

Channel 4
Channel 4 Briefing
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Introduction

Angus MacQueen
Head of Documentaries

I. Outline of Presentations

I want to talk about our range as a department, illustrated over the past year with feature-length docs like *Lie of the Land* and *Breaking up with the Joneses*; the new format *Secret Millionaire*; the astonishing film *The Seven Sins of England* that I hope half of you hated and half loved; and Jane Treay's series about children. We have had a run of Three Minute Wonders, as usual, and Kate Vogel will talk about what she wants next year. We have a new talent strand this year that will be repeated next year.

I know there has been a hiatus on commissioning. There was a slow down at the turn of the year and we now have a new boss; this affects how decision making happens. I know this is difficult and apologise. We try to be as straightforward with you as possible.

II. Headlines

Headlines for you today are things that I mentioned last year; it takes time for them to come back. One is that we as a department lack a face or two. BBC2 has done well with faces this year: Stephen Fry, Parry on *The Tribe* and others. We had Tony Robinson in Simon's film on him and his mother, but we do not have anyone else. We are on the search and that will be more concentrated.

We want the follow-on from *Secret Millionaire*, which Meredith Chambers and Sarah will speak about. Though there has been a commissioning hiatus, this means that we have many more gaps and slots for next year than when I joined a year ago. There is work on offer here and I hope that you find the department accessible. The big thing to say is that there is a wide range of tastes to deal with: Meredith, Simon Dickson, me, Sarah Mulvey, Kate and now Jan represent an astonishingly different group of people. We are here to explore your best ideas.

Documentaries 1

Meredith Chambers
Commissioning Editor, Documentaries

I. Overview

I look after Cutting Edge and feature singles and am on the hunt for series and formatted series. I would like to show you a tape of programmes from the last year which has been quite lively and wide ranging.

[Video]

The tape demonstrates the range in what I do. I am keen to protect this, which the success of these programmes allows.

II. Cutting Edge

1. Preamble

We are in the middle of a longish run of 10 Cutting Edge documentaries at the moment, expanded from an original five. There will continue to be longer runs. Kevin and now Julian continue to be keen on a number of strong single films in a run rather than bits and pieces, and we must make clear to the public that Channel 4 is the home of the single documentary. We are about five films in, all very strong, directors' films. They are free to make the films as they want to, and this is one of the key distinguishing factors. I hope they do not feel like magazine articles with pictures, or as though they are made in a prescribed way. They have done well in terms of how people have liked them, but not how many people. This is frustrating, though they have not been unpopular. We need to be certain in the future that what we commission will do good business for us. Otherwise, the situation of Cutting Edge being alive and well with space to commission is under threat.

2. Risk

The quality of a good Cutting Edge – apart from interest in the wider world and a sense of curiosity about the human condition – is an element of risk. Sue Borne made a film last year called *Wedding Days*. It looked secure in the sense that it was based on past-tense interviews. However, there was a risk, since we asked 30 people to talk about what made a successful marriage and did not know whether they would be able to or not. They had all appeared on the same page of a local newspaper, and there was a risk in whether ordinary people could tell good stories. In films like *Blind Young Things*, would we be able to find narratives in the lives of blind adolescents over three or four months? We did not know at the start what the end would be. I want films to have that sense even if it is implicit rather than overt. The viewer can only go on a journey if the director did.

3. Past-tense Stories

I am not receiving many past-tense stories, probably because the speed at which the media jumps on stories means that there are few that are past tense. *The Black Widow* two or three years ago had a sense of fun and was a brilliant, clear, simple story. There are no past-tense stories in the current run, and I think it would have been stronger if there had been. However, this is not a place to redo old murder or crime stories. They need a single headline aspect that puts a smile on your face, or to be a story that is so clear in your head as to what it represents that we are confident the viewer will come. We do not have enough present-tense adventure stories. We have quite a few anthology or phenomenon stories. An unforgettable experience for the viewer is to see one or two people going on one adventure that is singular and particular to them; going on it with them stays with you.

4. Humour

As you will hear time and time again, I want funnies because the ones you remember are those that put a smile on your face even when you read about the idea. In the hands of a gifted film maker, it is easy to ensure there are smiles; *Blind Young Things* had many memorable smile-inducing moments, but perhaps the audience did not come in the numbers we would have liked because they did not realise we could make popular films about almost anything. We need more that are overtly seductive to the audience in terms of promising a good time.

III. Feature Documentaries

I am also always interested in 'grand conceits' like the idea of asking ordinary people from the streets of Romford to talk in ancient verse in a pub. That film became *The Seven Sins of England* is a crazy idea that nobody understood for most of the year Joe Bullman was making it. Fortunately, he was talented enough to pull it off. These strange feats of documentary making do not come along often, but the key is that there is a sensible element to making them. They need to reveal a greater truth about the subject in the merging of genres. This was true of Joe's film in the sense of re-engaging in a conversation about the white working class and where they think they have come from and are going.

I am interested in trying to find smart, quirky, one-off feature-doc ideas as 60s or 90s. They should have the qualities of innovation, methodological enquiry and be instantly interesting to the audience rather than particularly difficult or dark just because we are the documentary department. They should feel that they could be popular, but I would be happy to feel I was taking more risks. I am interested in putting seed money into an idea – a journey that a member of the public is going on – even if it fails after spending x pounds because there was not a film there after three weeks.

IV. Formatted Series

I am just as active in looking for formatted series as some of my colleagues. *The Secret Millionaire* was a success last year. I was particularly pleased to find a formatted series with an interest in the wider world rather than the small, domestic, internal world of the home. It tried to engage with real issues in a popular, formatted way. In the second episode, an asylum feature made a joke and it was the first time I had seen an asylum seeker not in profile or being victimised or vilified. This type of format brings humanisation when it works. I would like to find more formats in the wider world or perhaps the home that capture how our viewer might like to live or is dreaming of living. Rather than being dark or dysfunctional, our audience is increasingly wondering about the type of world they live in and taking responsibility for it. We need to find formats that inform and take our

audience and the contributors on a journey that investigates the world they live in now and of the near future. Our viewer as a consumer, participant and modern person with responsibilities needs to feel connected to the film.

Some of you may know about Andrew Mackenzie's *Dumped* where people live on a waste site and *The Baby Borrowers*. As well as stripped down, bare bones series where one simple conceit turns the world upside down like *The Secret Millionaire*, I would be interested to hear about popular big conceits and constructs like *Dumped* where we take on equally important issues in a way that has more entertainment sensibilities and more fun about them. I am doing a show for E4 that is a surprise wedding show, though more tasteful than that sounds. It will be fun, big and brash, but I hope that because it is made by documentary people with documentary sensibilities, it will surprise people and be as interesting about modern marriage as it is entertaining.

V. Observed Series

Along the same lines, I am interested in bringing together a body of work in terms of more traditional observed series. In three or four months' time, we have one about the family courts, an extremely hard-won piece of access that will comprise a three-part series called *Mum Versus Dad*. That should have the scale and intention of a piece of classic, observed documentary with never-before-seen access. I want to build a rolling programme of such films. We should be reasonably certain that once every quarter or third of a year, we have a proper act of landmark documentary making in three or four parts. We should borrow from advances in new technology and techniques in soap-doc making to ensure those series feel not only landmark, big, important, political and social, but also that they will be entertaining, so we can feel excited about how many people we bring to it. We can then look at four to six parts, and schedules with larger blocks of documentary as well as features and factual entertainment.

VI. Contact

Feel free to email me through eWorks. I shall attempt to achieve a quick turnaround, especially as I know that we are in the same market as other channels and departments for your best ideas.

Documentaries 2

Simon Dickson

Deputy Head of Documentaries

1. Scale

I would like to start by looking at what I have commissioned and have coming up.

[Video]

That was a selection of recent and forthcoming pieces. A wind of change is blowing since we have a new boss. I am wondering what would be useful to tell you about how his instincts overlap with ours. There will be a premium on ideas with scale. Scale is a word like risk that we use a lot and is difficult to define. Over the last three or four years, there have been some killer and some less brilliant formats. Our department has done well by capitalising on the mood for a good documentary single, but I think that we need to do more in terms of formats. We were once known for *Wife Swap* and *Faking It*. There was an internal shuffle, people moved and they are now run out of factual entertainment. In terms of our output, we are a little reliant on singles. We all love singles and we are not going to stop making them. They often grow into series and you can make an enormous impact with them; they fill our hearts. However, I am convinced that with Julian's experience of scale, he will try to bring that packaging method to how we do things. This does not mean everything needs to be factual entertainment with four to six episodes. It does mean we should look at how to make things bigger, and not always craft the perfect single at the expense of something larger.

In earlier conversations, the words narrative and drama came up a lot. However, we can make films that are more about portraiture or slice-of-life, taking a peek at something. That can be beautiful, sweet and live long in the memory, but how we package things will be more important than ever: how we title and group films together. The *Troubles with Old People* series last spring started as one film that became two; then *Zig Zag* contributed a two-part format and we had a season. That will become a prominent way of working on the channel: we will look for ways of expanding a single. We want to be a department that says something about the world through the programmes we show. We want to give singles more impact and scale. This is how our sensibilities interface with Julian's, who will contribute an eye for detail and scale to what we do.

II. Individual Talent

Regarding my own output, there was a clip from an upcoming show with an economist called Noreena Hertz, a very interesting new talent. She is doing a programme in which she is trying to blag £1 million from every footballer in the premier league to create a nurses' hardship fund. It is a sweet, interesting film that appeals to me because you cannot do nursing or hardship without talent. I would be keen to have open-ended conversations with you about individuals you have seen and think are good who could unlock an idea or territory for us.

III. Past-tense Stories

The Hostage Tapes that Firefly did in February was a past-tense story, which we have a dearth of. We used to do them a great deal. There was *The Kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart* and *Gridlock* in the Cutting Edge run. We have become a little obsessed with present-day narratives. We have a good touch with and enjoy doing them. What past-tense narratives are worth revisiting, and how should we do it? Tone is important. We might want to do things with a more sardonic, ambiguous or funny take, or a sense of the absurd. Everyone is chasing the perfect multi-part, 9pm, socially-oriented format and that is great, but what else is out there? What is a bit left field? We would like to do things with you that you are passionate about, even if you are unsure where they might go. We can enter into dialogue and give it a whirl. Most important is that we are trying to make an impact and give it scale. We want to give it the ability to connect with the audience. These are demanding times for us in practical television: the rise of multi channels, the internet and video gaming. We must do all we can to take what we believe in to as large an audience as possible.

IV. Only Human and Bodyslock

I am often asked about Only Human and Bodyslock. I do not want to do Bodyslock as a strand as I used to – runs of four to six – but I do want to do good ones when they come along. As with *Fat Boy in Russia*, when we find a good one, we will do it. Only Human is a more complicated question. There have been three runs. We are in a big conversation about how we manage our singles, what we call them and how we package them. It is possible that we may not do separate runs of Only Human as in the past, but I want those ideas because they speak to me and are thought of as my signature area. Though I want to broaden out, good human interest films will always reach out and grab me because I relate to and like commissioning them.

V. Personal Taste and Direction

I have a few things coming this year that were not on the tape and might indicate my personal predilections and the directions I am taking things in. One is *Can't Read, Can't Write* which is a three-part formatted doc by RDF with Phil Beadle from *The Unteachables* in which we help a group of illiterate adults with their reading and writing skills. Another is a semi-formatted show called *Wait Till Your Father Gets Home* from Richard McKerrow and Love Productions which looks at the issue of absentee dads and the breakdown in relationships between them and their children while reuniting them with the kids they left behind. In addition, Jonathan Smith is making *The Family* which is a multi-part observational documentary series about family life in Britain set in one unique family, borrowing quite considerably from technological innovations over the last 12-18 months. It is a big show by Firefly, giving us a microscopic, real-time glimpse of how family life is lived.

I would encourage you to think about individual films, series and formats you are passionate about and nutty stuff. We are not the factual entertainment department; we can do whatever we like based upon our relationships with you and the greater community of people who bring us films. We do not just want to offer up things that we think will work and fit nicely into the supermarket shelves of any modern, popular broadcaster. We need rough edges and nutty stuff; Meredith's *Seven Sins* was head and shoulders above anything else that has been on television this year in that respect. We will not do those every week, but we have to do them. The passion, integrity, social motivation, creativity and innovation of what we try to do through you is going to be what marks us out.

VI. Conclusion

In sum, singles are great, series even better: narrative, drama, punch and impact. Can you format it, make it into a season, make it bigger without making it flabby and pure fact?

Documentaries 3

Sarah Mulvey

Commissioning Editor, Documentaries

I. Preamble

I joined the department in September. I do not have a clip tape or vast back catalogue to talk about so I shall be specific about what I am looking for. I commission formatted documentary series at 9pm, seasons at 9pm, singles at 11pm and also at 9pm and 10pm, and the new talent strand that I am in the process of launching.

II. Formatted Documentary Series

1. Overview

My main priority is formatted documentary series for 9pm to build on the department's reputation for fresh, fun, innovative and intelligent formats. I am looking for formats that are simple, honest and quite documentary in conception. I was struck when making *Brat Camp* by how far it is an observational documentary retold in format grammar. As always, subject areas close to viewers' hearts are important. As a department, we tend to steer clear of derivative mechanisms, over-construction, rule-driven, expert-led programmes, but I was struck by *The Baby Borrowers* which did feel all of those things, but took us somewhere worth going nevertheless. There is room for something startlingly original, that occupies a new space and feels a little left field and absurd. My taste in format is for wind-them-up-and-let-them-go: intervention at the top, action played out in the real world and with a genuine outcome.

2. Format Territories

The question we are all juggling is what the new spaces for these format territories are. I have always been struck by how it does not come down to a single territory, but to a collision between two worlds. The most successful formats introduce one world to another: the badly-behaved teen to the cowboy. This is a key way to anticipate social change since such fusions often tell us about where we are going. I would ask you what worlds we have not yet merged in this way and what the mutual benefit would be, in order to find a social purpose. I am interested by a stunt premise at the top of a format: what simulated event or situation could we use to pin down the intangibles of being human in a new way? I would love to find a bold, popular format, something that applies the

principles of the old panel show *Without Prejudice* to an observational documentary in order to scrutinise the process of decision making and the vagaries of personal ethics. I am fascinated by contemporary morality and I think there is something popular and noisy to be made in that space.

On tone with format, Meredith's *Secret Millionaire* taught us all a thing or two about the next generation of format and where to look. There is a new appetite for television which is warm-hearted and with real social purpose. I have a suspicion that nice may be the new nasty; we do not have to be angry and conflicted anymore. As a department, we are keen to use formats internationally. *Wife Swap* magnified the domestic to tell us new things about how we live. What idea or mechanism could do the same internationally?

III. Seasons

I am also looking at seasons at 9pm. Simon and Meredith have talked about how we are thinking as a department about how our singles can punch through, and Simon's *Trouble with Old People* did well for us. I am interested in and planning for 2008 a *Trouble with Men* season. I am looking for contemporary, pithy, modern documentaries that use humour – which is so important – to reach the heart of what I see as a current crisis in masculinity. As the centrepiece of that season, I am looking for a celebrity-authored documentary to do for contemporary manhood what Stephen Fry did for depression and Tony Robinson did for old people. I would also ask what other territories we should explore in seasons. I think there is scope for mini seasons in the way we play strips at 11pm. Current affairs did the highly successful Guantanamo season and I wonder what people – rather than premise-led season – perhaps with a slightly light, campaigning edge – docs should be doing. Please bring us ideas.

IV. 11pm Singles

I am now the main contact in docs for singles at 11pm. I currently commission about six a year in strict weeks. To work in this space, ideas should be salacious, provocative and risky. I am interested in extremes of human behaviour and nature, and there should be a reason these could only play at 11pm. I also want to experiment with formats, and the buzz words are fresh, edgy, dangerous and something that sits perfectly at this time in the schedule. I am looking for cracking one-offs. We have historically played films stripped to a theme in this space and we might change that. Do not just think dark or grim; there is more possibility for levity and humour at 11pm.

V. Singles

I will be commissioning a cluster of singles at 9pm and 10pm. My taste is for fractious films. I do not have a back catalogue to refer you to yet, but think about films that defy expectations, surprise and confuse, and that poke fun at neuroses. I like the quirky and absurd, and this will be reflected in the new talent strand I am running. I like films that do not tell us how or what to think. As a department, we are keen to go back to saying something, but not in a way that pushes at an audience but rather begs questions: a film like Hilary Clarke's *Bad Behaviour* several years ago or Jane Trease's *Age 12 and Looking After the Family* which I thought was wonderful. Films do not have to be dark to be fractious. Simon's *Hypochondriac's Holiday* played games with your sympathies and made you smile.

To give you an idea of where I am going, I have a challenging film in development that offers a perspective on pregnancy and the choices women make; it gives us a perspective that we have not heard before. I am interested in unmediated, fresh voices. *Pram-Face* was in that space in the

sense that we felt we were witnessing something we had not seen in that way before. *Seven Sins* did the same in a completely different way with its grand conceit. There is a sense we should be applying modern grammar to breathe life into the social documentary. I think we should also look to technology to help us change the way we tell stories and there is a place for that in formats too.

VI. New Talent

Finally, I look after the new talent strand. I am launching a replacement for *The Other Side*, an eclectic 15 x 30 series of half hours that play on More4 with the best repeating on Channel 4 to showcase distinctive new voices. Half a dozen companies are working with me on those films. This year's autumn run is nearly full, but I would ask you to point your experienced APs or junior directors in my direction in September when I shall be commissioning for next year.

Three Minute Wonders

Kate Vogel

Commissioning Editor, Three Minute Wonders

I. Preamble

I look after Three Minute Wonder, the short film strand that runs after the news every day apart from Friday at 7.55pm. Three Minute Wonder can be seen as a microcosm of the channel and the range and vision should be broad.

You probably all watch and are sent hundreds of clips from You Tube and think, 'Wow, what a fantastic film,' and then go back to work. Please send them to me. I watched his film, got hold of him and he ended up making some films. Three Minute Wonders can be immediate and reactive in terms of trying to find talent and also in terms of subject. I would like to do some things that feel they are reacting to what is happening in the outside world. It would be good to feel we are tackling current issues in a way the news does not. We inherit this intelligent, older audience and I would like to show them films they could engage with but with a different take on news subjects that are wonderfully covered at 7pm.

II. Series

Instead of weeks of films, they are commissioned as a week of four films with a £16,000 budget. I would like to dedicate a whole month to one subject or area, whether a physical space like an estate or a campaign – there were some Three Minute Wonders on giving blood called *Blood Matters* which were very effective and made the headlines. I would be very interested in something that dealt in those areas.

III. Three Minute Wonders and FourDocs

Returning to the internet, I am trying to link up Three Minute Wonders and FourDocs more effectively. I would love you to tell your talented APs and film makers to post up their short films on FourDocs, which I am sure they make on the side anyway. Sarah and I discuss connecting the new talent lab with Channel 4 because without it we will be left with an ever decreasing pool of directors. It is important to see those first films so do send them to me. The best way is probably to email me at k.vogel@channel4.co.uk.

Angus MacQueen

I would like to highlight a couple of themes before Jan speaks. It seems to me that we are in extraordinary times in terms of documentary, the web and You Tube. A couple of years ago we made a fantastic start with FourDocs and as a department intend to engage with it, I am also interested in challenging you about how we can engage that world out there playing around with us and what we do. I want to think about how we can make the department and channel feel attached to that very young audience going straight to the web instead of the television. Where are the joins? We have had various discussions with people and nothing has quite yet formed, but it is a real challenge.

Secondly, nothing at the moment is too big. There is scale and ambition to get those events, to punch through and for it to be felt that the channel and documentary department exist. What are those very big ideas?

Arts and Performance

Jan Younghusband

Commissioning Editor, Arts and Performance

I. Preamble

I am commissioning editor for arts and performance. I shall introduce what I do before the whole department performs the final scene from *Mamma Mia*. I am pleased to be joining the documentary department. I am still doing what I do, but for reasons of reporting lines in the channel and because I am a department of one, they thought that I would be happier attached to a family which is going to be the documentary department. I am very excited about that, and I see it as a new beginning that I hope will inspire me to great things.

II. Overview

Julian and I have not talked about arts yet so I do not have any big, future message today. By June we shall know more, so we can chat about it then. I shall talk about what we do and try to do,

which is summed up by startling impact. We try to do totally brilliant things that impress everybody, that drive the business and innovation, that are incredibly brainy, win lots of prizes and are watched by millions of people; simple, really. The arts have this stultifying label of public service broadcasting which makes you feel you are doing the bit tacked on the end after the interesting stuff has happened. We take the role of innovation seriously, so we do not do coverage. Mariella Frostrup has told us off in *The Independent* today for not doing anything, but what she has failed to understand is Channel 4's crucial role to innovate everywhere but especially in arts. This determination to innovate created *Operatunity*, *Musicality* and many of the new genres of arts programme picked up and copied endlessly by everybody else.

The best things we have done and achieved started by seeming totally impossible: the 'fuck me' factor. This means you go to Glyndebourne and say, 'We just want to do this and that,' and they say, 'Over my dead body.' A sign I am on the right track is when the Tate rings me and says, 'You are never going to do that, it won't work.' When I receive that call, I know we are doing the right thing. We also like to work with artists and consider the screen to be the canvas. We made Jeremy Deller's film *The Battle of Orgreave* which won him the Turner Prize and we have commissioned Antony Gormley to create the Waste Man which we burnt down last year, part of Penny Woolcock's film *The Margate Exodus*. We like to work with brainy people who can talk to us about art.

III. The Arts and Channel 4

We do not have slots as such at the moment though that might change and I want to talk to Julian about having a regular space for the arts. Whilst we do big things that appear in the schedule, it is a problem for the viewer to not know when they are; they pop up then vanish again. The arts are current affairs, not some dead thing in the past that we should learn about because it is good for us. They are living and of now, and I am fascinated by their social relevance, along the lines of, 'Don't lock me up; send me to ballet school.' I want to commission programmes that fit seamlessly into the Channel 4 schedule. When you watch the winter launch tape, you see all the fabulous things that are done here, and you think, 'I know what is going to happen. An arts programme will happen and I will feel as though I have changed sides.' I try to bring to the arts the sensibility of the channel, which is very important.

IV. Public Service Broadcasting

We have an interesting time in the arts because of this public service label. I do not wake up in the morning thinking I must make a great public service programme today, but the arts are in a dangerous spot. They have slid into a space where they are politically useful. Public service television is changing and if the arts stay locked into that space, they will fall down a drain of worthiness one day. We need brilliant film makers to come forward with exciting, fresh new ideas to bring the arts out of that box which is a bad one to be in though necessary for our political purpose right now. Public service does not have to be worthy in the wrong sense.

V. Clip Tape

I would like to show you a clip tape of things from the past and that are coming up, to give you an idea of the tone of what we do. The new programmes include *Big Art* which is an ambitious new public art series where we ask the general public whether they like a piece of art and hope to build about six pieces of public art around the country and tell the story. Matt Collings' new series *This*

is Civilisation picks up where Kenneth Clark left off and looks at why art matters and what it can tell us about history and the present day. There is a clip of Antony Gormley's *Waste Man* burning down but I do not have a clip of Penny's new *Exodus* film.

Finally, there is *War Oratorio*, an extraordinary piece we commissioned from More4 by James Kent with music by Dominic Muldowney. We were trying to commission a major new music film that looks at war and what happens to people's everyday life during war. Nobody knows what it is because it is so weird, but it is a performance with an orchestra and singers of a brand new piece of music featuring stories about three people in three different war zones, the most dangerous places in the world of Uganda, Afghanistan and Kashmir. It is about what happens over 24 hours to those people, and is shot in real time. Real documentary is inserted into the music performance. I have tried to make a clip that explains what it is.

I am keen to hear from people who have not made arts programmes before or who have an idea of how we should move forward. You do not have to be an arts expert. I would be happy to speak to you, even if you only have an embryonic, mad idea.

Angus MacQueen

I am told that Kevin Lygo should be thinking about these joined-up bits and thinking about what is going on. For those of you who have been to Janey Walker's briefing, education is virtually going on line now so that will be happening to a degree. I am not yet sure how that will impact on us, though clearly we need to be thinking in those areas. Our primary target is to fill the schedules and it would be silly for me to take too much money out of what should be going on screen to put online, but if there is feed back, then I get interested.

Thank you for coming.