

“Channel 4 and the art of intelligent provocation”

Julian Bellamy speech to RTS , Law Society, Wednesday 4th November 2009

Good evening.

This is my first time at the RTS and I'm told I should probably start by telling you a little about myself. An anecdote or two about my inspiring personal odyssey from runner to industry titan. But the truth is far too mundane for public consumption. So I will restrict myself to a single personal observation.

I am an optimist.

I'm optimistic that hair loss can be reversed.

I'm optimistic QPR will conquer the premiership at some point.

I'm even optimistic Steve Hewlett will one day write something unambiguously positive.

I hope a little of that optimism will be evident in what I say this evening.

I want to advance a cultural argument for Channel 4, not an economic one. I want to talk about what I believe is Channel 4's key cultural role - *intelligent provocation*. I want to explain why I think television, and society as a whole, needs Channel 4 to play the role of *provocateur* now more than ever. And I want to explore how the end of **Big Brother** represents a unique opportunity for us to reconnect with this essential cultural role.

[PAUSE]

So what do I mean by *intelligent provocation*?

Well, for me, Channel 4 is at its most culturally valuable when it provokes with a purpose. Where we challenge it should be because we really believe there is

something worth challenging, not because we spot the opportunity to mindlessly offend public sentiment.

This spirit of *intelligent provocation* isn't just limited to our more obviously public service output, like **Dispatches** or **Channel 4 News** or **Christianity: A History**. It lives across our schedule - from taboo busting features like **The Sex Education Show** to the near the bone humour of **Peep Show**. You can see it in the sheer chutzpah of Derren Brown predicting the lottery or Gok Wan projecting women's naked bodies onto buildings. It is in the uncompromising attitude of **Skins** and **Shameless** and the audacity of factual series like **Boys and Girls Alone**.

It is *intelligent provocation* that connects David Starkey to Jamie Oliver, Jon Snow to fonejacker Kayvan Novak, Peter Kosminsky to Peter Kay.

It's what binds all the disparate parts of Channel 4 together. Analogue. Digital. Film. Online. Uncle Tom Cobley and all.

[PAUSE]

I see reasons to be optimistic when I look at British cultural life today. There is some evidence of commercialism squeezing out creative variety, but our cultural life in this country is still both dynamic and diverse.

My contention is that we can only have that flourishing, vibrant culture if there are spaces for mainstream thinking to be consistently and deliberately provoked; for broad audiences to be confronted by alternative ideas, even if they offend some sensibilities; to break conventions and conformities by pushing the boundaries of experience, taste and thought.

I see these spaces when I look around. The Edinburgh Festival, the world's biggest arts event. The thousands of live music performances staged in Britain every day. The richness of our theatre from David Hare at the National to Enron at The Royal Court. London Fashion Week. Tate Modern. The Saatchi Gallery.

I only have to walk into my local Waterstone's, and see the likes of Richard Dawkins and Malcolm Gladwell enjoying shelf space alongside Dan Brown, to find reasons for cultural optimism.

Better still, the digital world is democratising our creative industries, empowering fresh, individual voices into our collective consciousness.

A healthy dose of alternative, provocative voices can be heard from multiple sources across pretty much every creative field in this country.

Except, I would argue, in television.

[PAUSE]

I believe the range and ambition of television in this country continues to narrow.

It's ironic that, as technology has become more revolutionary, television content has never been safer and more homogenised. Broadcasters look sideways and backwards for inspiration. Anywhere but forwards.

Doctor Who. Strictly Come Dancing. Remakes of Minder, Reggie Perrin, Gladiators, Day of the Triffids, Upstairs Downstairs, Blake's 7, Name That Tune.

Television as a whole is becoming more averse to deliberate acts of cultural provocation, at confronting the consensus with new, non-conformist ideas. That's not to say there aren't many programmes of the highest quality. But as an overall body of work, there is less surprise and variety than there should be.

Why is that?

Well, for one thing, ITV, under the most intense competitive pressure, is understandably focused on maximising ratings and revenues. It is not in its competitive interests to challenge its viewers; mass audiences switch off if they are uncomfortable with what they see.

The same can be said for all commercial TV channels that rely on advertising revenues for their primary income. The multi-channel schedules are dominated by a blizzard of undemanding entertainment choices.

Meanwhile, the BBC has decided it needs to compete for ratings to justify the universal licence fee. As a result, it's had to mirror the creative narrowing within commercial television. Four weekly episodes of *East Enders*. A half-hour *Panorama*. *Casualty* spinning off to *Holby City* spinning off to *Holby Blue*.

As for Sky, well they claim to be different because they rely on subscription rather than advertising. But a *Martina Cole* adaptation and two *Terry Pratchett* films is a poor return from two decades' dominance of the pay-TV market.

Where Sky does have some commissioning scope it simply doesn't connect with the mainstream. The average audience for *Sky Arts* puts it on a par with *Kidderminster Harriers* in the Blue Square Premier League.

The truth is the British pay TV market can't support the HBO model.

[PAUSE]

So why does all this matter?

It matters because television is our most influential cultural medium.

We congratulate ourselves when 5 million people visit Tate Modern each year. Yet a comparable number tuned in to Channel 4's **Big Art Project** across just *four hours*. No other medium matches this ability to reach millions in minutes. To shape the culture in hours and days, not months and years.

The internet is obviously an increasingly powerful influence. But where television still just about unites, the web fragments. When social media *does* manage to

deliver a collective experience, it's remarkable how often it revolves around television content.

Television still has greater power than any other creative medium to influence public attitudes. And yet it is increasingly characterised by the *lack* of places in which mainstream audiences can engage with provocative, non-conformist ideas.

If our most universal and influential medium fails to challenge and provoke, if a fear of offending the audience begins to proscribe creative freedoms, then I believe the danger to our broader cultural life is clear.

Our society will become less democratic. Less enlightened. Ultimately, less free.

[PAUSE]

So what should we do about it?

Under a classic market failure model of public service broadcasting, the BBC might be expected to make up any shortfall in creative risk taking amongst commercial broadcasters. And yet, as I've already suggested, the Corporation seems to be increasingly conservative in its editorial decision making.

The BBC *can* sometimes be provocative and challenging in its journalism. The recent row about the BNP on Question Time demonstrates how it will defend its duty to be impartial.

Yet, as the audience fragments, the BBC appears to view its primary public role as uniting the nation not dividing it. It seems more concerned with broadly confirming the nation's collective assumptions rather than testing them. After a string of scandals about taste and decency, it seems to avoid disruptive, potentially controversial ideas like the plague.

Time and again producers tell me this. And I believe it. Given the current compliance culture at the BBC, can you imagine the reaction to *Jerry Springer*:

The Opera on the BBC today? Or *Monty Python*. Not even Michael Palin believes he'd enjoy that kind of creative freedom.

This is an unintended consequence of the BBC's method of funding. Spending three and a half billion pounds of public money each year requires unrivalled public accountability. And in the middle of a severe economic downturn, there is even greater scrutiny of how the BBC spends these guaranteed billions.

We live in an era when greater transparency is expected in the public realm, with the audience empowered by technology to give instant feedback. Individuals and pressure groups are incredibly adept at using social media to mobilise public opinion. The press is relentless in measuring and magnifying perceived outrage. It is becoming more uncomfortable for all broadcasters, but particularly the BBC, to stand in opposition to the public mood.

In an ideal world the BBC would operate free from some of these pressures. But this is not an ideal world.

[PAUSE]

Which leaves us with Channel 4.

In the debate about *Digital Britain*, Channel 4 was described as the main source of public service competition to the BBC. But, while this role is important, it is not the reason Channel 4 matters more today than it has ever done. We matter, not just because we keep the BBC honest, but because we are now the *sole* guardian of non-conformism and provocation on Britain's most powerful cultural medium.

Channel 4 was set up in 1982 as an antidote to the narrowing tendency in television. We have only ever existed to offer an alternative perspective, to challenge the consensus with provocative new ideas.

Our history is full of moments when we collided with the popular mainstream. The **Brass Eye** paedophilia special. **Queer as Folk**. The human autopsy.

When we get it right, I would argue, we have an unrivalled ability to influence *change* in mainstream culture.

Sometimes this influence is direct and obvious. Great comedy like Ali G, great fiction like **Slumdog Millionaire**, great talent like Jonathan Ross and Chris Evans.

Other times the impact is less immediate and visible, but even more momentous. The way programmes like **Brookside** and **Queer as Folk** and talent like Graham Norton and Alan Carr have influenced attitudes to sexuality. The way cultural diversity has entered the social mainstream, helped by trailblazing programmes like **Desmond's** from our past and **The Family** in our present. Our profound influence on youth culture through **The Tube**, **The Big Breakfast**, **Skins**. The way our chefs have helped change the way Britons eat.

Many of the unconventional ideas that Channel 4 has championed in its past, in the face of a public outcry, have become highly conventional in due course. We are sometimes accused of becoming more mainstream as a result.

But I believe passionately that we still go further than any other broadcaster to support creative risk. We should be increasingly distinguished by our willingness to defend creative freedoms even when public sentiment risk being offended.

And those freedoms *do* need defending. The compliance spiral that our industry finds itself in threatens to bland out the medium to no-one's benefit. I'm thinking about Frankie Boyle being censured for commenting on the appearance of an Olympic swimmer. Or the politics programme, *This Week*, being removed from the BBC i-player because of a few complaints about a chocolate hobnob joke. Or one of television's most experienced and acclaimed writers, Tony Marchant, having to take a compliance test on "Safeguarding Trust in Factual Drama".

This is not about defending a comic's right to make rude jokes about the "Queen's pussy". Although if it's funny, I'll defend it to the hilt.

This is about still being prepared to commission programmes in every genre that break some form of mainstream convention or conformity.

Let me give you a few examples on air on the Channel 4 network at the moment or coming up in the next couple of weeks or so.

Race: Science's Last Taboo, a season that explores the secretive and controversial subject of science and racial difference.

A drama documentary called **The Execution of Gary Glitter** that confronts viewers with uncomfortable moral questions about the death penalty.

Steve McQueen's arts film **Hunger**, which gives a human face to terrorism

Peter Osborne's forthcoming **Dispatches** on the Israeli lobby, a film that I suspect will be viewed as highly controversial in some quarters.

A politically incorrect comedy drama, **Cast Offs**, which we hope will do for television's portrayal of disability what *Queer as Folk* did for gay men.

And **Embarrassing Bodies**, an incredibly arresting series that tries to break down the convention of silence that characterises British attitudes to illness.

[PAUSE]

Of course, Channel 4 is not immune to the relentless pressures that are squeezing risk out of our broadcasting system. We have to earn every penny we spend. That has meant an increasing number of repeats. And acquisitions. Commissions that are not going to win prizes for originality. Longer runs of proven hits.

Which brings me to **Big Brother**.

When it arrived on Channel 4 it was genuinely revolutionary, epitomising that spirit of intelligent provocation I've been talking about. *Big Brother* has been television's

most influential programme in the intervening decade. It has changed not just the forms and conventions of the medium, but of popular culture as a whole. I am immensely proud of my association with the programme.

But, as the years passed and competitive pressures intensified, the temptation to commission longer runs proved irresistible. The show became less pioneering just as it began to dominate our identity, eclipsing so much else that Channel 4 did. Our former Director of Programmes, Tim Gardam, told me that it is like having a willow tree in your garden. Spectacular. But nothing can grow in its shadow.

Those commercial pressures, which once prompted Channel 4 to commission 18 weeks of Big Brother in a single year, are not going to become any less relentless. In the last three years we'll have taken almost £150 million out of our programme budget. Our editorial spend will never again approach this high.

But the optimist in me sees a silver lining in this state of affairs. It sets out the choice facing Channel 4 in the starkest possible terms. We can either continue playing the percentages, gradually diluting our distinctiveness, managing decline as slowly as possible. Or we can trust to the instincts that have served us well in the past and do everything possible to defend Channel 4's unique cultural role.

I am not being naïve. I know how difficult it is to engage audiences in these ultra competitive times, particularly with programmes requiring a little effort on their part. But I genuinely believe if Channel 4 retreats into conservatism we will cease to be a meaningful cultural force. Putting a premium on intelligent provocation, irrespective of financial circumstance, is our best hope of staying afloat.

It is in this spirit the decision to end Big Brother was taken. At a stroke we have freed up millions of pounds and 230 hours within peak in 2011. The decision won't generate extra revenue but it will allow us to spend our existing funds much more flexibly. It represents the biggest creative reinvention in our history.

[PAUSE]

Anyone expecting me to be any more prescriptive tonight about our future plans is going to be disappointed. Too much prescription is the enemy of invention.

But, believe me, I do want to communicate a genuine and renewed determination to experiment with different ideas; to identify new orthodoxies to question; to discover new ways to take the mainstream out of its comfort zone.

We must spurn any temptation to relive past glories, as so many in television now do. This is a moment to be more focused than ever on reaffirming our credentials as Britain's most forward looking, contemporary channel.

And it's never been more important for Channel 4 to muster its resources to do things of real cultural importance that, for whatever reason, others can't or won't. For example, drama from the alternative, authorial voices that appear to be getting drowned out in a conformist sea of soaps and cops and medics.

That's why we've announced a doubling of our original drama budget for 2011 and a range of new commissions that demonstrate our ambition: from a four-part serial based on Shane Meadows's BAFTA winning film, **This Is England**, to a new Peter Kosminsky mini-series on the Israeli Palestinian conflict.

When I talk about *intelligent provocation*, the real danger for Channel 4, in a fully digital world, is that we lose our connection with the mainstream and with it our power to influence the wider culture. With that in mind we must recognise that in a world of infinite choice viewers increasingly look to TV for entertainment. That means, in a world without *Big Brother*, a step change in the amount and range of entertainment programmes we commission. But it also means that we need a lot more programmes that have social purpose at their heart but which are also unambiguously entertaining. Programmes like **Embarrassing Bodies**, **Sex Education**, **Secret Millionaire**, **How the Other Half Live**, **The Family**. As disruptive and revealing as any social documentary, but which can more easily bring millions of viewers to them.

It is not possible to provoke anyone if you are being ignored.

In that spirit, we must also confront the danger that some of our most demanding-to-watch programmes could fall off viewers' radar in a blitzkrieg of almost infinite entertainment choice. So we must think radically about how we tackle important stories in a way that makes a bigger impact. A deeper, more memorable connection with viewers, across all the platforms on which we operate, without compromising our values.

Last week we broadcast a cutting edge called **Katie: My Beautiful Face**. It was a harrowing film about a young woman recovering from a horrific acid attack. It was anything BUT entertaining. Yet, 3.5 million viewers watched it. Afterwards we were inundated with calls from people profoundly moved by what they saw.

It shows us the way forward. An unforgettable story, brilliantly told and boldly promoted, *can* still connect with mainstream audiences, however 'difficult' the subject matter.

[PAUSE]

There is a real sense of new beginnings at the channel. New Chairman. New Chief Executive. New schedules in a post Big Brother world. And all this at a time when we stand on the cusp of new era in society at large.

We are facing an election and the possibility of a new political orthodoxy. The election of Barack Obama has shifted the geo-political goalposts. We are considering new economic realities and ushering in a new information age. We are questioning a lot of the old certainties.

It is a time tailor made for Channel 4 once again to reinvent itself. We have always been at our most influential in the midst of profound social change. Playing the role of *intelligent* provocateur. A champion of arresting, non-conformist, brave ideas that take our viewers outside their conventional comfort zone.

Thank you.