

Preface

The pace of change in British media is breathtaking. By 2012, the analogue television world into which Channel 4 was born will have disappeared. To some, the very notion of television – with its reliance on content commissioned by a privileged few, organised around fixed linear schedules, and consumed in large numbers by an audience historically starved of choice – will be superseded by the vast choice of content and services online.

When there is more content available than ever before; when even the most obscure niches have their own space online; and when low barriers to entry encourage innovation from a global pool of creative talent – is there any place for an organisation like Channel 4? Or will it merely be a relic from the twentieth century?

When Channel 4 launched in 1982, its purpose was clear – it was expected to broadcast programmes that catered to audiences not served by the BBC or ITV. It made programmes that were innovative and distinctive, and which recognised the diversity of a changing Britain. It gave voice to a new generation of creative talent, and was the initial catalyst for independent production in the UK.

But in this world of plenty, can Channel 4 still add anything to the mix that is not readily available elsewhere? And – given that the operating model that has served Channel 4 so well is fast becoming unsustainable – is its contribution to public service broadcasting worth saving?

This document grows out of an extensive nine months of research and dialogue with thousands of people from every part of the UK. The process has given us a clearer picture than we have ever had before of what people expect from Channel 4 and what they value most about our output and approach. The results are very encouraging. Despite changes in the consumption of digital media, television is still seen as having a unique power to engage with large audiences and influence social change. And Channel 4's values remain clear and distinct – it is seen as being different, diverse and independent, prepared to take risks and challenge the consensus. People told us, very emphatically, that we bring something unique and important to Britain's media mix, and they want us to go on doing so. And they expect our content and services to be available in new forms of digital media.

Channel 4 has to operate to the highest standards of public accountability. Following last year's controversies across the whole of broadcasting – including Channel 4 – we have asked hard questions about the organisation's fundamental role, and whether, on occasions, we have

fallen short of expectations. Our research shows that viewers welcome the challenging, provocative and sometimes controversial programmes that Channel 4 shows. Our willingness to push boundaries is one of our core strengths. But they were very clear that Channel 4 must never shock for its own sake. Nor should it ever abuse the trust of viewers or participants in its programmes – they expect the highest standards of integrity from Channel 4 in everything that it does. Important lessons had to be learnt in 2007, and we are fully committed to meeting ever-higher expectations of accountability and transparency. We need to become more responsive to our audiences' wishes, and work harder than ever to ensure we have their full respect and trust.

The Channel 4 Board has developed what it believes to be an exciting vision for the organisation, building on its traditional core strengths in television to deliver public value across a growing range of digital platforms. While the individual elements of the remit – the commitment to innovation and diversity, and so on – remain as relevant now as they were in 1982, we have articulated for the first time a set of core public purposes that capture in greater detail the end value of Channel 4's activities.

We believe that if we get this right, the coming age of ubiquitous media, user-generated content and social networking, however challenging, could yet turn out to be a golden age for public service content and the values that underpin it.

Channel 4 is an organisation that lives by the disciplines of the market, and this should not change. But Channel 4's ability to deliver its remit has always required public support, and Ofcom and LEK's analysis last year confirmed that we will continue to need some kind of support in the future. This would represent a small proportion of Channel 4's income, just as it always has done. And it would be more than justified by the public value that Channel 4 delivers to viewers, to the creative economy and to society.

Our aim in this document is to give a clear sense of our ambitions for Channel 4 in the future, as we respond to the rapid pace of change, and as the Government and Ofcom begin their important reviews of public service broadcasting in a converged world. We believe that Channel 4 can play as important a role in the digital age as it has in the analogue world over the last 25 years. We hope others share our vision, and will help us to achieve it.

Andy Duncan, Chief Executive
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