



A Licence to be Different

The Story of Channel 4

Maggie Brown

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THE BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain by Palgrave in 2016
Reprinted by Bloomsbury in 2018
on behalf of the
British Film Institute
21 Stephen Street, London W1T 1LN
www.bfi.org.uk

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-8445-7204-5
PB: 978-1-8445-7205-2
ePDF: 978-1-8390-2446-7
eBook: 978-1-8390-2447-4

Typeset by The Little Red Pen, Dublin

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Maggie Brown



To my parents, Marion and Cecil

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Foreword

Channel 4 is a brilliant accident of history, and Britain's cultural life over the past quarter century has been all the richer for it. At its heart, the organisation exists to provide a forum for individual voices making one-off programmes that would otherwise never reach a national audience. And at its finest, Channel 4 can be sublime: stirring drama, riotous comedy, compelling documentaries, unbeatable current affairs. The BBC is a vast state-sponsored institution; ITV a huge commercial business. Channel 4 sits between these goliaths, a quirky amalgamation that aims to deliver public goods while retaining the verve of the private sector.

As this history shows, Channel 4 regularly supplies shock and awe to British citizens via the television – and not always in the way planned. It has an impressive capacity to infuriate – and inspire. It has always been the broadcaster most reliant on independent producers, so they have frequently brought their most extreme – and innovative – ideas to us. While this does not make for a peaceful existence, I suspect that Channel 4's integral policy of taking creative risks is the only way an artistic body can renew itself on a regular basis. Otherwise the schedule becomes clogged with long-running series and predictable formats, leaving no room for radical breakthroughs.

As a launch pad for new talent, Channel 4 has a remarkable track record. It has given early breaks to an astounding array of comedians, directors, writers, actors and presenters – and even television executives. Many have gone on to considerable fame and fortune, from Stephen Frears to Jonathan Ross. And it is surely no coincidence that the bosses of the two largest television broadcasters are also former Channel 4 chief executives.

The creative economy has also benefited enormously from the huge success of Channel 4. PricewaterhouseCoopers estimate the corporation's contribution at £2 billion a year, while its activities support 22,000 jobs. Its investment in British films and policy of regional production distinguish it from other broadcasters. It has achieved this without any direct cost to the taxpayer, save gifted spectrum. There can be no other part of the state that offers such enjoyment and value to the taxpayer for so little cost, while also boosting the economy.

In 1966 E.B. White wrote in an essay in support of public-service broadcasting:

I think TV should be providing the visual counterpart of the literary essay, should arouse our dreams, satisfy our hunger for beauty, take us on journeys, enable us to participate in events, present great drama and must explore the sea and the sky and the wood and the hills [. . .] it should restate and clarify the social dilemma and the political pickle.

When it works, Channel 4 does all this and more. It can do this because it is independent: it sells its own advertising time to fund its programmes. Overall, I believe Channel 4 provides more distinctive entertainment and enlightenment at less cost, to more citizens, than any equivalent body in Britain today. And because Channel 4 generates its own revenues, it is independent from shareholders, independent from in-house production, even independent from government – most of the time. This allows Channel 4 to remain undeterred by controversy and still able to take risks. It is not afraid to break taboos, expose hypocrisy and lead campaigns like that inspired by *Jamie's School Dinners*. From time to time, it is almost deliberately obscure or provocative. In a democracy the media is a vital forum for legitimate debate; only in totalitarian regimes are contrary opinions forbidden.

Channel 4 faces challenges ahead, as do all the so-called 'legacy' media companies: newspaper and magazine publishers, radio and other television broadcasters. The advent of digital television has led to an explosion of choice for the television viewer, while the arrival of new competitors means the price of content such as imported shows has risen. Meanwhile, the online world is attracting an increasing share of the advertising cake – and of viewers, especially younger audiences, traditionally Channel 4's heartland.

But very few, if any, of these impressive new channels or websites are delivering what might be called public-service broadcasting. Their objectives are purely commercial. By contrast, while Channel 4 is entrepreneurial and flexible, its overriding purpose is to show diverse, experimental and educative television – original British commissions from all over the country.

Moreover, Channel 4 is embracing the digital age and expanding its horizons beyond a single channel. It already has successful offshoots like E4 and More4, together with Film4. It has a significant online presence and is about to launch a raft of DAB radio stations. Further new media initiatives are planned. Long-term Channel 4 cannot rely on its core channel; it must diversify and broaden its appeal, as consumers obtain information and entertainment from an ever wider array of platforms.

Maggie Brown's book paints a slightly mixed picture of Channel 4's first twenty-five years. While I disagree with some of her interpretations, I think this is an important document, which is why I championed the project within Channel 4. She has tried hard to reveal the truth, although inevitably elements of the story are subjective. Ultimately, she is a commentator on the outside, who is trying to create a dra-

matic narrative. She can never understand the complexities and subtleties of actually trying to balance the conflicting aims of a quirky, hybrid institution like Channel 4. Life is never as simple as books portray. Nevertheless, I salute her industry.

The principal message of the book must be this: Channel 4 has been a pioneer from the start and remains a huge force for good, despite its mistakes. It pushes the boundaries in every genre, from news, to documentaries, to comedy, to film, to reality television. It is staffed by many outstanding people and supplied by inspired programme-makers. It helps keep other public broadcasters up to the mark and generates enormous added value for the creative economy in Britain. I sincerely hope Channel 4 prospers and is around to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary with another history, listing many more great achievements.

Luke Johnson

Acknowledgements

The idea of writing the history of Channel 4 first came to me in September 1997, at a dinner party in Notting Hill. Another guest was the new Chief Executive of the channel, Michael Jackson. At the time, Jackson was at the start of a mission to rein-vigorate the channel, a crusade that would result in stand-out programmes such as Sacha Baron Cohen's *Ali G*, and *Queer as Folk*.

Just two months earlier I had attended a farewell dinner for Jackson's predecessor Michael Grade, whose larger-than-life personality dominated the channel for ten years. That party had been held in the mirrored ballroom of the Dorchester Hotel. Guests started off by playing bingo, and by each place setting was a pair of Grade's trademark red socks, tied with golden string.

I was amazed that no one had seen the need to record this unique chapter in British broadcasting history, relying instead on Jeremy Isaacs' first-hand account of founding the channel, which went up only to 1987, when Isaacs left Channel 4. But Channel 4 never had much sense of its past: then, as now, it was always looking to the future.

While other projects took priority, the idea stayed with me, and I kept a beady eye on Channel 4 and watched as many of its programmes as life permitted. In 2005, with the channel's twenty-fifth anniversary looming, I raised the idea with Luke Johnson, the then newish Chairman of Channel 4, at the Edinburgh Television Festival. We talked it over on a coach to the conference centre, and by the time we arrived, I knew I had a deal. Johnson is a fast worker.

As an outsider to the channel and to television, Johnson grasped immediately the need for a history with a page-turning sense of narrative – as did Andy Duncan, Channel 4's Chief Executive. Both have played key parts as patrons to this history, and without them it could not have happened. Andy Duncan has been unstintingly kind and patient in providing access and supporting the project, as have others at Channel 4 – crucially David Scott, the former Deputy Chief Executive, who helped me write a detailed synopsis and facilitated access to Channel 4 boardroom minutes.

Channel 4 enabled the book to be written but with this important caveat: this is not an official history. Although I am the first outsider to be granted supervised access to its archive, the interpretation and organisation of this history is all mine. An approved version would read quite differently. I wanted it to be accessible, to wear its

authority lightly so as to interest as many people as possible, not just media experts and policy wonks. Channel 4 exists for everyone.

Channel 4's archivists, led by Rosie Gleeson, deserve special thanks: they unearthed many gems, enabling some extra chapters, notably on the relationship between Michael Grade and the dramatists Alan Bleasdale and Dennis Potter, to come to life. Pamela Dear, the archivist of its public record, was another key person who kindly smoothed my path and looked out lost documents with a maternal affection for the channel. The *Guardian's* own research team were helpful in digging up long forgotten articles. Within Channel 4, Claire Grimmond, who provided key information on programme performance and ratings, and Rosemary Newell, were stars. The Royal Television Society's Simon Albury offered advice and Archivist Clare Colvin mined the archive for conference reports and speeches. I was also warmly encouraged in the project by an industry contact since 1980, Sir George Russell, who devoted hours to briefing me, as did David Glencross, the former Chief Executive of the Independent Television Commission, who lent me key reading material.

The Chairmen, Richard Attenborough, Michael Bishop, Vanni Treves and Deputy Chairman Barry Cox all agreed to be interviewed, as did Jeremy Isaacs, Michael Jackson, Mark Thompson and Directors of Programmes, Liz Forgan, John Willis, Tim Gardam and Kevin Lygo. On the regulatory side, Ofcom was extremely helpful, with Stephen Carter and Richard Hooper providing key insights, while other Ofcom experts, led by Kate Stross and Mark Bunting, painstakingly took me through their financial review of Channel 4. Chris Smith, the former Secretary for Culture, Media and Sport helped me put the crucial 1997–2001 period into context. The one person who refused to be involved was Michael Grade. I managed without him.

The people I interviewed on the record are listed in the footnotes. I thank them all for their time and patience. They include Founders Anthony Smith, generous with encouragement and advice; Roger Graef; Justin Dukes; Paul Coia; Tim Simmons, who provided some wonderful videotapes of Jeremy Isaacs and his notes to staff; Pam Masters; Jo Wright, who first reminded me of the leading role a pot plant played in Channel 4's early presentation; Cecil Korner; Sue Stoessl; Mike Bolland and Sue Woodford. Nigel Stafford-Clark was a mine of information. John Morrison, a founder of *Channel 4 News* provided long-lost documents about the early disaster days, as did Peter Moore from the 1997 era.

None of this would have happened without the utter professionalism and steadfast support of my publisher, Rebecca Barden of the British Film Institute (BFI), who was a true midwife to the book. Michael Leapman, with whom I once job-shared on the *Independent*, also played a pivotal role, bringing all his experience and flair to patiently advising, editing and reading the script over a period of months. Liz O'Donnell project-managed the final stages with speed and accuracy. Richard Paterson at the BFI kindly read the completed book and advised, as did Corinna Honan, who provided

encouragement and seasoned editing advice. Thanks also to Jan Tomalin at Channel 4 who rooted out the odd inaccuracy. Matt Wells, Media Editor of the *Guardian* patiently let me concentrate all my efforts on the history, rather than journalism, during the crucial months of 2007 when I was finalising the book.

This is the story of an amazing British experiment.

Enjoy.

Maggie Brown
September 2007

1

How Celebrity Big Brother changed Channel 4



In the autumn of 2006, Channel 4 began to lay plans for its twenty-fifth anniversary on 2 November 2007. It should have been preparing a celebration. On launch in 1982 it was a tiny experimental station with burning ambitions and an independent spirit, determined to do things differently. By now it was a sleek media company headquartered in a palace of glass and stainless steel designed by Richard Rogers, with an annual turnover of almost £1 billion. The contrast was astonishing; but then, Britain, too, was a different and, in particular, a more prosperous place.

Though facing mounting accusations of betraying its mission, the mature channel was still basking in what was to be a final hour of Indian summer after a two-year period of sustained success.¹ For the past ten years, during the decade of Tony Blair, no one had seriously questioned Channel 4's unusual status, its privileges and independence. But, as August turned into September, the atmosphere changed, the mood music shifted from an upbeat major key to an ominous minor one.

Several forces were conspiring to bear down on this strange British experiment which had grown out of Margaret Thatcher's decision to shake up the television establishment by allowing the creation of a fourth channel, publishing programmes made by small independent producers and paid for, irony of ironies, by ITV. The mounting pressure on Channel 4 contributed to the most damaging episode in the company's history: the outburst of naked racism on *Celebrity Big Brother* in January 2007, which provoked an unprecedented level of complaints² and was deeply harmful to a broadcaster priding itself on catering to contemporary multicultural Britain.

Although the incident, principally involving the Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty and, a former dental nurse whose celebrity status dated back to her role in the third series of *Big Brother*, appeared to blow up out of nothing – the cooking of a chicken,

the waste of an Oxo cube – it was no storm in a casserole. The essential ingredients were all in place and had been simmering away since the series started. At some stage, over some issue, *Big Brother* was bound to overheat and, in the process, to shatter Channel 4's image. Even before the Jade Goody outburst, the show's producers and crew of more than 300 were struggling to keep hold of the show's audience, whose average age was climbing worryingly, and were resorting to ever more contrived antics and bizarre twists.



The defining moment of the channel's change in fortunes can be pinpointed with some accuracy: a meeting in the boardroom on Thursday, 21 September 2006. This was when the Director of Television, Kevin Lygo, in charge of the programme budget of £500,000,000 (more generous than BBC2's), called together his senior commissioners, mostly high-flyers in their thirties. The channel has always held programme reviews on Thursdays, and, in the early days, under Jeremy Isaacs, they were disputatious affairs, astounding newcomers with their frank exchanges of views. By now, they had matured into cooler, more scientific debates, with the ratings expert setting the scene by analysing the past week and the key demographics, examining whether enough of the right people were watching. The right people generally meant young adults – a narrow focus that was a measure of the journey the channel had travelled towards commercialism, abandoning Isaacs' ambition to be eclectic, to provide something for everyone some of the time.

This meeting, though, was different. Lygo, the cultured and witty son of an admiral and a collector of antique Tibetan bronzes,³ called the meeting to raise the question overshadowing the channel: should we renew *Big Brother*? Has it been running too long? Can we manage without its extraordinary appeal to younger viewers? Can we imagine the channel without it? How quiet would it feel throughout the summer?

They were rhetorical questions. Lygo knew they had no choice but to renew, and in his presentation he spelt out the unassailable fact: the programme provided half the channel's profit. For some recent recruits, this scale of dependency was a shock, the first time they had looked up and seen the *Big Brother* sword of Damocles hanging over their heads. All the same, Lygo wanted to make sure of their support, and to his relief there were no dissenters. Most said they were still enamoured of *Big Brother*, they thought it continued to be ground-breaking and touched a national nerve: the critics, mostly middle-aged and above, could be shrugged off because the basis of their dislike of *Big Brother* was clearly their failure to understand young people.

The channel's problem was that *Big Brother* was a format invented by a supplier. Unlike other profitable programmes such as *Wife Swap* or *Hollyoaks*, it could easily be taken away and sold to a rival. Under a contract agreed in 2002 by Mark Thomp-

son, who was now Director General of the BBC, *Big Brother* had become a multimedia event, and coverage had effectively doubled. It was expanded again when the deal was renewed in 2005 and would expire in 2007. Endemol, the producer, was using this break to bid up the price, which would eventually double to £40 million a year, with a big annual increment from 2008. In addition there was an extra £7-million bill for making *Celebrity Big Brother*, which was extended.

The issue was urgent because ITV had emerged as a rival suitor for *Big Brother*. It had courted the programme all year, hiring consultants and negotiating determinedly with the producers. This flirtation was already the talk of the glitzy programme market in Cannes in April 2006. ITV estimated that the summer's *Big Brother* was worth £88 million to Channel 4 in advertising, generating a surplus of £68 million.⁴ That sum excluded sponsorship, spin-offs, E4 and *Celebrity Big Brother*. As Lygo admitted, 'Endemol had to some extent underpriced it. It was the channel's most profitable programme and probably the most profitable anywhere. It was a wonderful bargain.'⁵

When *Celebrity Big Brother* was added in, the two provided the main channel with 15 per cent of its income and the majority of the company's profit.⁶ Even at a doubled price, it was still going to subsidise unprofitable news, current affairs and drama. And, apart from the financial considerations, Lygo simply could not stomach the idea of his most cherished programme turning up elsewhere.

ITV's wooing of *Big Brother* was partly tactical. In August, its outgoing Chief Executive, Charles Allen, had pilloried Channel 4 for seeking government handouts to underwrite its public-service future while at the same time pumping out ever more commercial programmes. In private conversations with the Culture Secretary, Tessa Jowell, he would point out that *Big Brother* was transmitted, on average, once every three nights during 2006; but in public he was careful not to attack the programme directly, because if he did so people would stop believing that he wanted to buy it.

He calculated that ITV would emerge the winner whatever happened. If he acquired *Big Brother*, Channel 4's balance sheet would be in tatters. If the clear signs of his interest forced a steep increase in the price – which is what happened – then the channel would be damaged also, if less severely. After all, ITV had a score to settle after Channel 4 had lured away Paul O'Grady, host of its successful 5 p.m. programme, early in 2006. Simon Shaps, ITV's Director of Television, was in truth uncertain about how long the *Big Brother* brand would remain strong and worried that, if it did move to his channel, it would unbalance the output. That was why ITV, after all the sniffing around, never put in a formal bid. Nor is it clear that Endemol would have wanted *Big Brother* switched to ITV.

There was, however, a further barrier to the renewal of the contract: the Channel 4 board was itself ambivalent, and would remain so. The first words the Deputy Chairman, Lord Puttnam, had exchanged with Andy Duncan, after he was appointed in

January 2006, had been: 'What shall we do with *Big Brother*?'⁷ It was undermining political support for the channel, and its impact was overshadowing the much better programmes that formed the bulk of its output. He was concerned that the hunt for novelty and ratings would lead to places the channel should not and could not go.

The Board considered *Big Brother* twice that autumn, in September and October, before somewhat unhappily deciding that it would be financially irresponsible to do anything but renew, although they told Ofcom that they expected profits from the strand to be significantly lower from 2008 onwards, as the three-year contract with Endemol, if honoured, would cost in total £180 million. After the decision, the Chairman, Luke Johnson, commented,

There was a consensus about renewing. Individually there were differences but if you saw the facts as presented to us there can be no doubt about it, it was the right thing to do. The deal is only for three years, which felt about right. The big issue is what to replace it with. How long will it last?⁸

This was a matter of great concern. Lygo and his colleagues had been hunting for prime-time hits and replacements for several years, to kick-start the channel's creative escape from *Big Brother*, but nothing had worked. They tried again in November and December with a reality show, *Unanimous*, in which a group of people argued unpleasantly over who should win £2 million, but the show caught nobody's imagination. The channel's former magic touch of coming up with a fresh hit when needed – *The Tube*, *The Big Breakfast*, *Grand Designs* – seemed to have deserted it, and there would be no let-up from the trend in the coming months, with flop following flop.⁹

There were two reasons for this. Since 1993, when it began to sell its own advertising time, the channel had been increasingly trapped by the iron rules of the marketplace, which laid emphasis on year-on-year comparisons, to such an extent that the schedulers could not afford a downwards dive from an experiment. Second, *Big Brother* and other long-running programmes such as *Wife Swap* were partly sapping the ability to innovate as they crowded out other things, soaked up programme funds and lessened pressure on the handful of dominant programme suppliers to Channel 4 to put their creative thinking caps on.

Big Brother, in short, was an extreme manifestation of the trap all television networks around the world are falling into: the biggest hits are a mixed blessing, because a channel becomes over-dependent on them. To be able to discard them painlessly requires the goose to lay more and more golden eggs, until exhaustion sets in. ABC experienced this in America with *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* which it ran five times a week. On ITV, *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale* risk the same outcome. But, in a sense, Channel 4's dependence on *Big Brother* was worse because it went to-

tally against the spirit of the channel Jeremy Isaacs had founded, where the schedule changed season by season. That was fine when there was a guaranteed income, but in the fierce commercial environment of 2006, such luxuries were unaffordable.

Isaacs rationed himself that autumn to an article in *Prospect* magazine, mourning the channel's loss of 'quiet seriousness'. Luke Johnson had no time for such pomposity. 'No one has to watch it', he snapped.¹⁰

Channel 4 was also heavily reliant on two other successful shows, which its rivals wanted and could easily take from it: *Deal or No Deal* and *Desperate Housewives*. During the summer, ITV bid for *Deal or No Deal*, another Endemol production whose round-the-year success had pepped up the channel's audience by the same amount as *Big Brother* when averaged out. Channel 4 held on to it, but the price went up 60 per cent.¹¹

The battle to keep key American imports was tougher. The channel had a deal with Disney's Buena Vista that allowed it to pick two new series a year for a two-year span. In order to hold on to the third series of *Desperate Housewives*, it paid a staggering £950,000 per episode, more than it cost to make an original British drama such as *Shameless* and ten times the average price of bought-in US series. This was when it became evident that Channel 4 could no longer afford to sustain its boast as the home of the best American imports, as Lygo would confirm at the Edinburgh Television Festival in 2007. It was outbid by Sky for *Lost*.

There was also a three-cornered scrap with ITV and BBC1 over Gordon Ramsay. Peter Fincham, Controller of BBC1, fancied him as the new face of cooking and offered a deal that would extend to the chefs working in Ramsay's restaurants. But the former footballer stayed with Channel 4, striking a four-year deal worth an estimated £8.5 million. He explained that he liked the channel's style and its people:

Channel 4 don't do here's one I made earlier, or cook along with Gordon – it's cutting edge. My relationship with them goes back a long way. Kevin Lygo without a shadow of doubt, has tenacity, and Sue Murphy [Head of Factual Features] has the most creative brain in television. Kevin and Sue, like tomato and basil, mango and passion fruit, both highly acidic, both full of vitamin C, explosive when combined together.¹²

At least Ramsay knew where he belonged, but the autumnal woes continued with a sudden decline in the advertising market as money was switched to the Internet. It was like the sun going behind a big black cloud. 'This channel becomes a very different place when the money stops flowing', Lygo mourned.¹³ Drama was cut down to one new series a year in 2007, and a commitment to screen one expensive drama each month was chopped back from twelve to eight a year. Endemol also then succeeded in bringing the new *Big Brother* contract forward a year.

In this edgy, unhappy mood, with Andy Duncan, the Chief Executive, lobbying for government assistance, what Channel 4 needed above all was a quiet time, out of the limelight and free from controversy. *Celebrity Big Brother* loomed, and the instinct was to play safe. Lygo intervened in December to weed out two controversial housemates proposed by Endemol. The first was O.J. Simpson, the American football star who was acquitted of murdering his wife and a friend in the televised 'trial of the century' in 1995, although he was subsequently found liable in a civil court case. In 2006, his book *If I Did It*, a fictional account of the murder, was withdrawn from publication. 'They all really wanted him,' Lygo recalled. 'I just thought you can't have someone who has been so closely involved in something like this.'¹⁴

The second rejected housemate was John Leslie, the former *Blue Peter* presenter who had been questioned over an alleged rape of Ulrika Jonsson. 'I rejected two dodgy characters,' Lygo reflected wryly, 'then you end up with the most controversial *Big Brother* ever. It just goes to show – what do I know?'¹⁵

Lygo sympathised with a faction on the Board, led by Lord Puttnam, who argued that if they were stuck with *Big Brother* they should ensure that it was dominated by conversation and not crude antics or sex. He did not see a problem with Jade Goody: 'She hadn't been racist or violent. She'd been on loads of television.'¹⁶ But the tension between Endemol and the channel, generated by the arguments over the participants, did not augur well for communication and trust.

Celebrity Big Brother, the fifth and longest series, made a fairly promising start on 3 January 2007. Donny Tourette, a minor pop star, went in the jacuzzi with his suit on and later escaped over the perimeter wall, then Leo Sayer, a singer and songwriter, walked out in a huff. The seventy-nine-year-old film-maker Ken Russell quit when Jade Goody's mother Jackie and partner Jack Tweedy arrived: he called them 'the terrorists.' The foul-mouthed Jackie lasted just a week before being voted out, having never managed to master the name of the Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty, who at least brought some tone to the proceedings; she called her simply 'the Indian.'

Then came the explosion. Jade, along with Jack Tweedy, the model Danielle Lloyd and the singer Jo O'Meara, were accused of racism in their treatment of Shilpa and their language towards her. On Monday, 15 January, the *Daily Mirror* reported growing fears on internet sites that Shetty was being bullied and that the incidents might be racist in origin. It got worse when the following night's programme featured a row over Shilpa's cooking of a chicken and the use of a stock cube. There were also three conversations, not reported to Channel 4 by Endemol, which involved composing a limerick, on which the word 'Paki' was implied by the rhyme, but not spoken.

The next night's programme showed Jade ranting at Shilpa in a truly ugly scene. Calling her a loser and a liar, she shouted, 'Go to the slums.' When Shilpa begged her to shut up, Jade screamed: 'No you shut the fuck up. Who the fuck are you to tell me to shut up? You're not some Princess in Neverland . . . You're a normal housemate

like everyone else. You need to come to terms with that. [. . .] Your head is so far up your fucking arse you can smell your own shit.'

Big Brother was now dubbed 'Bigot Brother', and the tabloids, led by the *Mirror*, were up in arms. Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and prime-minister-in-waiting, happened to be in India when the story burst onto the front pages. When he was in Bangalore, effigies of *Big Brother*'s producers were burned by angry crowds, mortified at the treatment of the star actress. He made his displeasure clear: 'I want Britain to be seen as a country of fairness and tolerance.' On the same day Tony Blair answered questions about the programme in Parliament but Channel 4's executives kept quiet, hoping the row would blow over.

Housemates are kept insulated from the coverage given them by the press, so Jade had no way of knowing about the uproar she had provoked. When questioned about her behaviour in the Diary Room, she referred to the Indian actress as Shilpa Poppadom, a slur that the producers thought so significant they aired it twice. On the Thursday, Luke Johnson went on Radio 4's *Today* programme to discuss the BBC licence-fee settlement, due to be announced that morning. He refused five times to respond to questions about racism on *Big Brother*.

That same afternoon, Andy Duncan was addressing the Oxford Media Convention, the wild, stormy weather providing an appropriate backdrop to the gathering crisis. The row could not have come at a worse time for Duncan, who was at the conference to argue that Channel 4, as a beleaguered public-service broadcaster, needed help to overcome a looming future funding gap. He arrived early and agreed to hold an impromptu press conference. Wearing his trademark crumpled black polo shirt with horizontal stripes, with black rings around his eyes and beads of sweat on his forehead: he looked like he had not slept.

Shortly before he read out his press statement, the news broke that Carphone Warehouse had suspended its £3-million sponsorship deal with *Big Brother*. The firm's founder Charles Dunstone had watched the show the night before and decided his company should no longer be associated with it. The decision triggered other commercial disasters for those involved in the row: Jade's perfume brand, Shh..., was removed from the shelves, and Danielle Lloyd lost a £100,000 modelling contract.

Duncan's statement was a cack-handed attempt to take the sting out of the ugly exchanges and bullying by interpreting them high-mindedly as sobering evidence of a culture clash, a valuable lesson about racism still lurking just beneath the surface of British society. He said:

The latest series of *Celebrity Big Brother* has strayed into particularly controversial territory – the issue of racism and whether or not it remains ingrained in British attitudes despite all the progress we have apparently made towards becoming a truly multicultural society. We

cannot say with certainty that the comments directed at Shilpa have been racially motivated or whether they stem from broader cultural and social differences.¹⁷

Producers had spoken to Jade and to Shilpa, who said she did not feel that behaviour towards her was racist.

Duncan was trying to play for time because he had been assured there would be a reconciliation between Jade and Shilpa. He had worked out a form of words that made it look as if he was absolving himself from responsibility. '*Big Brother's* unique strength is that it is ultimately the public who will decide whether or not the behaviour of certain contestants has been unacceptable.'

It was an unconvincing performance. Duncan was the first non-broadcaster to head Channel 4, and his inexperience was cruelly exposed. Seen alongside Johnson's stubborn silence on the *Today* programme, it was evident that neither of the two men who ran the channel knew how to cope with such rapidly escalating political crises. As the channel's own review would later conclude, its executives appeared to be somehow condoning unacceptable behaviour by intervening either too late or not forcibly enough. It was left to Tessa Jowell, the Culture Secretary, to tell the conference that she had found the programme disgusting, 'racism masquerading as entertainment.'¹⁸ A penitent Jade was ignominiously voted out of the house while Shilpa stayed on to win the contest.

The *Guardian's* Media Editor Matt Wells weighed in on Monday, 22 January with a judgement that hit hard and reverberated around the channel: 'The events of the past week have served only to illustrate the desperate lack of creative, strategic and political leadership.' The Channel 4 Board met that day and finally issued a profound apology. The most critical director was reported to be vicious in condemning the executives: 'I don't understand how you let this happen.' The Board set up a review led by Tony Hall, a non-executive director and former Head of BBC News, and Rabinder Singh QC. In some ways, their report was more critical than that of Ofcom, which eventually found the channel guilty of failing to apply generally accepted standards on three counts.

On 25 January, when commissioning editors met at a programme review committee, their mood was angry and confused. Some agreed with Dorothy Byrne, the Head of News and Current Affairs, who said she felt embarrassed, upset and humiliated by a programme whose contract they had agreed to extend and by a set of people at the top who had not been able to see straight. Others thought the huge public row was a storm in a teacup and would blow over and were unable to see that the channel had managed to come across as cowardly and arrogant at the same time.

The atmosphere by April was febrile. *Celebrity Big Brother* had put Channel 4 in jeopardy, and there was the grim prospect of *Big Brother 8* on the horizon. 'If I asked that question now, should we renew *Big Brother*, I wouldn't get the same unanimous

response,¹⁹ Lygo observed in July, as *Big Brother 8* crawled uninspiringly through the summer, losing support fastest from the young adults it is designed for. At this stage, the channel decided that *Celebrity Big Brother* would not be coming back in January 2008. It was ironic that Jade Goody, the first celebrity created by *Big Brother*, should unwittingly have killed off its lucrative offshoot.

The row over *Celebrity Big Brother* exposed the delicate balancing act Channel 4 performs between commercial and public service, the key to its unique position as the Jekyll and Hyde of British television. Shine a light one way, and you reveal a cynical, ruthless commercial broadcaster. Turn the beam in the other direction, and you will find the surviving remnants of a benign, soft-centred institution regarded at its birth, a short twenty-five years ago, as a miracle of pragmatic Thatcherism.

2

The long and winding road



Television sets in the late 1960s came with four buttons. Three were for BBC1, BBC2 and ITV, but the fourth was blank, even though there was capacity for another service. It was known as the empty channel and became a growing source of vexation. For two decades, there was tortuous debate about what should happen to the tantalising spare frequencies. After the launch of ITV from 1955 onwards, as a commercial alternative to the BBC's then solitary television channel, the Independent Television Authority (ITA) spoke of the potential for a second ITV channel, a rival advertising-funded service. But governments were suspicious of too much television and, indeed, of broadcasting's power in general – an attitude that would hold back the introduction of commercial radio until the 1970s, when the pirate stations forced the issue.

In 1960, Harold Macmillan's Government set up the Pilkington Committee to inquire into broadcasting, including the possible allocation of a third new television channel. By then, ITV had grabbed 70 per cent of viewing, but the BBC, which had relaunched its pre-war television service in 1946, was starting the fight back with more adventurous programming. When Pilkington reported in 1962, it rounded on what it saw as ITV's vulgarity and populism and praised the BBC for its more responsible standards. That was why the third channel went to the BBC, as BBC2. After a shaky launch in 1964, it became a success under David Attenborough, and some in the independent sector began to campaign for a second ITV service, to level the playing field. But, in 1966 Harold Wilson's Government decided it would be too expensive, and in 1970 the ITA dropped the idea.

In 1968, a time of social and political ferment all across Europe, the Free Communications Group (FCG), a diverse collection of programme-makers and journalists, began to demand more outlets for expression and a television channel to accom-

moderate them. Opposition to the war in Vietnam was at its height. Tensions between Government and broadcasters over Ireland was starting to mount, and politicians were determined to keep radio and television on a tight leash. Four years earlier, the political satire show, *That Was the Week That Was*, watched by 12 million people at its height, had been dropped by the BBC after thirteen months, ostensibly because it might be seen to influence the forthcoming General Election. In 1965, the BBC governors had refused to allow transmission of *The War Game*, a dramatic reconstruction of the aftermath of a hydrogen bomb dropped on Britain, showing a member of the armed forces shooting a civilian. Harold Wilson was openly hostile to the BBC, believing that it was biased against him, and he refused to increase the licence fee.

New ITV contractors went on air in 1968 with eight-year franchises, but from the beginning they were preoccupied with their battles against the industry's powerful trade unions. Thames, the new service for Londoners during the week, was launched on 29 July and immediately went dark for two hours. London Weekend Television (LWT) started on Friday 2 August, only to have the technicians' union black out the station's first show, *We Have Ways of Making You Laugh*. But when they did get on air, the programmes were disappointing. The FCG used its newsletter, *Open Secret*, to contrast the shoddy service LWT was offering with the high-minded programme promises it had made to secure the franchise, opening up legitimate questions about how effectively ITV was regulated and run. There was, too, discontent within the BBC, expressed in underground papers by anonymous authors with titles such as *Shit*, *The Brutish Empire* and *Burial*. Scurrilous mock-ups of *Radio Times* were passed from hand to hand, lampooning governors and the Director General. A growing number of disaffected young people working in television began to hatch schemes, their frustration heightened by the knowledge that there was an empty channel waiting to be filled.

But the rumblings of discontent did not come only from the lower depths of the industry. On 18 November 1969, an establishment lobbying group, the 76 Group, was launched in the House of Commons. At a meeting chaired by Brian Walden, then a Labour MP, the group, some of whose members were also involved with the FCG, pledged 'to represent the views of men and women professionals employed in television and radio united by a common concern over the future of broadcasting and dismay at recent events in both ITV and the BBC.' Its principal demand was for a new royal commission to look into the organisation of broadcasting after 1976, when the BBC Charter and the ITV Act were both due to expire. Along with another organisation, the Campaign for Better Broadcasting, the 76 Group placed an advertisement in the *Guardian* headed 'Crisis in Television and Radio: A Royal Commission Now!' It was signed by 102 distinguished names.

On 14 May 1970, the Government caved in and announced there would be an inquiry, led by Lord Annan, Provost of University College, London. Four days later,

Harold Wilson called a General Election for 18 June, which Labour lost. The Conservative Government, led by Edward Heath, saw no need for the Annan Inquiry, and Christopher Chataway, the new Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, announced that it would be postponed indefinitely. The campaigners for change were deeply frustrated, and their frustration turned to anger when it became apparent that the Conservatives, who had introduced commercial television fifteen years earlier, were thinking of handing over the new channel to the existing ITV companies, as ITV2. The advertising industry also sounded the alarm, stressing that to allow the present franchise-holders to operate the new channel would strengthen their tight monopoly on television advertising. Naturally enough, the ITV barons were delighted by the indications that the Government would see things their way, and the five largest companies drew up a schedule for ITV2 as complementary to the main channel, competing with BBC2 and eating into its ratings. If ITV1 was seen as the equivalent of the *Daily Express*, ITV2 would be the *Telegraph*.

In July 1971, the ITA invited views from people working in television but tried to avoid a public debate. This led to an alternative public debate organised by the FCG and *Time Out* – the first TV4 conference. It drew together a wide cross-section of interests beyond broadcasters, including members of the Conservative Bow Group, the National Union of Teachers and university academics; but none came up with a cogent proposal. The dominant note was one of protest, the insistence that Britain did not need more of the same. This public unease forced Chataway to concede that, in the face of that level of dissension, the channel could not be allocated. For the time being, the ITV companies had been faced down, but they continued to lobby discreetly, and in March 1973 Sir John Eden, who had replaced Chataway, declared that there was no need to put off a decision on the fourth channel any longer. He asked for submissions. This was the cue that a modest, soft-spoken former television executive, with a burning thirst for change, had been waiting for. His name was Anthony Smith, and he was about to demonstrate that the power of the press was mightier than the airwaves.

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If you stand outside Fortnum & Mason in Piccadilly and look across to the Royal Academy, you will see a small turning next to it, with the word 'Private' written on the tarmac. Behind it, across a courtyard, sits an eighteenth-century mansion, withdrawn from the traffic, with chandeliers blazing day and night. This is the Albany, designed by William Chambers for the first Viscount Melbourne but converted in 1802 to provide elegant suites, known as sets, for gentlemen up from the shires. It is a fine establishment address, whose twentieth-century residents included such as Malcolm Muggeridge, Tony Armstrong-Jones, Graham Greene, J.B. Priestley and

Edward Heath. For the past thirty years, it has been the London home of the intellectual father of Channel 4, Anthony Smith, who on weekdays moves easily from his drawing room – all elegant sofas, Persian rugs and period green paint on the wall – to a library next door. He is a thinking man and a generous host, combining unobtrusive sharpness with dogged persistence. Between 1988 and 2006, he was President of Magdalen College, Oxford, and before that he ran the British Film Institute (BFI), proving a formidable fundraiser and networker at both.

People assume that Smith is a product of the wealthy Home Counties, as are so many of his former students and peers. In fact, he is the son of a poor mother and went to a now defunct grammar school in Harrow. From there he made his way to Brasenose College, Oxford, where he read English, then joined the BBC as a general trainee, producing current-affairs programmes. He was exceptionally talented but his own man and, therefore, distrusted by many of his superiors. When he resigned in 1971, so as to think and write about the future direction of broadcasting, he had been a member of the *Tonight* team and Editor of *24 Hours* – an admired precursor to *Newsnight* – for seven years. He had dealt with politicians of all hues in the ferment of the 1960s, sent news crews around the world and counted the investigative author Tom Bower among his protégés. A purer meritocrat would be hard to find.

He was also someone who placed his faith in independent institutions, because he knew from his own life experience that good ones could nurture people. He once said that if he had the money, he would found a well-endowed independent university college, outside of Oxford or Cambridge. ‘I believe in autonomous institutions. People live in families, institutions and schools and they add a real richness to life. I believe in a collegiate system – Channel 4 as originally practised. I hate state control.’¹ After he resigned from the BBC, he became a research fellow at St Antony’s College Oxford, and from here he campaigned to challenge the hold over the nation’s broadcasting exerted by the BBC and ITV. On the face of it, he could be seen as part of the problem, one of the Oxbridge male elite who had, with input from show-business agents and impresarios such as Lew Grade and Cyril and Sidney Bernstein, shaped the system. He was, thus, perfectly camouflaged to act as a reformer.

After Smith’s withdrawal from the hurly-burly of television, he worked on a study of the relationship between the audience, broadcaster and state, which later surfaced in his book, *The Shadow in the Cave*. He also joined in discussions with the Association of Broadcasting Staff (ABS), a union mainly composed of BBC employees, to respond to the request from the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, Sir John Eden, for ideas about the fourth channel. There was a dragon to be slain. The ITV heavyweights were lobbying for control of any new channel.

It was while sitting in the ABS’s Marylebone office that a new concept came to Smith.

As we talked, the idea germinated in my mind of a formula for a television organisation that ran like an American foundation. It received applications, it gave out money. This one would give out the money and the broadcasting time. It would have a transmitter. I said, let's call it the Open Broadcasting Authority. The ABS let me write out the plan and use it as a possible option. In the context of the discussion of that time, there was no alternative.²

The ABS President, Tom Rhys, supported the idea in a letter to *The Times* in January 1972. Three months later, Smith fleshed out the proposal and exposed it to public debate through a 3,000-word article in the *Guardian*, published as part of its nascent media section. The *Guardian*, and its Media Editor Peter Fiddick, would act as facilitator of the fourth-channel debate, carrying other articles from Smith, refining the concept, during the 1970s.

Smith's first article began with the sonorous words: 'Once in a decade an opportunity arises in Britain for the creation of a new television channel.'³ It should, he wrote, be run by a national television foundation – a more respectable, less anarchic name, he felt, than the Open Broadcasting Authority. It should be the responsibility of a body of trustees, appointed with the approval of the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications. They would have a very small staff, a central transmitting studio, but all the rest of the content would come from hired studios. The secretariat of the foundation would be responsible for processing applications for programmes and encouraging ideas from authors in society at large. He was trying to define an institution without grand designs for itself, more a broker and enabler. It would foster a new method of making programmes, commissioning from independent producers, thus breaking free from the large BBC and ITV programme departments where office politics was too often the factor determining which ideas and people were backed.

This thoughtful prospectus included some slightly odd elements. Smith maintained there was no need for regular schedules, since programmes could be arranged in 'festive seasons [. . .] with a tendency towards the ad hoc rather than continuous filling in with identical programmes.'⁴ But it was essentially a well-considered article, destined to be much photocopied, handed around and discussed. It provoked a *Late Night Line Up* debate on BBC2 in which the charismatic former Director General of the BBC, Sir Hugh Carleton Greene, took part. He initially opposed the idea, but in a Granada Guildhall lecture the following October, he said, 'I suggest this should be set up more or less as proposed by Anthony Smith [. . .] as a centre for every type of experimental programming.'

Smith's case for the National Television Foundation in truth was rather incomplete. The weakest part of the proposal was how to finance the foundation in a way that allowed it freedom. Smith came up with a list of possibilities: sponsorship by

large companies, unions and ministries; a government grant; advertising – not as traditional spot but in a large slab once a night; sales overseas; and a licence fee. His final option was that the existing broadcasting organisations might pay for experimental work. This is quite close to what happened in the first phase of Channel 4, when it lived off an annual subscription from ITV which, as a quid pro quo, sold its advertising. Smith's was a considered vision, put forward with sincerity and without apparent self-interest. Later, the campaigning became more commercially motivated when advertising agencies and a handful of large producers began to smell opportunities. One of the reasons the article had such an afterlife was that it talked about the point of the new channel, providing access to the airwaves for fresh voices, an escape from the so-called consensus and from the bias towards safe programming.

Smith argued that broadcasting, with only three channels, was restricted by the licensing regime with controls that ultimately chained it directly to the state, preventing society from properly informing itself. He gave a topical example. Britain had just experienced a miners' strike, and a hugely disruptive three-day week was about to be imposed. 'Few people in Britain had any idea of the determination of the miners to strike so long and so determinedly: the point could not be made satisfactorily in a programme or two on the BBC or ITV.'⁵ And in a pitch that appealed directly to many of the younger campaigners and programme-makers, he noted,

If you are outside the world of television it is difficult, to the point of being impossible, to introduce an idea into it. Something fundamental has to change in broadcasting if the closed world of programme makers is to open not merely its ranks, but its minds. The conditioning of fifty years of the BBC, and twenty of ITV, of whole working lives sheltered in large organisations, has to change. There are people who want to initiate programme ideas which could not be conceived within Television Centre or Granada or Thames. It cannot be that broadcast communication is intended by nature to be conducted in perpetuity inside large, single-minded corporations and programme companies exclusively.⁶

Though the concept of a separate foundation did not eventually win through, most of the ideas supporting it did. They became the seeds that grew into a fresh way of thinking about television. Other radically minded broadcasters – including John Birt, David Elstein and Jeremy Isaacs – also sent in suggestions to the Government which were close to the eventual deal struck over Channel 4, but most were reluctant to go public because they wanted to protect their jobs. Smith, freed of the daily grind of making programmes, focused on taking the campaign into the public arena rather than simply circulating his thoughts within the industry. He argued for a democratic opening up of the airwaves, an 'imp in the mechanism'. He caught the

mood of dissatisfaction about the state of television which had been growing since the 1960s, in particular over the heavy regulation of political programmes. John Birt later wrote:

I saw much broadcasting as clichéd and formulaic. I bridled increasingly at the prevailing notion of mass programming, of serving a homogeneous audience of people with uniform tastes. I felt this about my own generation, whose needs were rarely met by television. I also felt keenly that ethnic minorities, and other groups – like gay people – barely surfaced.⁷

Smith now says that to understand what Channel 4 was about you have to go behind the debates and the clamour from different pressure groups and ‘look at the intellectual moment at which pressure for it began.’⁸ There was no Internet, no mobile phones, no videos, DVD or multichannel television to act as outlets for frustrated communicators.

You have to understand the role of the duopoly and why it became a tremendous vexation for thousands of people. The point was that society was no longer homogeneous. There were a great many different interest groups – the 1960s had shown that – but the screens were not catching up. People had begun making films and then videos in the 60s. There wasn’t an easy domestic recording system as now, but there was a desire to use the moving image among people coming through the underground movements, and they had causes they wanted to express – everything from taking drugs, having sex, changing the laws about sex, the whole gay-rights thing, the homelessness issue, the beginning of the feminist movement. All these things were bubbling around here and abroad and at the same time the capacity to make messages was growing in the population. Meanwhile, we were all made to believe the broadcasting we were getting was very good. I suppose it was by international standards; but it was all in the hands of this rather well-paid, superior civil-service class. They drove around in big cars. They drank rather a lot and, like all drunks, they didn’t listen. They couldn’t hear, literally and metaphorically, what was going on around them, what demands were really being made – demands that their comfortable duopoly was able to frustrate.⁹

This view was echoed by Michael Darlow, a television producer since the early 1960s and a major campaigner for Channel 4, which he later meticulously chronicled. ‘Increasingly we came to believe that the whole system of control and funding

in film and television was inappropriate to the needs and aspirations of the new age.¹⁰ Meanwhile, as the 1970s advanced, there were more freelances and independent producers, often living hand to mouth, hungry for work. The top tier had a status quo to defend. They were comfortable, and they were aided and abetted by very powerful trade unions, the Association of Cinematography and Television Technicians (ACTT) and the Association of Broadcasting Staff. Certainly, ITV and the unions, in some ways, had a vested interest in collusion. The unions wanted wealthy monopolistic employers they could milk by threatening to pull the plugs and walk out – as the print unions were able to do with national newspapers. Smith's proposal was taken up by disparate lobbyists ranging from Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers' and Listeners' Association – whose campaigns to 'clean up' television had been initially ignored and then mocked by broadcasters – to trade unionists in other industries who felt their views were ignored or distorted.

In 1974, Smith wrote another article, this one of 6,000 words, and refined his thinking about funding and ranges of programmes. Labour had listened, and when it returned to power that year it set up a new Annan Committee, four years after the Conservatives had stood down the old one. Smith was approached to become a member, but his name was removed by Harold Wilson, because he had written to Wilson criticising his soft line on the Czech Government's suppression of the human-rights movement led by the playwright Václav Havel. Smith was replaced at the last minute by Anthony Jay, co-author of the comedy *Yes Prime Minister*, who had founded an independent production company in the mid-1960s. Smith's friend, the broadcaster-turned-Labour-MP Phillip Whitehead, was, however, a member of the committee, and Smith himself was able to exert a strong influence on it even without formal membership. Lord Annan wrote asking him to submit his National Television Foundation plan and to undertake research projects.

The committee had to sift through 750 submissions and held twenty-five days of hearings. The BBC, partly in order to head off ITV2, backed the National Television Foundation. When the report came out on 13 March 1977, it proposed an Open Broadcasting Authority, separate from the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) and the BBC – a triumph for Smith, Phillip Whitehead and the programme-making lobby. According to the blueprint for Channel 4, it would have a prime duty to serve minorities as well as majorities, plugging the gaps in the BBC's output. It was to act as a publisher of other people's ideas. 'We attach particular importance to this third category as a force for diversity', said Annan. It was to aim at celebrating differences, rather than seeking consensus. The report even quoted Anthony Smith's borrowing from Rousseau: 'If I am free to say anything I want to say except the one thing I want to say, then I am not free.'¹¹ It attached particular importance to independent producers as programme suppliers as a force for new thinking. Programmes could also be offered by the ITV companies, whose frustrated programme-makers would

welcome new outlets and the chance to make use of idle studios. 'The younger generation of producers is bubbling over with ideas which are not allowed to surface', Annan said.

'It had bought my whole bill of goods, all the notions of a plural system, and the philosophical support for the broadcasting authority', Smith pointed out.¹² But still nothing concrete would yet emerge. The Government, losing popularity and clinging to office with a wafer-thin majority, was in no mood to take what was likely to be a controversial initiative. So in January 1979, when it seemed to Smith that Margaret Thatcher was going to sweep the Conservatives back to power, he went to see Sir Keith Joseph, one of her most trusted and influential allies, who ran the Centre for Policy Studies. Smith reasoned that he needed to depoliticise the Channel 4 proposal. Udi Eichler, a Thames Television producer and a member of a Conservative think tank, arranged the introduction. 'I went to see Keith Joseph', Smith recalls.

He was there with Norman Lamont, his new Parliamentary Private Secretary, a little bouncy thing. I explained this was a way of introducing competition and enterprise into the broadcasting system but keeping the notion of public service dominant. Sir Keith listened very intelligently and asked intelligent questions – he's another intelligent Magdalen man. He said: 'Norman, this is very interesting. Why haven't we done anything about this?'.¹³

And in a further bid to implant the idea with the probable new regime, Smith went to see Willie Whitelaw, the prospective Home Secretary, who would be the pivotal figure in the debate. Shortly before the election, Whitelaw had opposed the creation of an Open Broadcasting Authority and had endorsed the IBA, which had replaced the ITA in 1971, as the body to handle changes.

In the General Election of 3 May 1979, Mrs Thatcher won a majority of forty-four in a campaign fought on Labour's record on the economy, symbolised by the Saatchi poster, 'Labour Isn't Working'. At first, the outlook for Channel 4 looked bleak, with the big ITV companies able to exert more influence on the Conservatives than they had on Labour. The Queen's speech of 15 May included a brief statement that the life of the IBA would be extended and that it would be responsible for the fourth television channel. By this time, though, a new alliance, the Channel 4 Group had been formed to draw together campaigners under one banner for a final push. It had a small office, a single employee – and a future to win or lose. Six months after Anthony's Smith's meeting with Sir Keith Joseph, they were sitting in a dingy room in Great Pulteney Street, Soho, when, as Michael Darlow described it, the penny dropped. They were studying a copy of the Conservative manifesto, in particular the section on encouraging small businesses and the thirst for enterprise. That was it!

They could rebrand themselves as part of the solution, a ‘free market in ideas.’ They sacked their organiser and recruited instead, for £30 a week, a thin, pale, intense young man called Michael Jackson, who had just graduated in media studies from the Central London Polytechnic but who had made a big impression on Sophie Balhetchet, a key campaign member. His professor, Nicholas Garnham, also a staunch advocate of Channel 4, said he was unique, very bright, more focused on his goals than any other student he had ever taught.

At this stage, the IBA was fostering the notion that independent producers could supply just 15 per cent of Channel 4’s programmes, meaning that ITV would make the rest and thus be the dominant player. The Channel 4 Group decided to target the 1979 Edinburgh Television Festival that August and argue against such overwhelming ITV influence. They wanted at least half the programmes to come from independents and for the channel to have a programme controller with complete freedom. Jeremy Isaacs, who was to give the opening MacTaggart Lecture, would use his speech to stake his claim to found it. Each morning of the Festival, the whippet-thin and self-effacing Jackson would go to the Red Star parcels office to pick up a batch of leaflets sent up from London, and before each session, he and Balhetchet would dash in to place briefing sheets on the seats. No one would ever have expected that this underfed-looking youth with intense eyes would, eighteen years later, become Channel 4’s third Chief Executive, with a chauffeur-driven Lexus and a salary of nearly £500,000.

3

Isaacs: maverick founder



In August 1979, Jeremy Isaacs was like a proud stag driven out of his kingdom. He had ‘resigned’ from Thames Television where he had been an adventurous programme director and now, without a steady salaried job, had joined the ranks of freelancers – the grass roots of the movement to create a separate fourth channel. Prone to private bouts of insecurity, he was by no means confident that, a year later, he would win the glittering prize of founding Channel 4, not least because the proposal was still fluid and its supporters split into rival camps.

The World at War, his epic history of the Second World War, had been screened by ITV during 1973 and 1974 and had been acclaimed around the world. It had established his reputation as one of the best British television producers of his generation, but it had not protected him from being passed over when a fiery rival, Bryan Cowgill, the Controller of BBC1, was made Managing Director of Thames in 1977 – an appointment that Isaacs learned of from the press. The two men were as incompatible as oil and water. With typical directness, Isaacs had told Cowgill, now his boss, that he, Isaacs, ran the programming:

‘Bryan . . . I want to make one thing clear. I am Director of Programmes at Thames, responsible for our programme department, for all our programmes and for the schedule. I need to know that you accept that.’

‘That’s right’, Cowgill replied.

‘In that case’, Isaacs wondered, ‘what will *you* do?’¹

It was a deliberately provocative comment, and from that point, Isaacs, whose contract was due for renewal, was mentally steeling himself to leave. In the end, his departure, in 1978, was explosive. The terminal row was over his decision to allow the BBC to run unscreened material from *This Week*, the regular Thursday

night Thames current-affairs programme, which he had once edited. *This Week* had made a string of well-researched programmes about Northern Ireland, critical of the Labour Government's policy. These had exasperated Roy Mason, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, a combative ex-miner, who put pressure on the IBA to act. The authority's lay members had the legal power of publishers and could block any programme before transmission. The offending piece featured reports by Amnesty International of mistreatment of suspects by the Royal Ulster Constabulary at the Castlereagh Interrogation Centre and included interviews with members of the IRA. The IBA banned it – and, in protest, members of the ACTT union prevented a replacement programme being shown, which meant blank screens on ITV.

When the BBC asked the next morning if they could see the material, Isaacs, angry and rebellious, said: 'Give it to them.'² He was echoing an earlier decision made by Denis Forman at Granada over the first edition of *World in Action*, when he had allowed the BBC's *Nationwide* programme to use excerpts. Isaacs was called upstairs by the Thames Chairman, Howard Thomas, who accused him furiously of insubordination, adding that it was a sacking offence. Isaacs said he was resigning anyway.

This meant that by 1979, now aged forty-six, he was regarded as brilliant but a maverick, with a reputation for sticking up for programme-makers. This endeared him to radical producers and ensured loyalty from the ranks but played badly with those who might manage him or regulate his programmes in future. They viewed the *This Week* incident as a sign of immaturity and irresponsibility. Yet, his status among programme-makers ensured that he was asked to attend the Edinburgh Television Festival, founded in 1976 to debate such matters as the fourth television channel and chaired in 1979 by Paul Bonner, a benign BBC executive. Isaacs was invited to give the keynote MacTaggart Lecture, a signal honour and a marvellous opportunity for an ambitious man on the job market, at the height of his powers, fuelled by a sense of destiny.

Isaacs spent August at the family holiday home in Ceibwr, North Pembrokeshire, with his wife Tamara, composing his thoughts about what sort of fourth channel was wanted. He thought back to the 1973 submission he had made in confidence to the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, which had proposed a separate channel under the control of the IBA rather than the ITV companies. Although ITV would fund the channel and sell its advertising, a separate programme controller would schedule it. On 27 August, relaxed but primed, he arrived at the George Hotel, in Edinburgh's elegant New Town, where delegates were congregating in the bar in an atmosphere more charged than anyone could have anticipated.

The lecture was given in the austere Georgian lecture hall of the Royal College of Physicians, a short walk from the hotel. The packed audience of around 200 included civil servants from the Home Office Broadcasting Department and a strong turn-out from the militant independent producers lobby. Isaacs, at his most bull-like, relished the moment and plunged into what was blatantly a public job application. A gifted

orator, he fleshed out his vision of a distinctive channel, serving minorities, with conviction, while at the same time sounding grounded and realistic.

We want a fourth channel which extends the choice available to viewers; which extends the range of ITV's programmes; which caters for substantial minorities presently neglected; which builds into its actuality programmes a complete spectrum of political attitude and opinion; which furthers [. . .] some broad educational purposes; which encourages worthwhile independent production; which allows the larger regional ITV companies to show what their programme-makers can do. We want a fourth channel that will neither simply compete with ITV1 nor merely be complementary to it. We want a fourth channel that everyone will watch some of the time and no one all of the time. We want a fourth channel that will, somehow, be different.³

He hoped to see more black Britons on the screen, more programmes made by women that men would watch, more programmes for the young. And he threw in what was designed to be a juicy bone for the campaigners: 'Up to now independent producers have had a raw deal because no one has needed their services. A fourth channel will suck in a new influx of programme-makers.'⁴

Yet, despite that pronouncement, his words did not wholly satisfy the Channel 4 Group – who had assiduously prepared a thirteen-page briefing pamphlet – because he contradicted their belief that any great new source of energy and ideas was out there among independent producers, waiting to be tapped. He said most such ideas were trapped within the BBC or ITV and suggested that independents would make only a modest contribution. He did not specifically endorse the IBA's assessment, made in a paper that summer, that a 15-per-cent share for independents would be realistic, but his thinking seemed to chime with their approach. He spoke honestly, based on his experience of working within ITV, rubbing shoulders with creative people who also felt frustrated.

The campaigners' doubts about him were strengthened the following day, when his speech was debated at the Festival. Isaacs then speculated that maybe only a 10-per-cent initial contribution from independent producers would be achieved. The reality was that he had not paid sufficient notice to the growing clamour for change within the nascent independent sector – he had been too busy making and overseeing ITV programmes. Asked to explain how a fourth channel could be different if the majority of its programmes came from the ITV companies, Isaacs replied that the fourth channel would be 'different, but not that different.' The much-quoted remark was aimed at appeasing the radicals while not doing anything to frighten the horses – in this case, the ministers who would make the final decisions on the new

channel. Yet, the radicals were not appeased, in particular not Roger Graef, the Harvard-educated documentary-maker who had created a distinctive niche and who would become a founding board member of Channel 4 in 1980, playing a key role in selecting its chief executive and driving its ethos. He was deeply irritated by Isaacs' limited expectations.⁵

The tension at Edinburgh between those who worked within ITV and the independent producer lobbyists grew so heated that the Home Office civil servants billed to speak beat a hasty retreat. Further announcements would be left to Willie Whitelaw, the 'one nation' Home Secretary who was to speak in two weeks' time at the more sober, industry-based Cambridge Broadcasting Convention. Meanwhile, other would-be contenders to run Channel 4 entered the Edinburgh debate, including Anthony Smith and the ambitious thirty-four-year-old John Birt, who campaigned with the radical slogan, 'Let All Voices Be Heard.'

Isaacs, though, had laid down his marker. The lecture showed that he grasped what Channel 4 could be about and understood how it could be realised. Graef later admitted that on this point 'he absolutely got it.'⁶ Although there would be many questions raised about his suitability, he was now the one to beat. In the meantime, he returned to programme-making. His television history of Ireland, made for the BBC and narrated by Robert Kee, won a BAFTA award for Best Factual Programme, enhancing his reputation. And in 1979, he also became a governor of the BFI. This taught him the value of independent film producers and led him to appreciate the value of community-based film-making and video workshops – all lessons he would take with him to Channel 4 . . . eventually.

How had this combative television producer been shaped? Where did his daring, self-confidence and conviction come from? Isaacs' father was a jeweller and his mother a doctor, and he was their eldest son, raised in Bearsden, a comfortable middle-class suburb of Glasgow, populated by the professional classes. They were a prosperous but radically minded family, staunch Labour supporters. Born in September 1932, Jeremy was old enough to experience living through the Second World War, while too young to be devoured or damaged by it. After the horrors of fascism, many middle-class people of Jewish descent turned to Communism and socialism. The *Manchester Guardian* and the *Glasgow Herald* were delivered daily to the Isaacs home, supplemented with a weekly Hansard ordered by his father in response to a comment by a primary-school teacher that one day the young lad could be Prime Minister. He duly pored over the parliamentary debates, questions and answers.

Family life included books, music, debate and attendance at the synagogue. There were numerous family connections with Israel. Jeremy's first visit was in 1955, and his youngest brother Michael, from whom he became estranged, emigrated there – he and his wife Rebecca were blown up by a Fatah bomb in Jerusalem in 1975, orphaning their two young children.

Jeremy and his brothers were educated at the fee-paying Glasgow Academy, where he was the only Labour supporter in his class, gleefully celebrating a series of by-election victories between 1945 and 1951. Lord Reith, the first Director General of the BBC, had also been a pupil at the Academy. Isaacs remembers him presiding over a prize-giving ceremony in June 1950 and offering the boys some characteristic advice: that when shaking hands they should always look people in the eyes.

Isaacs went on to read classics at Merton College, Oxford, where his debating skills led to his election as President of the Union and Chairman of the Labour Club and where he struck up an unlikely lifelong friendship with the Conservative politician Michael Heseltine. He then had to complete two years' national service at Maryhill Barracks, Glasgow, so it was not until 1957 that he arrived in London to seek his fortune, although the first thing he did was to attend the inaugural meeting of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in Central Hall, Westminster. Like many Oxbridge arts graduates of the time, he applied for a traineeship at the BBC. The interviewer's note on him read: 'Small, dark Glaswegian Jew. Very much alive.'⁷

Unemployed, but shortly to marry his South African girlfriend, Tamara, he took advice from the rising young journalist Bernard Levin and also sought help from an unconventional source. The father of one of his schoolfriends was George Singleton, the owner of the Cosmo cinema in Rose Street, Glasgow, who was acquainted with Sidney and Cecil Bernstein, the owners of the Granada cinema chain and founders of Granada Television, launched in 1956 as the ITV franchisee in Manchester. Singleton wrote to the Bernsteins recommending Isaacs, and the letter was passed to Denis Forman, Granada's Managing Director, who offered him a job at £18 a week.

In Manchester, he worked for the legendary David Plowright, then Granada's News Editor, who was bent on taking the deference out of political reporting. Isaacs helped make Granada's election marathon, where all candidates in all the local constituencies were invited to present their case in two minutes sharp. He was then put in charge of the weekly press review, *What the Papers Say*, which he took from Manchester to Granada's offices in Golden Square, London, to be close to the pool of opinionated journalists from which the programme's presenters were drawn. It was a perfect grounding for a novice producer, giving him early experience of coping with the 1955 Broadcasting Act's insistence that every programme on an issue of industrial or political controversy must display due impartiality. Ensuring balance was a duty that would frequently cloud his career in broadcasting. The solution on *What the Papers Say* was to rotate presenters of contrasting political persuasions; but it would not always be that simple.

He also produced *All Our Yesterdays*, recalling the events of the week from twenty-five years ago, and made his first foray into historical documentaries. Denis Forman wrote, 'His quick wit, well-stocked mind and terrier-like aggression marked him as someone who would go places.'⁸ The first place he went, after five years at Granada,

was Associated Rediffusion, holder of the London weekday franchise, which ran what was then ITV's only true weekly current-affairs show, *This Week*, all fifty-two weeks of the year. He turned it from a hosted magazine into a single-subject format without a regular presenter, allowing his reporters the space to explore and illuminate controversial issues.

He believed in dramatic techniques for driving home the message of the programmes. One of them, screened close to Christmas, campaigned for tough drink-driving laws. The reporter, Desmond Wilcox, went to Jack Straw's Castle, a public house in Hampstead, to interview drivers on their way home after ten pints of beer. Isaacs lined up 120 volunteers to represent visually the number killed on the roads over the holiday period, then cut straight to a live interview with the Transport Minister. In 1965, the BBC poached him to ginger up their declining current-affairs flagship *Panorama*, presented by Richard Dimbleby, then dying of cancer. Trying to repeat his success with *This Week*, Isaacs turned it from a magazine to a single-subject programme. Some powerful people did not approve of the change, and he was unable to deal with the perpetually poisonous BBC politicking. His ten-week experiment ended in defeat, but he refused to reverse it, and in December 1966 he was fired.

He was quickly welcomed back to Rediffusion in a more senior role, as Head of Features, overseeing *This Week*. With him he brought a few refugees from *Panorama* who had supported his changes. In 1968, Rediffusion lost its franchise, but Isaacs stayed on with the new company, Thames, whose Programme Director, Brian Tesler, would become an important ally and constructive critic of Isaacs in Channel 4's early rocky days.

By 1971, the Conservative Government, reacting to disquiet about programme standards, suggested it would change from taxing ITV's revenue at source to taxing its profits. This concession did wonders for programme budgets, as the companies sought to cut their taxable profits by spending more on quality content. In this unusually expansive climate for programme-makers, Isaacs proposed *The World at War*. This stately, twenty-six-episode history of the Second World War, drawing on archive footage, took fifty people some three years to make, and each of the films had an individual producer. The one about the Battle of Britain was produced by David Elstein, who would later edit *This Week* and become an influential campaigner for Channel 4. The major achievement of the series was to break away from a British-centred view of the war and to fuse narrative with a sparing analysis. Composer Carl Davis wrote the music; Laurence Olivier was coaxed into narrating.

Isaacs later said that making *The World at War* was 'at least till Channel 4 came along – the defining experience of my working life'.⁹ It remains an ITV landmark to stand alongside *The Jewel in the Crown* or *Brideshead Revisited*. The real cost was never worked out, but the series was sold to more than 100 countries and is still being