

What's next for Channel 4?

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Channel 4 is announcing its strategy for the future today. Go [here](#) to their dedicated website. The PDF is [here](#).

[channel-4-logo-drop-shadow-2007.jpg](#)

I have already [written](#) about the history of Channel 4 and suggested that its future lies with a more Internet-centred approach to production as well as distribution. I used to work for Channel 4 News so I care from a personal perspective but C4 also matters on a wider stage.

[c4-test-header.jpg](#)

Over the next five or ten years we in Britain – and around the world – will have to decide what kind of public service media we want. Market liberalisation and technological changes mean the status quo can't survive. But we don't have to lose the benefits of journalism that fills the gaps and adds other value to our lives. The question is what do you want and how can we deliver it?

Will Hutton wrote a good [piece](#) at the weekend in which he identified what is at stake. He points out that the commercial US market is proving better at creating quality product such as the Sopranos, but we don't have the economies of scale in the UK for that to happen:

American cable companies such as HBO, which served up The Sopranos and Six Feet Under, or AMCTV, which make Mad Men, have the advantage of scale with subscribers running into tens of millions. American television as a whole may be hyper-commercial, but there are still ample corners that can sustain great writing, AMCTV can afford to celebrate great scriptwriting as part of its purpose. Britain does not have that luxury. It has deliberately to create a television environment that offsets the reality that our companies operate in our smaller market.

So the answer has to be some sort of public service support mechanism, but with the end of analogue licences how do you do that?:

Too many people believe public-service broadcasting is outdated, hindering television; it will take a cultural revolution at the channel to persuade commissioners that paradoxically the best way of systematically delivering great programmes in a British market is to fuse public-service broadcasting values with commerciality. And the second is cash; Channel 4 needs the security of predictable revenue so providing a context to take risks. Channel 4 must succeed; must not be privatised; must make public-service broadcasting work.

What has been [announced today](#) does start to answer that. And I am happy to see that they are focussing on harnessing a wider pool of innovative creative talent through [digital initiatives](#). But I will reserve judgement until I will do what I never did as a news journalist, and that is to read through the [report](#).

[James Robinson of the Observer](#) believes Channel 4 is going through an identity crisis and points out that it is probably worth less on the open market than Endemol, the independent production house that makes Big Brother.

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