

Channel 4 - Events
Specialist Factual Briefing
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Changes in Specialist Factual

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I. Preamble

My name is Ralph Lee, and I am Head of the Specialist Factual department. I recently returned to Channel 4 after a brief sabbatical at Channel 5. It is good to see so many of you at this meeting, and I would like to thank you for attending. Over the next hour we aim to both give you some idea of who we are, and outline our intentions around commissioning new programmes over the coming year. Before we consider the future, I will begin by showing you a clip reel comprising trailers for programmes that we have broadcasted this year.

[Video Presentation]

Those are just a few highlights from the last year of Specialist Factual content. I am very excited to be back at this department in Channel 4, because I believe that Specialist Factual has the opportunity to tell the most interesting stories. We have the best content, and so we should marry that with the most innovative and interesting ways of transmitting it to our audience.

II. Commissioning in the Year Ahead

It is also exciting to come back at this time because the commissioning cupboard is relatively bare, which is excellent news for you. We only have three or four major projects underway for the first quarter of next year, and unlike other departments we do not enjoy a large amount of returning work. That means we have a lot of work to do, and in the coming months we hope that you and the commissioning team can sow the seeds of next year's programmes through the discussions we intend to conduct.

III. Changing Specialist Factual

1. Broad Content

In terms of news, we want to make major changes to the way that the department operates and the range of programmes that we commission. I think that Channel 4's Specialist Factual provision has powerful and obvious strengths, and its broad range of content is perhaps the greatest of them. Watching the clip reel we could see programmes as diverse as Richard Dawkins' polemics against religion, *Human Footprint*, *Empire's Children* and its associated web applications, and innovative

drama-documentaries such as *The Relief of Belsen*. That expresses the extraordinary range of stories that we approach in many different ways.

2. Creating Interest and Controversy

The department has also been good at creating controversy. *The Great Global Warming Swindle*, *Diana: The Witnesses in the Tunnel* and *Bringing Up Baby* are three programmes that have created a storm of interest and controversy over the last 12 months, which is important to our success as a department and as a channel.

3. Shortcomings

a. Distinctive branding

However, I do have major criticisms of our output. Naturally, these are also self-criticisms because I played a major part in creating this situation. Our work lacks large brands and talents to define it, and we need to have programmes that will be visible from afar. With the current issues around fragmentation of audience, where viewers can choose between Natural History, National Geographic, BBC Four, Sky Arts and many other specialist channels, it is ever more important for us to make projects that are large enough to unite terrestrial audiences. That means that we will be chasing the big projects for 9.00pm on weekdays and Sunday evenings as a major priority.

b. Inclusive programming

Too much of our output is extinguished immediately after broadcast, even programmes that we remember very well. A project such as *Human Footprint*, although we are very proud of its success, is a kind of *haute couture* television. We want to be more aggressive in producing a high street version, rather than keeping our content on the catwalk.

4. Innovation

a. Living history

At the same time, we must continue to innovate. It is a terribly clichéd word that commissioning editors always use, but there is a real sense of innovation in our work. However, it may be that we have been stuck in a particular area of development. When it comes to our innovations, people think of living history, so we receive a lot of pitches which involve taking eight people and putting them in a historical situation for a certain amount of time as ‘a unique social experiment, based on the past’.

b. Changing idioms

Those programmes have been hugely successful for Channel 4. *The 1900 House* and its successors were the cutting edge programmes of their time, and they created the kind of big, output-defining brands that I want to be able to broadcast at peak time. However, we have not really moved on, and we are stuck in that idiom of storytelling. I think that there are many other ways of telling stories, and there are other forms of innovation, which I will come on to in a moment.

IV. Five Major Steps

1. Broadening Our Remit

a. New definitional boundaries

In order to address these criticisms there are five major steps that we, as a department, will take. We will broaden the definitional boundaries of what we think this department stands for. Until around a year ago it was a history and science department. Julian suggested that we do more of the adventure-based programmes that are seen on the BBC, such as *Tribe* and *Equator*, and so we became a history, science and adventure department. Consequently we received a lot of pitches that could be seen as the direct heirs of *Tribe*, *Equator*, and *Last Man Standing*. However, I believe that this was not enough, in terms of broadening the scope of our department.

b. Diverse interests

This weekend I was reading the newspaper, and it occurred to me that there is no Sunday supplement that we should not see as a potential avenue for programme-making, whether it was travel, business, jobs, motoring, women, style or culture. Nothing should be beyond the range of Specialist Factual.

c. Changing our reference points

That also means changing the reference points for what we should be interested in. Naturally, we look at programmes such as *Coast*, *Andrew Marr's History of Modern Britain* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* and wonder how we can replicate that sort of success. However, we should also be receptive to a much more diverse range of content, taking in programmes such as *The Gadget Show*; *The Apprentice*; *Kill It, Cook It, Eat It*; and *The F Word*. *Deadliest Catch* now represents greater innovation than the idiom used in *Brat Camp* and *That'll Teach 'Em*, where protagonists are sent on a transformative journey.

2. Creating New Series

Secondly, there will be more emphasis on series than singles. We still have the capacity to do large drama-documentaries such as *The Relief of Belsen*, but the core of our work and our major emphasis should be around trying to deliver large series that can stand out in peak*time. We will discuss those a great deal, and that will be difficult if we allow ourselves to be distracted by single ideas as we have done in the past.

3. Developing Specialist Factual Talent

a. Top academics

Thirdly, we should take a fresh look at the way in which talent operates in the department. On-screen talent defines factual programming in so many respects, whether it is Alan Sugar or Andrew Marr. We have done very well with our professors, such as Richard Dawkins, Niall Ferguson and David Starkey. We really value them, and we will continue to look for the top slice of the academic world. If they are out there, with very strong opinions and interesting things to say, we will still be interested in working with them.

b. Selection criteria

However, beyond the cream of the academic crop, we need to take a hard look at how we work with talent. Too often we receive pitches about moderately interesting academics and writers who have written good books or made their mark at university, and they are usually picked out because they are slightly younger or better-looking than their peers, because they are female, or because they are vaguely presentable on camera. There is a problem with choosing them as our upcoming talent, and we should think more broadly about the subject areas and the range of expertise that we can offer on the channel. We must consider how science, history and all of our other subjects operate in the world around us.

c. Building around our talent

We could work with the country's best surgeon or forensic pathologist in the same way that Gordon Ramsay has had a show built around him as the best cook in the country. Building shows around people who are outstanding in their field of expertise is an interesting way in which we could proceed.

4. Ambitious Propositions

Fourthly, we should be ambitious in the propositions that underpin our shows. The BBC's Specialist Factual output is defined by very simple things, such as *Coast*, *Himalaya*, *Equator*, *Tribe* and other one-word propositions. I think that Channel 4 has often been quite shy about these simple, welcoming propositions because we do not see them fitting well with the identity of the channel. We try to make our programmes fit by complicating the propositions. Instead, we should scrutinise the content to ensure that it fits, while the propositions can still be large, broad and welcoming.

5. Diversity

Finally, to ensure that our programmes continue to feel as though they are a good fit for Channel 4, we must be aware of the need for diversity. This is not just a multicultural point; we need to have a diversity of voices and ideas that shine through our programmes. In a recent discussion we agreed that the worst thing we could do is lose the sense of noise and perspective that defines Channel 4 in a headlong stampede towards the primetime audience.

V. The Commissioning Editors

These are the ways in which I hope, over the coming years, we can ensure that our output will stand out from the work we have done in the past. I will now hand over to the commissioning editors, so that you can understand their areas of interest. They are David Glover, Tanya Shaw and Tabitha Jackson, and they will talk briefly to you. We have also benefited from the services of Liz Hartford, who has been looking after our history programming. I will now hand over to David, who will talk about science.

Specialist Factual and Science

David Glover

Commissioning Editor, Channel 4

I. Changing Science Provision

1. The End for *Equinox*

Thank you. It is good to see everyone, and I am happy to announce that I have been promoted to Commissioning Editor. Let me tell you a story. Recently we broadcasted *The Dinosaur Mummy*, which I was going to call *The Dinosaur Mummy: An Equinox Special*. We received a note from Schedules informing us that Channel 4 no longer makes *Equinox*, so we changed the name. At that moment, I realised that *Equinox* did not exist as a strand anymore, and I was the only person who had noticed. Many of you have made programmes for *Equinox*, which used to be a rival to *Horizon*, and it begs the question of whether this signals the death of science on Channel 4.

2. Creating New Science Brands

It does not, and in fact this is the best possible moment to create a raft of new science shows. We need programmes that will be visible from afar, as Ralph says, so that we have brands that everyone knows. Cab drivers often ask me what I do, and when I say that I am in charge of science here they tell me that they did not realise that there was any science on Channel 4. If that is the case, the situation we are in must change. We want to keep the distinctive style of Channel 4 programmes seen in *The Human Footprint*, *Autopsy: Life and Death* and *Animal Farm*, but in ways which are populist and have the potential to return. As Ralph said, we need to have simple propositions.

II. The Future for Specialist Factual Science

1. Increased Scale

Additionally, we have the opportunity to do something that is bigger than ever before. Imagine having £3 million to do a huge series that would define science on Channel 4, and I do not mean a big *Equinox* or *Cutting Edge* strand but just three or six programmes. With such an empty schedule, that is a real possibility. I would implore you to think on that sort of grand scale.

2. Changing Format

We are also looking at format. Dramatic irony is a term that I have become obsessed with, and that is illustrated by *The Secret Millionaire*, where you get extra value from each scene in the documentary because a protagonist does not realise that they may or not receive money as a result of their behaviour. In *Grizzly Man* the dramatic irony centres on the fact that he is going to be eaten. I would like us to find some way of not being too bound by formats while retaining documentary sensibilities, perhaps with a flavour of dramatic irony. Another good example would

be in *The Lives of Others*, where someone is listening in all the time, and that irony lends a frisson to all of the scenes that follow.

3. Magazines and Shock Documentaries

I would also say that we are looking to make science magazine shows. As a department, and also personally, I am slightly jealous of programmes such as *Embarrassing Bodies*. Those programmes are incredibly successful, gaining 3 million viewers throughout the week, and I feel as though they should have been part of a science series. They are probably saving lives in Britain, too, as people notice that they have growths on embarrassing parts of their bodies and then run off to their doctor. *Bodysock*, along with many other shock-docs, also feature territory that we used to cover and which we have surrendered to other departments. We would like to steal it back.

4. Technology, Medicine and Green Science

Other areas of science are also interesting to us. Since Ralph arrived he has sent me to the Business Design Centre in Islington to visit an exhibition about green and environmental issues. I did feel a little like Boris Johnson when he was sent to Liverpool to apologise, but we would like to find ways of covering the environment in popular and provocative ways. Medicine also feels like something that has been the BBC's territory for some years, and I wonder if there is some way in which we can reclaim medicine. Technology is another area of interest. Channel 5 has *Monster Moves* and programmes like it, but we need to think about what we can do as Channel 4.

5. Retaining a Distinctive Voice

Essentially, we would like to find a few big science series that retain the distinctiveness of Channel 4 programming and place a clear marker in that territory, showing people that the channel can still do science in a big way.

III. Seeking Innovation

I will finish with another story, which I believe concerns Discovery Channel. Apparently the head of the channel called a meeting of all his executives and says, 'I don't want any more sharks.' There is brief silence, followed by a worried murmur as the commissioning editors wonder how they can possibly replace all of their many shark programmes. But their boss continues, 'No, I want shark bites!' which is met with cheers and rapturous applause. I used to tell that story to illustrate what an idiot that man was, but since I became a commissioning editor I am beginning to sympathise with him.

Exploring New Areas

Tanya Shaw

Commissioning Editor, Channel 4

I. Background

1. Wide-Ranging Experience

I am the new girl of the department, having joined in January, so I cannot take any of the credit for the great programmes that we saw in the clip reel. If we are all here next year, however, I will feel some pride watching this year's tape. My programme-making background is quite schizophrenic. I started in current affairs, moved to history and then went all the way through to pure entertainment content such as *Pop Idol* and *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!*

2. Programme-Making History

a. Attracting diverse audiences

I thought it might be useful to tell you about the programmes that I am most proud to have been part of, and I will speak about my sensibilities and the things I will be looking for in my new role in this department. I think that the best programmes are things like *Lad's Army*, *The Apprentice* and *Bringing Up Baby*, which all attract different audiences. In the case of *Lad's Army* it draws in people who like history, those who did National Service, and those who want an entertainment show. I hope that *The Apprentice* can continue to attract a business audience and an entertainment audience, as it did in its first two series.

b. Providing extra content

It is not easy to achieve, but when these programmes work they provide much more than each kind of audience expected when they tuned in, and the result can be a perfect combination of knowledge and entertainment. As Ralph mentioned, programmes that have done this very well for Specialist Factual in the past include *1900 House* and *That'll Teach 'Em*. What we need to do is find the next generation of these attention-grabbing subjects and approaches, and this is something in which I am very interested.

II. Programme-Making Sensibilities

1. Exploring New Areas

My background is not really in history or science, so I am particularly inclined towards the areas that Specialist Factual has not traditionally covered. There is no reason why we should not reflect everything around us, and I have been thinking about subjects such as business, health, immigration and what we eat. I am still interested in history and science, but mostly in the more accessible end of those two subjects.

2. Intelligent Populism

My sensibility is unashamedly populist, but with an underlying intelligence. I want to see big 9pm series, preferably with the potential to be returning programmes, and I am not afraid of taking risks. We are all looking for things that will be noticed, and such a programme can be noticed either by virtue of its scale or its subject matter.

3. Accessing All Areas

Looking at other departments in Channel 4 and comparing them with us, there should be no subject that could not be treated in the Specialist Factual style. For those of you that do not know me, if you have a good starting point for something, do come and talk to me about it. There is always a way to add knowledge and intelligence into even the most entertaining propositions, and I do enjoy developing ideas from small starting points. I will now hand you over to Tabitha.

Co-Production and Diversity

Tabitha Jackson

Commissioning Editor, Channel 4

I. Programme-Making Background

I hate going last, because all the jokes and good information have been used, so I will just offer you an insight into the two areas I will focus on over the next year. First, however, I will talk a little about my background. As a filmmaker I was interested in history and social affairs, and I made a brief foray into genetics with Neil and Archie at Takeaway. I lived in the USA for four years and developed relationships with the US broadcasters, so this is why I will be looking for some of the jewels of co-production that we may have missed in previous years.

II. Co-Production

1. Intelligent Spending

With much of our energy being focused on large original Channel 4 series, we need to use our money intelligently in the rest of the schedule. There are films out there that could fulfil important roles for us, and we may have missed them in the past. Programmes such as *Life After People*, made with The History Channel, are coming up, and we have already broadcast shows such as *Quest for the Lost Ark* and *Dinosaur Mummy*. These are all programmes that can perform and stand alone on a Monday night, we can pay less than the normal tariff to have them and then put the extra money into coming up with really distinctive series for Channel 4.

2. Discussing Co-Production

Please do come to us so that we can discuss co-production opportunities. Do not think that something is too difficult, or that More4 will be an issue, or that you should take your programme

to Channel 5 because the windowing is too problematic. If you think there is a way in which your programme could be a Channel 4 single, that probably means that it will be an iconic programme with subject matter that will instantly pique the curiosity of our audience. The *Lost Ark* was a good example of that. If you have a programme like that, come to me and we can discuss it. Even if the money we invest may be less as part of our plan to facilitate a wider spread of programming, it always helps you to have us showing interest and being on board during development.

III. Diversity

1. New Investment

The second thing that I will mention is diversity, to which Ralph alluded earlier. As a channel and as a department we have been talking intently about it, so please do not roll your eyes. This is a process that I want to begin by speaking to you today. You are probably aware, via the Next On Four deal, that a multicultural commissioner will probably be appointed in the summer. £2 million will be attached to that post, and it will be spent on multicultural projects over the next year.

2. Avoiding Labels

I like to mention that investment, because speaking about the projects only through labels such as 'multicultural' and 'diversity' can be our downfall, making us assume that resulting product will just be something worthy to be screened early on a Saturday evening. That will not be the case this time, because the channel will ensure that only multicultural projects fit for 9pm or 10pm broadcast will benefit from that extra investment.

3. Reflecting Who We Are

As a department, our money is specifically set aside for diversity projects. As a result we need to engage in dialogue with you about what we want diversity to mean. I do not want us to be obsessed with representation, with us counting the number of brown faces on our screens. Diversity can be much more exciting than that, reflecting who we are. It used to be about finding out about those people and how they lived, but it should be about who we are. That is what would make it exciting, and if we can find a mainstream way of doing it we will reap the rewards in terms of audience figures, the Channel 4 philosophy, and investment in what you do.

4. Provocative Ideas

When the *White* season was announced by the BBC my first thought was, 'Why are we not doing that?' My second thought was a realisation that it was because I had not thought of it, so I just focused on the first thought. We should be coming up with that kind of idea, which immediately feels provocative, is relevant to all of us and would be worth tuning in for.

So, my messages for this year centre around big co-productions and diversity. I will now hand back to Ralph.

Summary

Ralph Lee

I. History

In a moment I will field some questions from the floor. However, we have not spoken about history, and I do not want you to think that we will stop making history programmes with the kind of scale and ambition that we have shown previously. History remains at the heart of the channel, and we will screen a Victorian season this summer, a high society season in the autumn and a major series by Niall Ferguson on money later this year. It is still a big area for the department, and we are still very keen on trying to find the next big history projects. Our interest in history is not flagging just because we are diversifying the department.

II. Diversity

1. Securing Diverse Audiences

Secondly, I would like to pick up on Tabitha's point about diversity. Now is the moment for a bold initiative and an exciting step in terms of diversity. The BBC did some research to find out which of their programmes had the highest index of black viewers, and the results showed that it was *Top Gear*. Sometimes answers like this are obvious, and although we tend to view diversity as a marginal thing it may be simply that we need to cast a presenter who comes from a different point of view to cover a mainstream subject to secure more viewers. That is something that Channel 4 should be doing anyway, and at the moment we think it is missing from the channel.

2. Big Opportunities

A little thought about diversity could throw up big opportunities at this time. Last year I made *Empire's Children* with Wall to Wall, and it was a series of which I was very proud. It tried to examine how the modern discussion of multiculturalism cannot really exist without a discussion of the dismantling of the empire. It is a huge subject, and I do not think the programme represented an end to the discussion. British and English identity, multiculturalism and immigration are all huge issues that will not go away within our culture, and we as a department should constantly be thinking about them.

III. Specialist Factual Entertainment

1. Using Entertainment Techniques

Before we get onto your questions, one of the questions that I would be asking in your position is why we do not turn Specialist Factual into a Factual Entertainment department. If we want innovative programmes aimed at a 9pm audience that would seem to be a natural step. However, as I said at the beginning, we have the best stories and we do not simply use facts to make our programmes more entertaining. Instead, we should use entertainment to engage with subjects that really excite us.

2. Big Subjects

If we made *Embarrassing Bodies* the series would be slightly different, naturally, but we do think that we should be covering subjects that are as big and obvious as those covered by those kinds of programmes. Those issues fall within the area of science, and so we feel they are within the remit of our department.

3. Thinking Dangerously

Finally, this is the time for very big ideas. As David said, next year and those beyond it are currently quite empty. Other than *Time Team* and *Scrapheap Challenge* our department does not have the kind of returning business that other departments enjoy, so now is the time to find the starting points for success over the next few years. We want you to think dangerously about what you can do, and on a different scale to the work we have done in the past. That is the brief as I see it, and we now have plenty of time to take any questions.

Questions and Answers

Question

Tabitha spoke about co-production, but only in the context of singles. Were you talking about series as well?

Tabitha Jackson

I mentioned singles because they are at the forefront of my brain, and because they do a particular job. Series are slightly more difficult to co-produce in terms of securing the Channel 4 sensibility.

Ralph Lee

Traditionally we have done better with the big co-produced singles. *The Day of the Kamikaze* was a co-production, as were a lot of our big drama-documentaries such as *The Blitz*, *The Somme* and *Waco*. As Tabitha says, it is easier to make singles as co-productions, but we should not forget *Deadliest Catch* and *Born Survivor*. The former is admittedly an acquisition, but it shows that there are places on Channel 4 where some of those slightly more Americanised programmes can work. *Born Survivor* with Bear Grylls is an example of us doing a programme with Discovery, another UK producer, where the rights are shared.

Our appetite for co-production is greater now than it has been in recent years, and particularly at weekends we have more slots than before. We will look at series as well as singles, it is just harder to get the tonal match that we are looking for.

Question

Outside of the co-production umbrella, how British do you want Specialist Factual programming to be?

Ralph Lee

As a department, broadcaster and country we are phenomenally narrow in our view. I do not think we can change that overnight, but there is a difference between being British in the subjects you cover and being British in your preoccupation. We must recognise that we are a British broadcaster, with a British audience, but Britishness encompasses a diverse range of things, now, so it need not solely entail programmes about white, middle-class people in the Home Counties.

However, there is not much point trying to pick off subjects that are not within a British audience's sphere of interest. I would like to make more international programmes, in terms of history and science. There are opportunities for us to see the world differently, but we have to remember that our audience is British.

David Glover

Perhaps it would be worth saying something about presenters, why we choose them and how they do a job for us?

Ralph Lee

If you look at the channel's Features output they do not have an easy job, but they have a starting point with what Kirstie and Phil, Gordon, Jamie and Hugh should be doing next year. Similarly, the channel's marketing department flocks to talent like nothing else. David was recently successful with the Jacques Peretti series, *What Really Happened?*, and those programmes were much easier to make, market and watch as a result of Peretti's presence. They did not feel like neutral propositions that could have come from any channel at any time.

Biography is just one part of our content, but our whole output can sometimes feel characterless. Our characters tend to be of the rarefied variety typified by Richard Dawkins and Niall Ferguson, and I think it would be interesting to see how we might build other, new talent for the department. Bear Grylls is a slightly difficult fit for Channel 4 but he does feel very new, and his shows make an argument for themselves in a way that programmes without presenters do not.

Presenters are essential, and I think they are the thing that we as a department struggle with the most. We have to start making inroads into this problem. The BBC does not only have a wider range of platforms for its programmes, radio and online content, but it has many more shows where they can grow talent. We do not have enough nursery slopes at the moment, which is one of the reasons that we are looking at magazine shows such as *The F Word*, *The Gadget Show* and *Coast* with real envy. You can bring new presenters through on that sort of programme.

The Features department do it every day, for example by having new talent doing part of *How to Look Good Naked* who might turn out to be next year's presenter. So far, as a department, we have not been able to do that. We have seen people like Bethany, Neil Oliver, Richard Miles, Francis Prior and Alice Roberts circulate through our programmes without having the platforms to grow them as characters. That is one of the reasons why varied format or magazine shows are of particular interest to us at the moment. They not only provide us with the opportunity to tinker with the dynamics of the programme, but they also allow us to grow new talent.

Question

Would you want to see taster DVDs of new talent, in the first instance?

Ralph Lee

That is very useful, but it is also one of the things on which people frequently trip up. In the past we have been in the habit of giving out a few thousand pounds allow someone to spend time on Google or reading books before contacting a few experts. I do not think that is a good use of our development funding. It would be more useful for you to go out and shoot something on DVD that captures the flavour of a character or an idea in which we might want to invest.

Of the projects that are underway at the moment, there is an exciting talent-based adventure project that Tanya is pursuing with Tigress, and we had the confidence to back that show because we invested the time and effort in shooting something with the presenter that inspired us.

However, people struggle when they send an assistant producer with a DV camera to film an academic or psychologist sitting behind a desk and trying either to be a *Blue Peter* presenter or to replicate the material from their lectures. That often fails to capture the thing that made them choose that person in the first place. If you are going to film a taster, send someone who can capture a person properly. Once we have seen someone behind a desk talking about their new book on Hungarian nose flutes, we find it hard to get past that and have confidence in them.

Question

You mentioned experts becoming presenters. Are you prepared to look at the reverse situation, where intelligent amateurs come to particular subjects?

Ralph Lee

We have Tony, and he does a fantastic job for us in that respect, but we do not really have anyone else. I look at Richard Hammond on the BBC with enormous envy. He can present *Inside the Body of a Teenager*, *Brainiac*, *Top Gear*, a *Timewatch* about Omaha Beach and *Sport Relief*. There is almost nothing that he cannot do. That presents us with a real problem, because we have not been able to successfully launch a character like him.

I feel envious of those people, but I have a realistic view of whether we can grow that sort of intelligent inquirer. In the meantime, we are not above poaching talent or celebrity casting. We have a very exciting programme in our season about Victorian fashion which will feature Rupert Everett following in the footsteps of Richard Burton, the explorer. It is a great programme, and it comes alive because of the presence of Rupert Everett. Without him, it would just be another programme about Richard Burton.

There is a trend for celebrity-based journeys. We are about to see Martin Clunes' programme about dogs on ITV, which is an exciting turn of events, and there is a rash of similar celebrity programmes. We must be wary of this, but we would be mad to say that we would not make such programmes. It is very exciting for us to have a programme about Richard Burton involving Rupert Everett, for example, and I would say that we are looking at talent in the round.

However, casting the intelligent, amateur presenter who has no profile is really impossible for us. However good their showreel is, or however pushy their agent might be, it is too difficult for us to motivate people to watch their programmes. If we had broader, more mixed-format programmes in which we could grow people, there would be more of a chance. Perhaps we will be able to do that next year.

It seems that there are no more questions. I have not yet talked about slots, because I think they can make this kind of event a little tedious and prescriptive about what we want. In reality, we are not growing new shows in the Sunday teatime area populated by *Time Team* and *Scrapheap Challenge*. It is not worth pitching expensive soft factual programmes that are not particularly channel-defining, because that is not what we are looking for. We are almost exclusively commissioning for 9.00pm on Mondays and Thursdays, along with Sunday evening at 8.00pm and 9.00pm.

I would not worry too much about the distinction between those different slots. The important message is that we need big, bold, brave things for 9.00pm that will really stand out. We do not have any hiding places in our schedules, because the thrust of all our commissioning will be in peak-time.

Question

You showed *City of Vice* and mentioned *Belsen*. I was wondering what you thought about the future of drama-documentaries in your history output.

Ralph Lee

We are enormously proud of those projects. It is excellent that a drama-documentary about the relief of Belsen won the best drama award, much to the chagrin of many people in drama, and *City of Vice* was a very brave project from which we can learn a lot. The idea of magnifying the drama-documentary style of Justin Hardy to the level of a series was a brave and very expensive thing to do. Judging from afar, as I did not work here at the time, I saw the first two episodes and felt as though I had received a good fix of history. However, I did not come back for a drama fix in the way that one comes back to *The Bill* or *Vice*, which is the kind of thing it was trying to emulate.

I think we learned, then, that we probably would not make another drama-documentary set in a single period, but that does not mean we are afraid of the form or format. *City of Vice* felt brave and ambitious, which is very Channel 4, but the fact that its audience did not stay over five episodes probably means that those who came to it were a history audience who wanted more history out of it.

We love drama-documentaries, and fewer, bigger, better are probably key concepts for moving forwards in that area. You do not get any extra rewards for having a bit of drama in your documentary at the moment. A lot of the most successful history documentaries have no drama in them at all, such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* or Rupert Everett's travels in the footsteps of Richard Burton.

Many of the factual programmes that are protagonist-based are currently rating higher than the kind of content that we have been making for the last four or five years where some drama has been included. That means that we will take a view on whether we need drama in history documentaries, or whether there are better versions of them to be made without dramatic elements.

Question

Are there periods of history which do not interest you at all?

Ralph Lee

I would say no. However, if I am trying to change our output and set the bar of originality very high, it is unlikely that I will be able to go to Julian and commission a series about World War II. There are some areas of history that feel quite worked-over, and I am tiring of programmes about the two World Wars. There may be new innovations to take you there and there are always great stories, but they are not the subjects which will allow us to make a mark for this department.

Naturally, we are guided by whether something speaks to our current preoccupations, and whether it engages with the issues that our civilisation currently faces. Some history is escapist and some is informative, and although we like both it is easier to commission history when it is informative.

Question

When it comes to contemporary history, how recent are you prepared to go with your history programmes?

Ralph Lee

When I first came to Channel 4 six or seven years ago I was obsessed with the 1980s, and I remember that we made a programme about Heysel together. I love making what we felt then to be contemporary history, so we made *Brighton Bomb*, *Brinks Mat*, *The Miners' Strike* and *Who Kidnapped Shergar?* All of these were motivated by an attempt to pick those narratives from the period that we felt could become history. That was nearly a decade ago, so we should perhaps cast our magnifying glass over more recent history. However, finding great stories from the 1990s is proving quite difficult, because it does not seem to have been a particularly rich or interesting decade. I look forward to being proven wrong on that point, however.

I also think it may be difficult to do something very big about recent history. We have tended to pick out stories and collate them into seasons, but we have enjoyed only limited success. I do not know whether I would do a series like *The Explosive 80s* again. We had programmes about the property crisis, the storm, the financial crash and the Heysel stadium disaster, all of which were intended to show that it was a pivotal decade and that the Britain of the 1990s was unimaginably different from that of the 1970s. However, I do not think that people really got it as a season, so I am not sure that I would commission in that way again.

I would not rule out the kind of clever, noisy stunts that Peter Dale has achieved with More4, however. If you look at the Blunkett drama, *The Government Inspector* and *Death of a President*, it has been More4 that has done politically agitating, noisy drama-documentaries. Perhaps it is more interesting to bring things right up to date in that way.

Question

My first question is about series. David mentioned that someone has mysteriously killed off a series called *Equinox*, and other series such as *Secret History* have been killed off in your time. Do they not count as series anymore?

Secondly I wonder if you can explain a little more about how the channel would move from *haute couture* to the high street. I am not sure I understand what that metaphor means in this context.

Ralph Lee

In that context, it is very simple. I was talking about *Human Footprint*, which has been nominated for a number of awards and was a very beautiful film. It was unusual in its form and was thought-provoking and artful. However, we need to think about whether people remembered it on the following Wednesday, and whether they associate it with Channel 4. Some people do, such as those in this room, but it may be that the larger audience do not.

When we see an idea like that, which has the germ of something interesting, I wonder whether we can find ways of making it bigger. That is what I mean by rolling it out to the high street. We need to think about whether we can reach more people with it. A number of us have mentioned *Embarrassing Bodies*, the Features series that ran at 9.00pm a few weeks ago. That is a series which, along with *Embarrassing Illnesses*, has transformed what we are prepared to put on TV in the primetime slot.

I think that should be our job, but we often get too preoccupied with the *haute couture* version where we do some perfect, interesting film rather than getting in people's faces. We could do something like *Embarrassing Bodies* for a week and take human health to the high street by showing it in the clinic. That will cause a lot of people to look away, but it would help us to really get noticed. People cannot fail to notice something like that, and they would not fail to notice that it is very Channel 4.

On your first question about series and strands, I am guilty of getting rid of *Secret History*. There was also *To the Ends of the Earth*, *Secrets of the Dead* and *Equinox*. As a department we thought very hard about whether we follow the example set by News and Current Affairs in supersizing a strand, for example by bringing back *Secret History* and making 40 of them a year in place of *Time Team*. Similarly, we could forget the rest of our science output and make 40 single *Equinox* documentaries.

That has worked for *Dispatches*, and the channel is a better place for having 40 of those programmes every year. Similarly, the magnification of *Cutting Edge* has made Channel 4 a magnet for the best documentary makers, drawing them in to tell their stories here. However, I am not convinced that we can do the same job in history and science, and I think that it would force us into a bunkered way of thinking about them. It would stop us creating bigger brands, and it would not be a forward-thinking step to bring back *Secret History* and forget about all the other history we have done, or do the same in science with *Equinox*.

Question

Biography also seems to be dying. You mentioned Jacques Peretti, and his programmes about contemporary, tabloid figures. Is biography dead? Could you bring Jacques Peretti to more traditional figures?

Ralph Lee

I think we are unlikely to bring Jacques to more traditional figures. The days when you could play a documentary about Wernher Von Braun or Bertrand Russell at 9.00pm on a terrestrial channel are

numbered. We can make more tabloid content, and I do think Jacques has quite a range, but he probably would not do Wernher Von Braun. However, I think we may have made all the good ones, and we have historically struggled with biography. I did it as a director and as a commissioner for years, and in the end we ran out of steam.

We were overtaken by Julian's very good factual entertainment biographies, such as *Football Stories*, the programmes about who got various people's millions and *Seven Days That Shook...* They were staccato, noisy little runs of very pointed factual entertainment biographies, and they made our *The Real...* strand look a little out of date. If there are fantastic biographies that we must do, we should talk about them. However, saying that we should do biography on principle is not the right route for us to take.

Question

How international are you prepared to be with your presenters? Do they all have to be British?

Ralph Lee

I think it is quite difficult to sell a foreign presenter to a British audience. Armand Leroi is either from Holland or South Africa, and I do not think that audiences responded to him in a particularly warm way. Do you have any particular ideas in mind?

Question

You mentioned co-productions. In dealing with America we find that Americans do not want to see British presenters.

Ralph Lee

Yes. American viewers are marginally more amenable to our presenters than we are to theirs. Long may it be so. However, it can be a very tough sell. It depends on a number of factors. If it were a low-cost 7.00pm Saturday co-production we could think about it, but I honestly think we would struggle.

If there are no further questions we can retire to the bar. Thank you for coming. I hope that those of you who have been making programmes for us will now get in touch and we can start a dialogue about new programmes.

This Full Transcript was produced by Ubiquis ☎ +44 (0) 20 7269 0370