



Channel 4: it's history (book review)

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 Would we miss Channel 4 if it died? [Maggie Brown's](#) new history of Britain's 'alternative' TV station generally makes the case that we would but inadvertently it shows why we are still not convinced.


I should declare that I spent eight happy years at Channel 4 News which I still think is one of the best TV news shows in the world. It's made by ITN but its own history reflects everything good and mad about the Channel that commissions it. Firstly, it is paid for by advertising but is utterly independent. Secondly, it has gone through bonkers phases of ideological indulgence and then periods of almost Stalinist rigour. (The latter are soon ended by the anarchic, floppy individualism that infects all Channel 4 programme-making). Thirdly, it does TV that other channels either ignore or soon copy. One example at C4News was the 'news from...' series when the whole show was broadcast live for a week from Uganda, India or Iran.

Looking back over the last 25 years with [Maggie Brown's](#) themed chronological narrative it seems a miracle that Channel 4 was ever created, let alone that it survived. It was the product of the Thatcherite years and spent its life railing against capitalism. It was originally linked with ITV but ended up as a mini-rival as its own advertising revenues blossomed. Now when this deeply liberal, anti-market institution is at its most commercial it is billing itself as an endangered species of public service broadcasting and wants some of the BBC's revenue. It is a bit like your good-looking, creative but feckless younger sibling who is always being indulged by your parents. One minute they are telling him off for being rude and incompetent, the next minute he is given another sweetie.

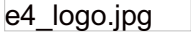
As Brown points out, Channel 4 was born in an age when people took TV more seriously. And yet they produced some dreadful stuff. There is no doubt that most of what is now made – putting aside whether it has gone 'down-market' – is much more intelligently and professionally constructed. Some of this is a technical matter but much of it was attitudinal. I love the anecdote about how *Union World*, for example, refused to let the bosses on for interview even when it would have improved the story.

We are all familiar with the boring debate about whether C4 has gone down-market. This is largely about *Big Brother*. But I think the real point about *BB* is that it has  created a dangerous dependency. The channel needs it for profits and it is now the programme that defines the channel to the wider public. But *BB* does at least have pretty universal appeal. What I think is more interesting, and it emerges strongly from the latter part of Brown's book, is how *suburban* C4 has become. The endless property, child-care, royal, food and travel programmes with a sprinkling of freak show and half-baked campness reeks of lifestyle TV for the semi-detached. That's probably an excellent formula for commercial survival – and they still do this stuff better than the BBC or ITV – but it is hardly mould-breaking programming.

In the end judging C4's quality is a subjective process. During a heated discussion at a recent media soiree about just how bad the channel had become, Will Hutton asked a very good question: "Give me three things that you would do to make Channel 4 better", he demanded. Answers were in short supply.

It's interesting how everyone has an opinion – from Mary Whitehouse onwards – about what Channel 4 is doing wrong. But it's left to the poor sods running it to come up with things it should try to do right. And the big fact here is that they  have done a fantastic job. It is (at the moment) solvent and well-watched and still wins awards. The bit I know most about is news and current affairs and that is in good shape. There's certainly lots of very sound and challenging editorial work. But generally it's been a while since the Channel has managed to pull off the trick of being impressive, impactful *and* intelligent. It may be that we have all become a little too media literate. What used to surprise and delight (and even shock) is taken for granted. Or it may be that TV generally has reached its limits.

How can Channel 4 be the 'pornographer in chief' when there is so much sex everywhere else?

 For me the greatest puzzle about C4 is how it has succeeded in creating classic niche digital channels (E4 and More4) which seem to do well, but has failed to take to the Internet. It appears to have gone to it too late and doesn't seem to have a strategy in the way that the Guardian, its newspaper equivalent, certainly does. You would have thought that a cutting-edge broadcaster with its creativity would have loved the freedom (and low costs) of the web. However, the reality may be that its commissioning structure with content provided by a host of independents means that it has simply been unable to match either the BBC's online investment or replicate the Guardian's strategic commitment.

We face a revolution in broadcasting in the run-up to 2012. If it leads to the demise of Channel 4 I would miss it. So would the liberal media classes who still run it and have treated it as their professional playground for the last quarter century. We would all regret losing its ability to improve the coverage of everything from hard news to cricket or pop music. It is, by its nature, marginal and inconsistent. But now it has to choose between becoming an imaginative innovator that risks oblivion in the new media landscape or a niche public trust. I know which path I hope it chooses.

Maggie Brown's *A Licence To be Different* is a pretty straight history of Channel 4 that gives a reliable and honest narrative rather than challenging critique. It can be bought [here](#)



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