

Dame Pippa Harris DBE and Nicolas Brown, Company Directors, Neal Street Productions—written evidence (FCF0018)

House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into the future of Channel 4

We are TV and film producers, and run Neal Street Productions, a UK based production company specialising in film, TV and theatre. Our recent productions include the movie "1917" for Amblin/Universal and EOne, "Call the Midwife" for BBC1 and "The Lehman Trilogy" which opens next month on Broadway.

We would like to advocate strongly for the continuation of the current public ownership structure of Channel 4. Pippa's very first job in television was working within the drama department at C4, under the then Head of Drama, Peter Ansorge, so she has experience of working both within C4 and since then, within the BBC and ITV, and for the last twenty years as an independent drama producer. Nick has also worked both within the public broadcasting system, as well as in the independent sector. We believe this has given us a very good understanding of the issues involved and the unique position which C4 occupies within the UK's broadcasting industry.

If C4 were to be privatised, the likelihood is that it would be bought by one of the US studios, or streaming services, all of whom have deep pockets and are eager for more UK content. The recent arrival on the scene of streaming giants like Netflix, Amazon and Disney +, has certainly poured enormous amounts of money into UK TV production. However, unlike C4 these are not places to grow and nurture new talent. They are not focussed on building careers, or trying out new, diverse voices, they are highly commercial companies, whose business model is to grow subscribers by giving a platform to existing stars.

If you consider so many of the UK's best acting, writing and directing talent, almost all of them were first allowed to try (and at times fail) on public service TV, and specifically on C4. From Michaela Coel with "Chewing Gum", Sharon Horgan with "Catastrophe", to Richard Ayoade in "The IT Crowd", Ricky Gervais in the "11 O'Clock Show" or James McAvoy perfecting his craft as an actor in the early series of "Shameless". Before Jesse Armstrong became a household name for creating "Succession", he had been given time and space to nurture his writing on C4 with "Peep Show" and "Fresh Meat". Before Edgar Wright wrote and directed "Hot Fuzz", "Shaun of the Dead" and "Last Night in Soho", he had developed his distinctive style on C4 via his sitcom "Spaced". We could list dozens more, writers like Paula Milne, or Abi Morgan, or world famous actors from Simon Pegg, to Hugh Grant getting his big break in Film Four's "Four Weddings and a Funeral", and not forgetting this year's sensation, Olly Alexander in "It's a Sin". All of them were allowed the time to develop their skills on C4.

Of course, these are just the household names, the ones who the streamers are now so keen to work with. But C4 has also helped to nurture thousands more working behind the scenes as costume designers, cameramen, sound technicians, or make-up designers, on some of the world's biggest movies currently shooting. So many got their first break by working on a sitcom or drama for C4.

As well as providing the nursery slopes for generations of British talent, C4's unique publisher/broadcaster model has allowed many fledgling UK production companies to grow and flourish. As the owners of a UK indie, we know how vital it is that independent producers are allowed to retain the IP in the shows that they create. None of the US giants permit this, and although they might pay bigger up front sums, the ability to control and profit from the back-end success of your creations is what makes the UK production sector the envy of the world. It allows producers to benefit long term from their work and to create sustainable businesses, which in turn create thousands of UK jobs in the creative sector.

Any move to privatise C4, will inevitably jeopardise all of this. Whatever a buyer might promise, at the end of the day it will become a purely commercial channel, with no remit to foster diversity, or to support the UK production industry, or develop new talent. Would a commercial broadcaster continue to show the Paralympics when most of the coverage gets only a tiny audience? We doubt it. We destroy the current UK broadcasting ecosystem at our peril.

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