brother* style documentary was broadcast in October 1986. This was a fly on the wall documentary called *Redbrick* that followed ten weeks in the life of students at Newcastle University. February 1990 saw a new documentary series called *Cutting Edge* introduced, which still exists today. September 1990 saw independent film and video documentary productions showcased in the new programme *Critical Eye*.

documentary 1 consisting of documents and other materials. 2 using film, photographs and sound recordings of real events to provide a factual report.

Oxford English Dictionary

More recently, C4's documentary section has gone down some very interesting routes. The ones I have found most interesting (by dealing with somewhat taboo issues not often, if at all, covered on other terrestrial channels) have been the *Adult at 14* series and a one off documentary called *Chatting to Death*.

The station's head of documentaries Peter Dale, who commissioned the *Adult at 14* series said 'we felt that 14 seems to be an age coming up in research at which a large proportion of teenagers are having sex. It's a point where there seems to be a clear transition between childhood and adulthood – but also a feeling that they couldn't be further away from adulthood.' (<http://www.news.scotsman.com/latest.cfm?id=2145675>)

The *Adult at 14* series was broadcast in November 2003 over about a week. It took an honest look at the experience of modern teens, considering issues such as the age of consent (16 November, 9.00pm -- *Sex Before 16: Why the Law is Failing*), virginity and sex education. Popular music, most tracks in the charts at the time of production, was used to appeal to the teenagers themselves. MTV style montage filming techniques were used in some of the programmes; a style liked by teenagers and one that also gave the programmes a young vibe.

I think this was a really good series as it helped open up the debate on what Britain's teenagers are, aren't, should and shouldn't be doing. If parents were watching with their teenagers I am sure it would have helped bring up taboo topics in conversation and minimized the embarrassment to bring up such topics. People in power who may have been watching, would have been enlightened, I'm sure! For people watching who aren't teenagers, parents or in a position of power, it was out of the ordinary, interesting and took a no holds barred approach. It gave publicity to issues that should have far more coverage and attention than they currently do. The other programmes in this series were:

- 16 November, 10.00pm -- *Pleasureland*
- 18 November, 9.00pm -- *Fourteen Alone*
- 18 November, 10.40pm -- *Kids on Porn*
- 19 November, 11.50pm – *Lovestruck*

Most of these were broadcast at times when parents could decide if their teenagers should be allowed to watch or not. However, most teenagers now have a television in their bedroom, so they most probably watched it alone or with their friends, rather than with their parents.

Pleasureland was the only drama in this series, the rest were documentary style. *Pleasureland* began with the main protagonist telling herself, "I, Joanna Mosscroft, aged 14, year nine, almost year 10, promise me, Joanna Mosscroft, to have sex" and she does, in various unaffectionate scenarios. The characters were dressed in clothes representative of real life teenagers, used language of real life teenagers and lived like real life teenagers.

C4's head of drama John Yorke stated that *Pleasureland* was "...quite uncompromising. We wanted it to be as realistic as it could be, without being too gratuitous. By putting it out at 10pm it leaves the decision about whether children should watch up to the parents. The reason I pushed it through was that I thought it was a subject worth talking about and airing. Channel 4's job is to look into places that haven't been looked at before." (<http://www.news.scotsman.com/latest.cfm?id=2145675>)

My second example of new and experimental programming on C4 is a one off documentary. *Chatting to Death* was also broadcast first in November 2003. This documentary was centred on young suicide. It featured the stories of an 18 year old 'happy Cornish teenager' Simon Kelly who committed suicide shortly after launching a website that announced his death titled 'Welcome to the homepage of my death' and a 21 year old male from Phoenix, Arizona who became the first person to kill himself online with an audience watching him on his web cam, signing off with the words: "I told u I was hardcore."

The documentary used modern melancholy music, like Radiohead, popular with teenagers. There was a non-sensationalist approach, which I believe was highly necessary to keep the cold reality of the topic prominent. Both the young males in the case studies were frequent visitors to suicide chatrooms, which are becoming popular with a growing number of suicidal (usually young) people.

Chatting to Death contained interviews with the friends and family of both males and chats with other youngsters with suicidal tendencies, including 20 year old Andy, who believes that he could have killed himself had he not met 23 year old Penny, who discouraged him from taking his own life, in a suicide chat-room.

This documentary posed a number of significant questions. Does talking to other suicidal people increase the likelihood that someone will kill themselves? Or can speaking to someone who shares their problems, and consequently understands them, stop them committing suicide? Is a person who commits suicide 100% responsible for their own death?

RDF Media is one of Britain's leading independent television production companies and their work can be frequently found on C4. Recent RDF programmes broadcast on C4 include *Banzai*, a Japanese style betting game show, *Wife Swap*, where the wives of two families swap for two weeks and the brand new *Boss Swap*, where the bosses of two companies swap jobs for a week.

Wife Swap explores how the families divide up parenting, shop and deal with housework. It also explores their spending priorities and what they want from their social life. Once the ten day challenge is complete, both families meet up and talk about their experiences. They discuss how the ten days has affected their own relationship. *Wife Swap* proved a massive hit for C4 in 2003, reaching an incredible six million viewers. Some hand held camera work was used, and the style was that of a reality TV show. Participants would not always be dressed up or have their hair and make up done. This programme got the gruelling and unglamorous truths of marriage on TV.

RDF cleverly picked up on the success of the *Wife Swap* format and have made a new programme on the same type of ideas, but this time it's the bosses swapping, not the wives, in *Boss Swap*. On the final day of the swap, the bosses meet for the first and last time to discuss what they thought of each other's company and what changes they made. It is yet to be seen how popular this will prove to be, but I have a feeling it won't be as successful as *Wife Swap* due to the fact it is not a totally new and experimental formula any more.

RDF have not just supplied C4 with reality documentaries like *Wife Swap*, but also a Japanese style gambling show in which viewers are asked to join in and bet on bizarre and hilarious events. *Banzai*, first shown on C4's digital channel E4, made its terrestrial appearance in June 2001. At a time when much of C4's comedy was based on a single idea stretched to breaking point, *Banzai* was a breath of fresh air - it was funny, it was cheeky, and it just did not care.

Since its emergence it has won many awards, including Best Entertainment Programme and Best Visual Effects & Graphic Design. The visual style of this betting show is very bright, sometimes uses animation and fast paced. *Banzai* offers the viewer a chance to bet (not with money) on many silly and pointless games from 'Mr Shaky Hands Man' who shakes hands with celebrities for as long as possible to the toupee challenge where you have to spot which man in an identity parade is wearing the wig.

Back in 1985, all the C4 American imports were vintage shows like *Bilko* or *I Love Lucy*, which were shoved into filler slots, but things have changed. C4 has moved their American imports to prime time viewing. This definition of genre makes great sense when applied to C4's use of American made programmes in their scheduling. 'Genres are produced according to the criteria of profitability and marketability,' (Strinati, 2002, p.77). In this case, C4 is using the American made genres because of pressure on them to make more profit and gain funding from advertisers.

'The appeal of American culture to European cultures is a long-established and diverse phenomenon, depending on associations of abundance, glamour, dynamism, social mobility, expressiveness, openness, directness and modernity.' (Stokes & Reading, 1999). In 1985 the floodgates really opened and suddenly C4 was full of *Hill Street Blues*, *St Elsewhere* and all those other MTM productions.

Michael Grade, an ex C4 Chief Executive (1988 – 1997) did suggest C4 was going to decrease their American import dependence. "You will see a dramatic decrease on Channel 4 in US material over the next five years. We know about some of the negotiations that are going on and some of the prices that are now being paid are silly."

Americanisation is not a new issue. English poet and literary critic Arnold (1822 – 1883) in his book *Culture and Anarchy* highlights his fears about Americanisation, more in the sense of democracy but mass culture and mass democratisation are not that easily distinguishable. English novelist Orwell (1903 – 1950) cited his concerns for the trend towards all that is American. His example of this transition was that of the English murder story. He suggested that more and more there was an increase in the murderer being American or having been Americanised, instead of being British. English cultural critic Hoggart (b.1918) discussed, in 1958, that it was mainly the working class community that was in the process of being dissolved into cultural oblivion by mass culture and Americanisation.

There is one C4 American import I feel they, C4, should be very proud of scheduling. That is *Sex and the City*. February 1999 saw this gem of a programme enter the C4 TV listings. Four modern, young women living in New York savour every drop of flavour from their bite out of the Big Apple. Led by Sarah Jessica Parker as the irrepressible Carrie, and featuring the most fabulous wardrobe department in town, this programme is not only empowering to women, it is also very easy on the eye. Apart from all the great sex scenes, there are all those lovely clothes, shoes, restaurants and apartments. It's a chance to feel the atmosphere of New York without forking out the airfare.

C4 may not have kept to all its promises, but it is to be forgiven. I think it is wrong that their reliance on American imports is seen as a bad thing. They would not do it if they were not getting higher viewing figures for these types of programmes. I think there does need to be an increase in their new and experimental programmes. They also need to show them at prime time. Maybe if they did this, they would see that they are actually more popular than they thought they would be. If they only put them on in the early hours of the morning they are not giving their own ethos enough chance to stand up for its self in the ratings war.

'For C4 to last another 20 years in today's harsh commercial climate will require ingenuity, financial dexterity, determination, and probably liberal doses of sex. Not so much reinvention, perhaps, as pulling rabbits out of a hat.'
(Barnett, November 3, 2002).

C4 needs to go back to its roots and regain its individual identity as an alternative channel once again, advertising and competition from other channels permitting.

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