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THE COMMISSIONER
Catherine Whelton on
Yesterday's content

Page 12

US SPECIAL REPORT
UK indies hit the
mark in the US

Pages 26-31



BEHIND THE SCENES
Identity gives cop
show a fresh look

Page 32

Top-heavy C4 gets overhaul

Commissioning structure under review, but chief exec tells staff not to expect more cuts

BY ROBIN PARKER

David Abraham has made his first major mark on Channel 4 with a pruning of senior roles, but has told staff his restructure will not usher in a further round of significant job cuts.

The C4 chief executive has reassured rank-and-file staff that the changes – which include a 25% cut to the 50-strong senior management group and the merger of Julian Bellamy and Kevin Lygo's roles – are structural rather than cost-saving measures.

Bellamy, in his new role as acting chief creative officer, is now drawing up plans for potential structural changes to the commissioning set-up, but this is not understood to include a significant reduction in headcount.

Instead, he will consider changes in the mould of the recent merger of the fact ent and features teams, with an emphasis on clarity and reducing overlap. "There are likely to be fewer points of contact and bigger decision-making centres," a C4 source said.

There could also be a more bespoke relationship with indies, with less time spent managing bigger suppliers making established brands, freeing up commissioners' to take a hands-on approach with new talent and emerging producers.

By merging Lygo and Bellamy's roles – director of TV and content and head of C4 respectively – C4 has effectively halved the creative approval that commissions need, and there will be a drive for quicker decision-making and fewer hoops to jump through.



The Million Pound Drop: blueprint for how C4 wants to use multiplatform to build a deeper relationship with viewers

C4 CREATIVE CONTROLLER THE RACE IS ON

Recruiting a chief creative officer is now David Abraham's "number one priority", C4 sources have indicated. The position will be advertised imminently and interviews have been earmarked to take place in July.

Internally there is speculation Abraham is keen on a "next-generation" candidate with

"demonstrable" experience in the digital space, although he would not opt for someone without a high-profile TV background.

Julian Bellamy, who currently holds the position in an acting capacity, is applying for the role and BBC3's Danny Cohen is a rumour mill favourite, but insiders do not expect Abraham to make a knee-jerk appointment.



Although Abraham's restructure was completed over a brisk 30 days, insiders say he is keen for it to form the basis of a period of stability for the broadcaster. With major job cuts last year and a new chairman and chief executive, C4

has lived through a prolonged transition period and Abraham has talked about the plan forming the basis for how C4 operates for at least the next three to five years.

Central to that is putting multiplatform content at the heart of

There will be fewer points of contact and bigger decision-making centres

Senior C4 source

what the channel does. The likes of *Embarrassing Bodies* web interactivity and *The Million Pound Drop* playalong game are among Abraham's templates for how C4 can use multiplatform elements to achieve a far deeper relationship with audiences than linear TV can achieve.

It is understood that he is already highlighting these kinds of creative opportunities and talking to the sales team about stressing to advertisers the commercial benefits of the deeper relationships.

Toronto's Hot Docs is a celebration of all that is good about documentary film-making – so why does 2010's event feel just a little bit gloomy?

Perhaps that's slightly unfair. There's no shortage of creativity or quality films on show, with award-winning Brit film-maker Kim Longinotto picking up an outstanding achievement award. But talk business and there's a kind of forced jollity that comes from the doc world's attempt to shrug off the most painful effects of the global recession.

Mercury Media chief executive Tim Sparke is frustrated by what he sees as the failure of over-cautious public service broadcasters around the world to fully engage with acquired documentaries. "One issue is the resistance of commissioners to make acquisitions because they can't control the content. In theory, acquisitions free up money for commissions, but because of this reluctance, that doesn't really happen," says Sparke.

Sparke has been integral in setting up the Documentary Distributors' Association, which is primed for its first meeting at La Rochelle's Sunnyside of the Doc event this month, and will lobby over these kinds of issues.

He's also hopeful that Channel 4 will have a fresh focus on docs under its new chief exec. "It'll be interesting to see the effect of David Abraham on the broadcaster's factual output. He's the guy who put Discovery UK on the map, and there's a feeling he might be committed to taking C4 into the global vanguard of public service broadcasting," says Sparke.

Approach with caution

Some of Sparke's concerns about commissioners chime with Hot Doc's centrepiece, the Toronto Documentary Forum pitching event (see box), which is ultimately a cautious affair.

From the film-makers' perspective, lots of the pitches describe the themes of the films, but not many get to the nitty gritty of what happens in them. Almost all the film-makers confidently describe themselves as 'storytellers', but failed to deliver details of their narrative to the commissioners on stage, including 'grumpy judge' *Storyville*'s Nick Fraser, who assumed the Simon Cowell role.

From the international commissioners' perspective, there is almost a sense of having their hands tied with domestic product. Most broadcasters appear overly focused on their own slots and strands, with many admitting they



Hot Docs: criticism that public service broadcasters have been reluctant to fully engage with documentaries

What's up with docs?

Hunting down funding opportunities and winning over cautious commissioners was on the agenda at Hot Docs. **Chris Curtis** reports

'It almost feels like TV isn't the place for docs any more; that on-demand portals might be the way forward'

Mark Atkin,
Crossover Labs

would struggle to find a place for international docs, despite admiring much of the content on offer.

That is recognised by Red Earth Studio founder Julien Mignonac, who was the sole UK-based representative at the festival's pitching forum. "Commissioners have to be sure about what they order. They are more worried than the producers now – especially since C4 and BBC are the only UK homes for our kind of docs," he says.

Finding new homes for content is a major challenge for the documentary community, and new platforms potentially offer an opportunity, according to Mark Atkin, a director of Crossover Labs, which delivers multiplatform production workshops across the world.

Atkin, who was in Toronto to engage with film-makers, believes the genre faces serious problems but also

has big opportunities. "With the commercial pressures, it almost feels like TV isn't the best place for docs any more; that on-demand portals might be the way forward. You could imagine a *Storyville*-style strand running more effectively on something like iPlayer than being scheduled at 11pm," he says.

Quite how the funding might work is another issue, he admits, but as well as distribution opportunities, the online world offers editorial ones.

Atkin believes the kind of interactive innovation that made shows such as C4's *Surgery Live* a success – it became the most popular topic on Twitter as viewers posted questions to brain surgeons undertaking live procedures – could help turn TV docs into a "truly shared experience".

Sharing the experience of documentaries is one of Hot Docs' key



JOSEPH MICHAEL

TORONTO DOCUMENTARY FORUM A PITCHER'S STORY

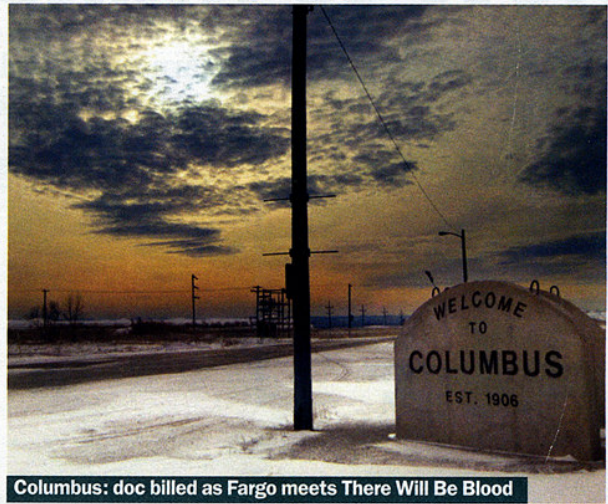
The Toronto Documentary Forum (TDF) is the centrepiece of Hot Docs, and one of the highest-profile pitching events in the factual world. A kind of United Nations-meets-Documentary Idol, it sees about 30 film-makers given seven minutes to convince a stage of international commissioners that their docs deserve financial backing.

Red Earth Studio (RES) was the sole UK representative at this year's forum, pitching a film that has been around in different forms for almost two years. *Columbus* tells the story of a small US town that is literally dying, with the average age of its quirky residents well over 70.

Any takers?

Pitched by RES founder Julien Mignonac and director Kelly Neal as "*Fargo* meets *There Will Be Blood*", it has proved a tough sell so far, despite having twists such as a handful of the town's residents marrying mail-order Thai brides, and the discovery that Columbus sits on a huge oil reserve and the geriatric land owners are set to become millionaires.

But RES still found itself "banging its head" with no commission and, encouraged by TDF director Elizabeth Radshaw to submit the project for TDF, embarked on what Mignonac describes as a great experience.



Columbus: doc billed as Fargo meets There Will Be Blood

"In some ways, it's great to be the only British selection and just getting on the list opens doors," he says.

The EDN (European Documentary Networks) helped to facilitate meetings and offered one-on-one coaching sessions, and the event itself is the opposite of the gladiatorial battle one might expect.

The channel execs on stage dished out only the very gentlest of criticism – that there were perhaps too many stories going on, and whether the film laughs at the old residents, rather than with them. In the main, however, there was plenty of interest.

"It's a very positive environment and no bear pit," says Mignonac. "But the days when

you came to a market like this and people would chuck money at you are long gone."

And the result of being at TDF? Many people told Mignonac that the project "had HBO written all over it", but a breakfast meeting with an exec failed to pique the channel's interest. However, hopes have been raised by conversations with US networks about a feature doc and long-form series, and Mignonac feels he is on the brink of a significant deal.

More positive is news that Arte in France is keen on an extended treatment and, closer to home, a meeting with Channel 4 is back on the agenda. The bottom line, Mignonac says, is "we want to get this made". Watch this space.

strengths, and points the way for other events, according to Sparke.

"One of the great things about Hot Docs is the way it connects ordinary people to great films. Everywhere you go, you see Hot Docs signs or shows – it was 1pm the other afternoon and I saw a queue of 200 people for a screening. That just doesn't happen at Sheffield [DocFest]. If we're talking about trying to increase the audience appetite for serious films, that is something we should think about."

The British abroad

Audience connection is on the agenda for Sheffield, says DocFest marketplace director Charlie Phillips. Numbers at screenings are increasing and the new summer dateline should help, he argues. Sheffield is also continuing its good work for British film-makers, with Phillips leading a team of UK delegates to Hot Docs.

According to Phillips, representatives from the festival will rack up plenty of air miles over the next few years, given that funding from broadcasters has "declined so sharply". He says: "UK film-makers are being forced to meet the rest of the world, but there's no resistance

any more. People accept what they have to do."

Phillips agrees that "caution" has become a by-word for commissioners, and highlights alternative sources of backing, such as foundations and institutions that promote social change.

While there are plenty of these alternative funding sources in the US and Canadian markets – such as the Sundance Institute or Tribeca Institute – where the money is in place to support docs, they are not a panacea. Many of the funds inevitably back films that are about social awareness, miscarriages of justice or have a political agenda.

"I worry more about other types of docs," says Phillips. "*Man On Wire* is a great film, a work of art, but where is the money for films like this going to come from?"

'2009 was depressing. It felt like the terrestrials had nothing. But 2010 feels more positive'

Deborah Forrest, Studio Scotland

But it's not all doom and gloom. Deborah Forrest, head of production at Studio Scotland, is in Canada to sell her conspiracy theory film *The Daniel Project*, and feels market conditions are picking up.

"2009 was depressing," she says, "Frankly, it felt like the terrestrials had nothing. But 2010 feels a bit more positive. There are encouraging signs out there, even though these days you spend a huge number of working hours putting together funding packages. The days when you could just focus on being a film-maker are gone."

Nevertheless, Forrest asserts that old-fashioned skills are just as relevant when it comes to "making films with old-style integrity and pitching them with professionalism". It could almost be a motto for Hot Docs itself.