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What We're 4

RTS Speech by David Abraham

Back in the autumn of 2003, I was at the RTS convention in Cambridge, when Ray Snoddy grilled the first four Chief Executives of Channel 4. Michael Jackson had by then gone to America and Mark Thompson was the incumbent. Michael Grade was relaxed and Jeremy Isaacs characteristically mischievous. I was running Discovery UK at the time.

Spectrum Consulting had been asked to forecast the future for Channel 4 by 2010. Even the rosier picture was bleak – so bleak in fact that Mark Thompson was reaching for the begging bowl. The banker Anthony Fry, meanwhile, confidently predicted privatisation and public service demise. But then he did join Lehman Brothers shortly afterwards.

Mr Snoddy spent much of the interview questioning C4's editorial approach – suggesting that from Michael Grade onwards it had been overly commercial, that it was essentially failing in its original duty to unlock the airwaves, to be a bottom-up creative organisation that made a difference as a 'serious' public service broadcaster - the so-called 'creative deficit'.

Plus ça change! This is a critique which to a greater or lesser extent has continued to this day and tonight I aim to set before you a vision for Channel 4 that I hope begins to move the conversation on to a new place.

But before I do that, I thought I'd share a little about my background because to an extent, even though I have worked in television both here and in the US now for 10 years, I still feel like a bit of an outsider - both professionally and personally. And this sense of being an outsider informs what I'm doing at Channel 4.

My parents are both post-war immigrants to England - my mother a survivor of Nazi-occupied Belgium and my father a member of a small community of Jews from Calcutta who lived through the period of Indian Independence. My dad was a local government architect and pretty much everyone else in our family were entrepreneurs - so I grew up with a odd mix of influences: part creative, part public and part commercial.

Despite my appearance, I did not grow up in North London but in rural England in the 1960's and 70's - I am state educated and was very fortunate to be offered a place to study History at Oxford.

So, my sense of objective reality was in many ways informed by an agenda set

by state education and the public broadcasting of the 60's and 70's. Along the way I developed a pride towards a Britain that gave *me* so much opportunity and also an appreciation of the importance placed in this country on what Salman Rushdie once described as "freedom of the imagination".

In my 20's and thirties I went to work in the private sector - at some world class creative companies - culminating with one I co-founded and ran for 5 years. So I have also experienced *first hand* the competitiveness of British creativity on the international stage – both in advertising and in content creation.

This background has now drawn me to lead a national institution that was originally set up by Jeremy Isaacs and other visionary creative entrepreneurs to unlock the airwaves and challenge the old status quo of television. The argument that I intend to set out this evening is that the commercial and technological changes that are in play make Channel 4's role to support '*freedom of the imagination*' more important than ever before.

As the American academic Tim Wu has said healthy societies should be aware of the culturally pernicious effect of consolidation in technology and media.

So, the Channel 4 I see emerging over the next few years is one that builds on a tradition of giving voice to the outsider, of emancipating people's lives by providing diverse points of view and ideas about new ways of living in a modern world which is changing in profound ways.

This is about much more than provocation for its own sake. It's about making our contribution to a part of national consciousness that wants to question received wisdoms and listens out for what the creative individual might have to say that might alter how we all see things. And it's about giving permission to surprise and shock as well as to entertain, by allowing room for the iconoclasts and the downright cheeky - to fulfill what we call our mission with mischief.

Channel 4 was born in the volatile decade that spanned the Falklands War, the miners' strike, and the Big Bang in the City. Taboos were being attacked and this fuelled a sense of mission at the channel.

Channel 4 has always drawn its energy from being at the fault lines of society. It needs to be so again.

At a time when other broadcasters are perhaps more conservative, it's more important than ever for Channel 4 to challenge the status quo, stimulate debate, take risks and be brave. So, we need to have a unique perspective on the big issues of the day and to be imaginative in the way we tell those stories. I can think of no better example of how we continue to do that than in Peter Kosminsky's recent examination of the Israel/Palestine question in **The Promise** – I'm delighted that Peter is here with us tonight.

I do not intend to dwell on the ghost of Big Brother - suffice to say that Jay Hunt and I regard the opportunity to fill 250 hours of airtime as one of the most exciting in the history of television. Over the past year, as we have expanded our R&D capability, we've identified over half a dozen big issues that keep recurring in the minds of our commissioners, our creative and our advertising partners. Tonight I'd like to highlight two of them: The effects of technology on relationships - relationships *between* people and between people and power, AND, the effects of a prolonged economic winter on people's lives.

As Justin Timberlake's Sean Parker character memorably said in the *The Social Network*, 'private behavior is a relic of time gone by'.

But what does being hyper connected mean for how we relate to each other as individuals and as communities? Who's now in control? Whilst these are the kinds of questions we'll be exploring in Charlie Brooker's recently commissioned series of dramas **Black Mirror**, the success of a new breed of documentary, evolved from the many digital breakthroughs of BB, demonstrates the audience appetite for entry into previously hidden worlds. In experiments like **7 Days**, Dragonfly's **One Born Every Minute** and Maverick's extraordinarily successful **Embarrassing Bodies** Channel 4 is already actively engaging with the changing boundaries between the public and private.

We're also looking at how technology provides us with huge new opportunities to deepen our relationship with our audiences. We'll provide help and information in shows like Betty's upcoming **Food Hospital** and continue looking for ways to co-create with our viewers, for example, through **Twist** our popular series of user submitted on air idents.

Following the success of Richard Wilson's investigation on trains for **Dispatches**, we are looking at other ways of involving our viewers in our journalism. Wikileaks has speeded up a process by which programmes like **Channel 4 News** are able to look behind the trappings of power, people and institutions, helping us to separate for ourselves the fake from the real.

Moving on; Britain has been in a nervous recessionary state for the past 3 years and many believe we'll be enduring a collective sense of economic insecurity for years to come. Just as we did in the 1980's recession, Channel 4 has much to say about what this means for the individual. Whether in pieces that help us understand our lives today from the perspective of the past, such as Shane Meadows' **This Is England** and Clio Barnard's **The Arbor**, or in shows such as Studio Lambert's **Fairy Jobmother**, Company's **Shameless** and Remarkable's **Superscrimpers** that help us all to reflect, explore and generate empathy and understanding of what it means to be on the receiving end of the worst economic downturn since the 1930's.

As well as entertaining our audiences, we recognize our duty to find creative ways to bring this national issue alive through a variety of creative voices that share, reassure and reflect our collective conscience.

Anger is increasingly near the surface of our everyday lives. Road rage, social and political confrontation – mutual miscomprehension – all reflect a frustration fuelled by economic insecurity and a distrust of the politics of spin. Channel 4 has historically provided a platform for the awkward squad in society and shows like **Ten O Clock Live**, **Hugh's Fish Fight**, **What the Green Movement Got Wrong** and **Unreported World** are a pressure valve for the seriously pissed off. Just last week we announced Jay's first drama commission, **Coup** – written by Robert Jones - which will examine the dangers of a British state captured by corporate interests.

It's clear the Internet has changed creativity and communication. We've gone from the one-to-many analogue world, to a niche-to-niche digital one. We all talk to people like us the whole time. And it's very hard to see the wood for the trees. And in that world, the powerful just keep on talking to each other. Digital democracy is exposed as a myth.

In that context, Channel 4 has a clear new role. To make sure that people hear each other. To make sure that difficult views are heard. To make sure we argue with each other. To make sure we aren't drowned out by the powerful.

So, I hope that starts to give you a sense of how today's Channel 4 intends to remain a place where 'freedom of imagination' can thrive. But of course, we need to consider how we might afford these grand ambitions.

Because alongside its special ownership structure another part of what makes Channel 4 unique is its funding. The fact we make our own way in the world commercially helps to guarantee our independence from Government and gives us the freedom to invest in the creative community and deliver our remit to be distinctive and challenging.

Our chairman Terry Burns and I both feel Channel 4 is at its strongest when at its most independent. And this is why last year we decided to put away the begging bowl.

The world in which Channel 4 operates today is dramatically different to the one I entered just over a decade ago. Today, the whole of broadcasting – as it was then – is in many ways a subset of a converged content and technology sector that dwarves it.

On one level this could look pretty scary for C4. But one of the many historic strengths of C4 has been its agility. We've never been one of the 800lb gorillas. My feeling is that as long as we can maintain our unique cultural impact – we will

continue to deliver to our remit and provide advertisers with a distinctive environment where their brands stand out from the crowd.

The history of the first era of digital would suggest we can achieve this: our portfolio share was 11.4% last year and into Q1 2011 thanks to a strong contribution from our digital channels E4, More4 and Film4 and 4Music. This position has been further bolstered by an outstanding performance from 4OD. Not bad in the context of the past 30 years.

What I am going to focus on tonight is how we are going to navigate through this next decade of digital – that of connected television, in order to protect and develop the valuable position that we already have. And what I am about to set out is in my view entirely consistent with the idea at the core of our genetic code that we are here to serve audiences and interests in new and innovative ways.

Central to our future ambitions will be to add a 4th dimension to our proposition in which viewers become a bigger part of the conversation than ever before.

As we enter this decade of connected viewers, C4's mission will be to give people an even more personal and unique experience. We know Channel 4 already generates deep engagement with its viewers. Our new plans will exploit technology to bring them far closer to the programmes and people they love than was ever possible before.

We will use this understanding not only to improve the viewer experience but also to innovate our advertising offer. This is just one of a series of investments we will be making to innovate TV's ad model.

Andy Barnes has carefully built our market positioning over the years based on our delivery of the young and upmarket audiences that advertisers covet. Andy's successor will, in the coming years be able to add a relationship layer to that proposition, underpinned with data.

One of the reasons TV advertising has held up so well in recent years is that it has a measurable and credible currency. This is testament to the excellent work of BARB and its successful evolution over recent years. We intend to ensure that our core trading currency is maintained as the Gold Standard, but alongside it we are working on major innovations that can give us additional and complementary data about our audiences, which will further strengthen our long-term position in the ad market.

Our forecasts suggest to us that around two thirds of all TV audiovisual content viewing time (on TV, PC and mobile) will be tracked intelligently in some way by 2020.... But – who's controlling the data and who has access to it? In my view this should be a central issue in Ofcom's proposed review of airtime trading. Future ad sales models are unclear but two things are certain – change is likely &

data is becoming more important.

I believe that it is essential for the future of Channel 4 – and of PSB in general – that we ensure that the data that exists around content we generate with our creative partners, is not simply controlled and commercially exploited by other platforms – whoever they are. We don't intend to compete directly with the social networks that already exist, but as a public broadcaster, nor will we allow ourselves to be enveloped by them either.

More and more of our commissions are including a way to connect individuals to programmes, talent, fans, friends and debates. As our multi-platform teams now all report to Jay – things are speeding up and joining up for us in this area. An inter-disciplinary approach lies at the heart of our future competitive advantage – both within Horseferry Rd and between us and our creative partners.

Of course, first and foremost the data that is generated by these new activities belongs to our viewers. But our early research suggests that we will gain permission from a significant proportion of them to share it with us in return for a closer relationship with C4.

For example, we launched our 4OD iPad app 3 weeks ago – over a quarter of a million people have already downloaded it and a significant proportion of them volunteered to register with us in the process.

Transparency is everything. I believe that if we behave openly and honestly we can broker a new compact with our audiences that can potentially underpin commercially-funded PSB for the digital age. If they are willing to give us permission to share some of their anonymised data to secure advertising support, then we can invest the proceeds in original, risk-taking and imaginative content that they won't see elsewhere; reinventing the 'virtuous circle' that has existed between spot advertising and television programming since the 50s.

All of this activity will be designed to sustain the revenue model that allows us to keep investing in content from the widest possible range of independent producers; our essential partners without whom the delivery of our ambitions would not be possible.

Earlier this year in Salford I spoke about the need for Channel 4 to always ensure we stay very active in commissioning from new and fresh voices – and assuage those critics who have in recent years grown concerned that there is favouritism at Horseferry Rd. Jay and I have heard this message loud and clear and in her first 4 months she has met 110 indies, our commissioning team has met with 227 companies across 12 cities and we have launched our new Alpha Fund for early stage development with new creative talent and a fund for converged format ideas to encourage projects from non traditional sources. We are actively engaged with PACT on sharing our model for the future of Channel 4 and as we

approach the next Communications Bill, we will engage fully with all our stakeholders to preserve the value of all our relationships in a more connected future.

I'd now like to show you a short film that I hope helps to bring alive how this theme of independent creativity marries with the view of the future that I have begun to set out this evening. It lasts about 5 minutes – and then I'll be back to conclude and take your questions.

TAPE

To end, I'll return to my opening story about the RTS Convention in 2003. At the end of the session, the audience was asked if Britain still needed Channel 4 and whether it would still be distinctive and commercially viable by 2010. 75% said Channel 4 would still be needed and 85% said it could remain both distinctive and commercially viable. Contrary to what the doom mongers and people in the City believed at the time, the RTS audience was proved right. I hope this evening that I have at least begun to convince this RTS audience that the same will still be the case by 2020.

Thank you for coming this evening and thank you for listening.

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