

Channel 4  
**NCA Briefing**  
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**Discussion on Programming**

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**Dorothy Byrne**

**I. Overview of Current Situation**

First of all, I would just like to give a bit of an overview. It has been another really fantastic year for the department and we have won a lot of awards. You have made some wonderful programmes for us and everybody at the channel is really pleased with the way that things are going. This has also been the year that Julian returned – which we are very pleased about - and he has said that on top of what we do, he wants us to do other programmes and, in fact, is looking for quite a bit more from our department. We will therefore want to get that from you. This year may or may not be the year that we launch radio. If we do, I am sure that you will be able to make a lot of money from it. People often comment on how wonderful radio is for independent production companies.

Basically, therefore, as an overview, we have 41 hours of *Dispatches*, which are mainly domestic, but with a significant foreign input. We also have *Unreported World*, although all of it is made by one company and *The Insider*, which is also made by one company. Julian wants us to make more one-offs and some series, and we will also be doing *Right To Reply*, which will be half an hour a month on screen, although it will also have a major web presence, and everyone can pitch for that if they wish to. We are really open-minded about what that would be like and you should think in a really imaginative way about what would be a modern, contemporary approach to *Right To Reply* for an era in which certainly not everybody will have watched all the programmes that you will be talking about. In the old days, you could assume that everybody who watched *Right To Reply* had seen the programmes that were being covered. However, that is just not the case today, so that might mean that we have to cover things in themes, for example, rather than just talk about individual programmes. We would really like to see some exciting ideas on that.

[Video presentation]

**Participant**

The situation is getting quite critical.

**Participant**

On *Dispatches* tonight, the story of the Battle of Qorumsa[?] – the six-day battle that the Ministry of Defence did not want you to see, the battle that raises questions about Britain's war on terror in Afghanistan.

**Participant**

Tonight on *Dispatches*, an ideology of bigotry and intolerance spreading through Britain with its roots in Saudi Arabia... on women's rights... gay rights...and holy war.

**Participant**

This is a man who has not earned his position, has got there by inheritance, who is influencing policy and the Government secretly.

**Participant**

Tonight, *Dispatches* reveals serious questions being asked about the heir to the throne and uncovers real fears that the Prince is unfit to rule.

**Participant**

So, what sort of Prime Minister are we going to get? The heart of the answer to that is a puzzle thrown up by our research – the contrast between the cold antipathy often perceived by colleagues and officials and the warm private man known to his closest friends. Even Gordon Brown's critics readily accept that he is a man of huge substance. The question mark is about his character and methods in power.

[End of video]

**Mark Roberts****II. Foreign Coverage****1. Reporting on the War on Terror***a. Programmes to date*

I think that you can identify all of those fine programmes that we have made on *Dispatches*. However, I think that you can see very clearly that in the DNA of what *Dispatches* is, the foreign coverage is an enormously important strand. As I am sure everyone has noticed, the key to what we have been doing with the foreign coverage is the war on terror. We therefore have made many excellent films about Iraq, including, most recently, the award-winning *Death Squads*, with Deborah Davies, as well as very significant films made about Afghanistan, where this year alone

we have had *Fighting the Taliban* and *Meeting the Taliban*, both with Sean Langan, and *Afghanistan Unveiled*.

The important thing here is that we feel that we have set the pace on the coverage of the war on terror and that we are not going to tell the same stories over and over again. We will be looking for new angles, perspectives and countries where we should be telling the story of the war on terror. It is also important that what we are reporting is often the extraordinarily unvarnished truth. For example, what Sean Langan did out in Afghanistan was an extraordinary piece of reportage. However, we can use space outside of the Dispatches schedule to do things that are not possible to report on prime time news. We have therefore made programmes such as *The New Face of War* and *Jihad TV – The True Face of Occupation*, where we show extraordinary footage showing the grim, unvarnished reality of what it is actually like for those countries living under the war on terror.

We are also able to take a very steadfast, clear-headed forensic approach to the war on terror. We have therefore made programmes such as *The Iraq Audit*, revealing what it is like for people in Iraq in terms of the state of the hospitals and what it is like giving birth, for example. Additionally, *Iraq's Missing Billions* took a somewhat rigorously analytical forensic accountancy approach to the situation there and looked at where the reconstruction money is going, trying to find the bridges and hospitals that we say are being built. That is the kind of forensic, detailed analytical film that will fulfil our portfolio of *grande reportage*.

*b. Next steps on the war on terror*

However, I suppose that the question for now is where do we go next with the war on terror? While we will return to Iraq, as and when it is important, where should our next focus be? Should it be a thematic or geographical focus, for instance? *Unreported World* did very well and I would like to thank Roger for his excellent analysis of that fine programme. What are the other places that we should be looking at for al-Qaeda's frontline which will help us tell the most important stories in the wider story of the war on terror? Are they inside or outside the Middle East?

## **2. Other Foreign Coverage**

Beyond the war on terror, foreign coverage is obviously also extremely important to us. There are hugely important stories that are rarely, if ever, told, not because they are not important, but because they are stories that are extremely hard to tell. That is why we have done films about North Korea, Burma and Chechnya, and we would be very interested if you came across a brilliant journalist or a fantastic contact and had some actual footage from a country where there are some really important stories that are very difficult to tell. Just because these countries are being neglected by the main news agenda does not mean that we should also be neglecting them.

## **III. The Iraq Commission**

I would finally like to look quickly at something that Dorothy will talk about more fully later. We are just in the second day of what we are calling the Iraq Commission and are gathering together a panel of 12 commissioners, co-chaired by Tom King, Baroness Jay and Paddy Ashdown, to map out what they consider independently and in a non-partisan manner should be the future of the British position in Iraq. This is happening now, with four hours of evidence being streamed every day for the next 10 days, and it is an extraordinary gesture towards just how seriously we are willing to treat this and how much time we are willing to give to a subject that really deserves it.

**Dorothy**

Obviously, we do not know what will happen in Iraq over the next year, so it is quite difficult to plan programmes. However, it is important that we try. Would anyone like to ask a question at this point?

**Participant**

Is South America and area of interest?

**Dorothy Byrne**

Possibly but it is really hard to get the audience interested in it. If you could get the audience interested in South America, you would definitely be a winner.

**Mark Roberts**

I think that there is a very big difference with South America in that people in Britain do not necessarily have any significant links to the region, as would be the case with the Indian sub-continent, for example. It is therefore always difficult for us to wrestle with that. Every now and again, an idea comes in on Hugo Chavez, but it does not normally get through.

**Dorothy Byrne**

I think that it is hard to be really original about China. There is a certain sameness about stories coming out of China and while we feel that it is an extremely important country, there is a limit to the number of stories that you can do on the environment and AIDS, for example? That is a big challenge for us. However, we are interested in places where no-one else is going.

*World in Action* traditionally only did foreign stories where a British company was doing something questionable and that would be quite useful to aim for. I think that we probably do not do enough about British companies and what they are up to. That interests people. There have been a couple of fair trade stories at a middle type of level that people have done recently and those have obviously been of real interest. While these were not very big stories, the whole issue of people trying to be ethical consumers or trying to be green is wonderful territory. However, it is difficult to get a 49-minute film out of it. Nevertheless, it is wonderful territory and anything about people lying about being green is a great topic.

**IV. Domestic Coverage****1. Types of Programme**

Obviously, under cover remains incredibly important for us and we probably need some more under cover ideas, particularly ideas that will rate and, ideally, make a bit of a breakthrough. This might be either looking for new places or going back to some of the ideas that have been successful before and re-examining them. A couple of the most successful areas where we have gone under cover have been about airlines and you should not therefore be afraid to think again about some of the obvious areas. We do not want to become more and more obscure and you should therefore really brainstorm some good under cover ideas.

Programmes on gambling and measles, mumps and rubella (MMR), for example, are real traditional investigations with documents. Investigation is not all about going under cover. I loved our MMR film because it was based on months and months of proper investigative work.

We will probably do more reactive *Dispatches*, like *Bin Wars*. These are relatively simple to do and while other channels might do similar things, *Bin Wars* was good because it was a good, populist issue, with a big policy issue running underneath about the nation's failure to deal with rubbish. We are definitely interested in two-parters for *Dispatches*, like *Supermarket Secrets*. I think that two-parters work very well.

We are also definitely interested in stunts. *Bin Wars* had a small stunt where half the street gave up their rubbish after one week and the other half gave it up after two weeks. In the programme on asthma, we showed that the answer is not in all the drugs that the drug companies are selling to a lot of children, but a radical regime of cleanliness. That sort of subject where we are actually doing something is of interest. A number of years ago, we did *Can You Live Without?* and if you look at a great deal of what people are doing at the moment, it is just re-doing *Can You Live Without?* However, I think that that was a very successful format for us and we are very interested in trying out a format on a *Dispatches* programme and, if it works, turning it into a series. That is one of the things that Julian would really like us to do.

## 2. Ideas for the Future

Looking at what we know is ahead up to the end of December, we could do with some highly populist programmes. For us, a highly populist programme needs to go just that bit beyond a pure consumer agenda. It must have some substance.

Mark will talk in a moment about polemical journalism, but a lot of those programmes did not have a presenter. I think therefore that everyone has a good idea that we do not need a presenter, having said that, if you have a great idea for a new presenter, we are always on the lookout for new faces. Peter Osborne makes programmes for us and you have a good idea for him. Antony Barnett has joined us from *The Observer* as a full-time staff reporter and does really excellent investigations. Deborah Davies also does investigations and Jon Snow makes some programmes for us. We used Jane Moore on *Supermarket Secrets* and I think that she worked quite well for us. However, we are definitely looking out for presenters who will draw people into a subject, but they need to have real credibility. Joanna Lumley is offered to us quite often, although I do not know if she is even aware of it. Marvellous as she is, that is not quite what we are looking for.

**Mark Roberts**

## V. Opinionated Journalism

### 1. Strong, Serious Presenters

I would now like to talk a little about that kind of opinionated journalism and how it works for *Dispatches* and other programmes. We saw some of these things on the tape – Peter Osborne doing *Gordon Brown, Fit for Office*, Peter Hitchens doing *David Cameron, Toff at the Top*, and Andrew Dilnot doing *Gordon Brown's Missing Billions* are three very different examples of how you can have strong, argumentative, opinionated journalism within *Dispatches*. One of the other strands that we run with Mentorn and Raw on *The Insider* is that all the programmes are presented by people who genuinely know what they are talking about. You therefore do not have the sense of

Joanna Lumley, perhaps, in that they are an opinion for hire. That is what you get with Peter Hitchens, Peter Osborne and Andrew Dilnot, who are people that genuinely know about their subject and are marshalling the facts to come up with something that might result in an uncomfortable conclusion if you are David Cameron or Gordon Brown. The author and the journalism are working together to provide something that is clear and revelatory and gives a very clear perspective.

Who better is there to analyse Gordon Brown's economic record than Andrew Dilnot? What better way is there to analyse the character of Gordon Brown but to marshal dozens and dozens of interviews, both on and off camera, that can provide what can become the definitive portrait of who Gordon Brown is? Who is better placed than Peter Hitchens to do a dissection of David Cameron and, when photographs are not available, dress up as him in his Bullingdon Club outfit? These are really strong pieces of journalism that are hugely aided by the journalistic pizzazz of the person doing it. They are not just stuck on at the end, but are real people who know what they are doing.

There might be someone like Andrew Dilnot who is an extraordinary professional and an expert within their own field, who can marshal the evidence in a way that nobody else can and you then have something that feels really fresh and is very different from what the BBC does. When the BBC was questioned about this in Edinburgh, they said that when they want this kind of diversity of views they go for user-generated content. As big a fan as I am of a web chat after a programme, what you really hope is that your main journalistic flagship show can provide you with that very strong, clear perspective.

At the same time, we can have a show like *Who Speaks For Muslims*, fronted by Jon Snow, where while it has an opinion, it has not come from the individual journalist, but is the marshalling of the evidence with what is the largest survey ever conducted of exclusively Muslim opinion. It is from that that you find a journalistic revelation. With *Bin Wars*, which was made very recently, fronted by Alex Thomson, again from the News, it was great to be able to see those major faces from *Channel 4 News* on screen on *Dispatches*. These are very high-profile projects and are things that everyone is talking about, with huge amounts of publicity for *Who Speaks For Muslims* and a very significant audience and a lot of publicity for *Bin Wars*. These provide a wonderful opportunity.

## 2. The Subversive Presenter

Looking at our schedule and what we are doing both within and outside *Dispatches*, one of the things that we are probably short of is witty, provocative, subversive presenters. We have Mark Thomas, who recently did *After School Arms Club*, which was a wonderful device of getting older kids to become arms dealers. However, where is the next set of people going to come from? Will they be comedians or people who genuinely, passionately care? You would not just put a subversive comedian on the front of an important *Dispatches* programme. You would want to have someone you genuinely knew and who passionately cared about things and someone you believed. There is no point just having a man in a scarf topping and tailing current affairs. That does not work. You want someone who genuinely and passionately knows what they are doing.

Therefore, if there is someone who can either explicitly on screen, like Mark Thomas, or perhaps behind the camera, but becoming a part of the story, start to be that journalist who can take us there, with a bit of subversive wit, I think that the channel would really benefit from it. It would not necessarily be for *Dispatches*, although that would be a possibility. It is always nice to have someone that you can go on a journey with and it is a wonderful opportunity to be able to use a presenter in an interesting way.

## **VI. The Schedule Ahead**

### **1. Seasons**

Looking at the Channel 4 schedule overall, we have a number of long-running, returning series. While we are delighted to have them, it is always great to be able to break up the schedules with treats and surprises and a season helps you do that. This will not be a rag-bag of things that just broadly hang together. We are looking for something that is tightly focussed, with a very clear human agenda and be something that can touch us and respond to the genuine concerns of people. We really have opportunities there.

We will probably be doing one big season this autumn and possibly two next year, and these can give real focus and attention to a particular subject, which can be experienced from a variety of angles. There could be four or five individual shows in a season, with one possibly being a *Dispatches* programme. What will hold these seasons together is a single subject that reflects the preoccupations and concerns of Britain. These will not be niche subjects, such as five films about Uzbekistan, for example, but will be much closer to the work we did in our seasons on adoption and *Drugs Don't Work*. These seasons need clarity and we want them to be popular and for people to come back to them so that after a few programmes they think that they have something interesting and clear to say and they are more likely to be domestic rather than foreign issues and mainstream rather than niche.

### **2. Campaigns**

We want to have campaigning pieces of journalism in the schedule, as well as campaigning seasons. We therefore need to also have something extremely clear to say there. We might want to raise the awareness of an issue, argue for a change in the law or change our own behaviour. As with seasons, we are interested in subject matters that genuinely touch people's lives and stories with an emotional punch, rather than niche areas. This is much the same as we said about consumer journalism. We can have something that is exciting and popular and directly relevant to people where they can really get something out of it. However, underlying it there must be strong journalistic thought. It must say something important.

You need to think about what that might be. It could be something that you and others feel strongly passionate about and you should have a clear idea about what it is you want it to say.

On both seasons and campaigns, we are open to individual ideas, which could simply be a great individual film. However, you need to be thinking about what it might become and how it might fit into a broader season.

Dorothy Byrne

Does anyone have any questions about campaigning or polemical journalism?

### **Participant**

On the subject of campaigns, could you have imagined Channel 4 doing the kidney donor show?

**Mark Roberts**

There is always a problem with lying.

**Dorothy Byrne**

What was that show?

**Mark Roberts**

They said that they were going to get someone to auction off their kidney to the most deserving person.

**Dorothy Byrne**

I remember. Was that not true?

**Mark Roberts**

No.

**Dorothy Byrne**

I had just assumed that it was tawdry nonsense from one of my rivals. I am rather disappointed. We do not really do fake. I prefer reality.

**Mark Roberts**

I think that if you are going to do fake, you do it about something that is not very important, such as the great unidentified flying object (UFO) hoax. Duping people about things like that always makes us feel slightly anxious. We get quite a lot of ideas where people suggest that we go off and lie to certain groups of people and we always end up saying no.

**Dorothy Byrne**

This is generally the area of *The News of the World*.

**VII. Events****1. The Power of the Event**

However, I think that events are important. Many years ago – and it has been done since - people put real children up for adoption on TV. That is an event, and I think we are really interested in that. We have not been great at campaigning journalism and it is something that we could be a lot better at. I like the Iraq Commission because it is a big event. It is something that you latch on to immediately. In America, they had the Baker Commission and we will have the Iraq Commission here, which was Alex Gardiner's idea from London Weekend Television (LWT). As soon as he told me about it, I said that I wanted to commission it. I instantly saw it as being a big public

service event. However, on the whole, I think that Julian would prefer our event to rate. Nevertheless, there are some things that are just such good clear ideas.

We also did Tony Benn interviewing interviewers. That did not rate enormously, but the idea of Tony Benn interviewing Jeremy Paxman was immediately appealing. That is a little event and we would like to have some things like that.

## 2. Successful One-off Events

We know that Julian really liked *Borrow A Baby* that I did some years ago because he made a whole series on *Borrow A Format*. A one-off event can be wonderful, but it would be great to have an event within a campaigning season and Julian is really keen on us doing seasons. He sees our department as being able to add a bit of grit into the schedule, while still understanding populism.

Examples of the one-off events that we have really liked are *100% English*. Everybody at Channel 4 loved this and every time we have a meeting of Commissioning Heads of Department, they say that we should do more things like *100% English*. In this show, we DNA-tested a whole range of people.

There was also *Fat Man's Warning*, where brought over a very fat man from America and he just walked about warning people not to be fat. This was a very simple thing and while I thought that we had enough fat people's films after that, Julian seems to be very keen on this type of thing. That was also funny because the man walked up and down outside fast food outlets, with placards saying, for example, 'I am a Burger King' and 'Eat Lots of Kentucky Fried Chicken. Look at me. I did.' One of the outlets actually called the police, but it is very difficult to say that someone has libelled you by saying that they eat a lot of your products. That was good fun and I think that we simply do not have enough fun ideas. As a department, the war in Iraq has made us really serious and we need to lighten up a little. I loved Mark Thomas' *Weapons Inspector*, especially when he went to the Royal Palace, although he did not, in fact, tell the police about it, as he had said that he would. That therefore caused a little bit of a problem when he turned up at Buckingham Palace in camouflage. However, other than those tricky moments, that was a great thing to do.

*Camilla*, which Mark just did, rated very well. I think that we said that she was a fine woman, which I liked. I also liked the thing that we did that said that marriage was absolutely wonderful. We also made a programme last year that rated quite well that said the Queen was wonderful. I remember *The Times* asking if Channel 4 had really said that the Queen was wonderful.

While we need controversy, it should not be controversy for controversy's sake, and we need to take risks. However, we know how to make a good programme that rates and I know that all of you also know how to do that. We did *The Killing of JonBenet*, which David Mills made. That was the third time that he made the programme and it always rates. Sometimes I think that we are all a bit snobbish because we are journalists and we think that everything has got to be new. However, the old stories always work.

## VIII. Ideas for Programmes

Julian wants a series from us but, to be frank, it must rate and get attention. A lot of people wonder if the Channel 4 schedules sometimes look a bit predictable and while we could inject some unpredictability to it, on the whole, it would have to be unpredictability that rates. There are therefore a lot of opportunities for our department at the moment and it actually frightens me a little

bit when I think about how much they want from us. However, one thing that I would point out is that we are not really interested in anniversaries, although perhaps Tony Blair could do a series entitled '*I Saved The World*'. I noticed that he said recently that he wanted to end conflict – albeit using his unusual method of invading countries. Remember, then, that we want some fun ideas as well.

I loved the fact that we won the web award at the Royal Television Society (RTS) journalism awards and were shortlisted for the British Academy of Film and Television Awards (BAFTA) for something that cost £40,000, while the BBC – with whom I have no gripes – have hundreds of millions of pounds at their disposal. A really good, simple web idea would be of interest, therefore.

### **Mark Roberts**

Last year, the Sky News took out won, which shows how simple it can be.

### **Participant**

What is the timetable for *Right To Reply*?

### **Dorothy Byrne**

We will start it some time in the autumn, so it would be the next few weeks. You might want to attach an interesting name to it. I think that there is a general feeling at Channel 4 that we probably need that type of thing. I would say that you should think imaginatively and look at how you could organise a really interesting *Right To Reply* site on the Channel 4 website. I cannot give you a definitive answer to that, although I am sure that there must be a really exciting way of doing *Right To Reply* on the web that I have not yet thought of.

### **Dorothy Byrne**

I have always believed that we should do more one-off debates if there is a big controversy, and there certainly are underlying issues. For example, Muslims can feel that every TV programme attacks Muslims, and there may be some truth in that. It is therefore not just about one programme. We have had *Who Speaks For Muslims*, *Undercover Mosque* and *What Muslims Want*, and together, those programmes may be seen as being critical of Muslims. People might want to criticise *Undercover* as a genre and believe that TV is dominated by left-wing, liberal people, such as Peter Hitchens. None of those programmes strike me as being particularly interesting. The challenge here is to make *Right To Reply* interesting.

Ideas for *Dispatches* should go in the first instance to Kevin and we need to reorganise the website a little to take account of Julian's desire for more. At the moment, ideas on things other than *Dispatches* should be sent to me or Mark, depending on who you deal with more while Gideon is working on *Big Brother*. When he comes back, we can have a bit of a re-think on that.

### **Participant**

Are you still commissioning for More4?

**Dorothy Byrne**

We do some things for More4, and as well as More4, I have not mentioned the News Independence Fund. We have done some programmes of *Travels With My Camera* for More4. However, he is really concentrating on doing a big event once a month. He has been doing quite a lot of dramas and we should think about whether there is anything that we could offer that could attract the type of notice that a drama attracts, without being a drama or a drama documentary. However, I am not sure exactly what that would be. While *Why We Went To War* had dramatisation, it was really of a very simply nature. I am not sure, in fact, if he is doing *Travels With My Camera* next year.

**Mark Roberts**

Peter's opinion of *Travels With My Camera* is that they worked for him. He may or may not bring it back. The thing that would get him interested would be the big event that would be the outstanding thing for the month. It could be that he will, in fact, return to *Travels With My Camera*, but that he will do so later.

**Dorothy Byrne**

I think we went through a period when we did not really know what More4 wanted and people tended to send us their ideas on Guatemala. For the time being, I think that you have to assume that Peter does not want anything from our department for More4, apart from a big current affairs event for one of his monthly events. It is really up to you to consider where you might have your highest success rate.

This week, the News Independence Fund got a huge amount of publicity for doing a very simple survey of Muslims. People tend to pitch incredibly complicated, laborious and difficult investigations to the Fund, while something simple is much more likely to work. I know that it is not a lot of money, but if you have a really bright AP, it is a chance for them to have an item on Channel 4 news and that is a real thrill for them.

As there are no further questions, I would like to thank you all very much for coming.

**This Full Transcript was produced by Ubiquis Reporting ☎ (+44 20 7269 0370)**