Countdown to *Countdown*: Setting Up the Channel and Getting on the Air

When we build, let us think we build for ever.

[John Ruskin, *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 1849]

November 1980: planning the channel – the first commissioning editors

Almost from the moment of their appointment Isaacs and Bonner were discussing and devising the internal structure for the new channel. Nothing in British Television at that time was a template for what they now had to do; set up a national channel the output of which would consist entirely of programmes that it did not make itself. Isaacs considered the publishing-house model. The full analogy with publishing, as envisaged by Anthony Smith in his original National Television Foundation proposal, would not be possible under the regulatory terms of the Broadcasting Act. However, the commissioning aspect of the publishing model could be the basis for programme generation from independent producers. The term ‘Commissioning Editor’, unknown in television until then, was adopted for those who would generate the programming for the channel’s schedule.

The operational form for the channel would be simply a play-out centre. It would have no studios, except for presentation, but it must have the ability to broadcast, with as few staff as possible, a range of formats – from 8 mm and amateur video, through the conventional broadcast formats in the different world standards to wide-screen movies. The channel had to be accessible to programmes from all kinds and conditions of producer and to programmes from all around the world. They would need a Chief Engineer who was innovative,
widely experienced, hard driving and probably at odds with the traditional ways
of British broadcasting engineering.

To get on the air by autumn 1982 speed of decision and action were to be of
the essence. Isaacs now addressed the matter of finding the right sort of people
to be commissioning editors. Certainly some should know about broadcasting,
but not necessarily all. What was important was that everyone they recruited
should have energy of thought and be bursting with ideas about what was not
on television that could and should be. He knew that the cornerstones of the
channel’s intended output must be put in place as early as possible to allow for
the commissioning of major work to be ready in time for transmission in the
channel’s first year on air. These were Drama, which, to demonstrate an intent
to achieve a new broader approach, the channel would call Fiction, Current
Affairs, a new approach to which everybody from the Home Secretary
downwards had been calling for and which Isaacs re-termed Factual, and
Education. Education had acquired a particular significance because it was the
only programme genre specifically required of the channel by the legislation
[Section 11(1)(b), Broadcasting Act 1980 (Ch. 64), HMSO, 1980]. The people
chosen to occupy these commanding heights of the channel’s output would be
called Senior Commissioning Editors. And now the search was on to find them.

For Fiction, Isaacs first approached Chris Morahan, the ex-Head of BBC Drama
who was now directing at the National Theatre. Morahan was committed to
Denis Forman’s project to film Paul Scott’s quartet of books about the last days
of the Raj, which became for television *The Jewel in the Crown*, but he mentioned
someone unknown to Isaacs called David Rose. Rose was a BBC man who, as a
director and producer had been at the leading edge of popular television drama
in the 1960s and early 1970s. He was now Head of Regional Drama at BBC
Pebble Mill in Birmingham, where he continued to nurture productions that
were always adventurous, often innovative and sometimes controversial to the
point of alienating some of the BBC’s senior management. Isaacs sought him
out. They found they had a great deal of professional common ground. Rose was
hired.

In his approach to the appointment of a Senior Commissioning Editor for
Education, Isaacs put himself at risk of ‘the self-inflicted wounds of the old pals
act’, as he put it in his personal account of his years at Channel Four, *Storm Over
4* [Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989]. He appointed the wife of someone with whom
he had a friendship that went back to their time at University together at Oxford
in the 1950s, Andrew McIntosh, a Labour politician on the Greater London
Council (now a Labour peer). McIntosh’s wife, Naomi Sargant, was Professor of
Applied Social Research and a Pro-Vice-Chancellor at the Open University. That
university was the only one in Britain founded for the specific purpose of
providing ‘distance learning’ for people of all ages and educational backgrounds.