

Channel 4's Press Information Packs: Researching the Context

At first glance, Channel 4's Press Information Packs are unremarkable documents. Originally printed on A4 paper, they included listings information, programme reviews and personnel data, which were sent out on a weekly basis to newspapers and magazines across the country. The press packs were first published in 1982, prior to the channel's launch in the November of that year and continued to be produced until the beginning of June 2002, when press information was made available digitally via the Channel 4 website. As Linda Kaye has already explained, the British Universities Film and Video Council holds a complete set of the press packs printed during this twenty year period. Stored under archival conditions, they are well preserved with few signs of ageing or damage. However, they have, on the whole, remained an underused resource, infrequently accessed by scholars working in the fields of film and television studies. This situation will hopefully change once the press pack digitisation and accompanying searchable database have been completed, creating an easy point of access for higher education researchers.

I have been working closely with the press packs since the autumn of last year. As my research has developed, these documents have contributed to my understanding of Channel 4's broadcasting history, particularly in relation to the areas of scheduling and publicity. Having initially focused entirely on the press packs themselves, I gradually moved away from close textual analysis and started to examine their production history. I became particularly interested in the role of the channel's chief press officer, Chris Griffin-Beale, who has been credited with the innovation of the weekly press packs. In January 2011 several members of our research team were able to interview Diana Pearce, a former Channel 4 employee who worked as Chris' assistant throughout the 1980s. Chris sadly died in 1998, but our interview with Diana provided an insight into his working methods and role at the channel. In this case, interview data served to contextualise these archival documents, while also offering a possible framework in which they could be interpreted. This paper will examine some of the research methods that can be used to interrogate the press packs. Once these methodologies have been considered, I will discuss the ways in which these documents can be used by scholars working in the fields of film and television studies. In this instance I will use my own research

as a case study, assessing the press packs' significance as a source to be used in evaluating Channel 4's film scheduling policy.

As I have already suggested, there is not an established critical framework available to those researching the press packs. When first approaching these documents, it was necessary for me to borrow techniques from a range of disciplines. My initial readings were influenced by theories of television scheduling, programme flow and general histories of British broadcasting. I then started to carry out contextual research using existing biographical sources and interview data collected from individuals who worked at the channel during the 1980s and 1990s. Having decided to use interview data to interrogate the press packs, it was essential to consider the issues associated with this form of research. Turning to oral history scholarship, I started to interrogate the reliability of my sources and the ethical issues associated with the collection of interview data. I even considered the implications of transcribing interviews: a process that alters the nuances of individual testimony, through inevitable omissions and alterations.¹ Although at times problematic, this hybrid methodology, combining archival sources, television theory and interview data, contributed to my understanding of the press packs, revealing content that would have remained unexploited were it not for this broader contextualisation.

When initially viewing the press packs, members of our research team were faced with a number of unanswered questions. The first, and perhaps most important, query related to Chris Griffin-Beale, the press officer responsible for designing and developing these documents. He is credited in the front of the first press pack as Channel 4's senior press officer and designated contact for any queries relating to them. However, we are only able to glean very basic production details from the press packs themselves, which simply include Chris' job title and telephone number. Because of this lack of detail we sought further contextual material, which would ultimately allow us to better understand his role in their production. In this case, the interview with Diana provided an excellent forum in which to obtain further information about him. Having worked as his assistant for a number of years, Diana was able to talk intimately about his character and working habits. She painted a picture of a man with a limitless capacity for work and boundless energy, whose 'brain was as sharp as a razor'.² She revealed that in the months running up to the launch of the channel she and Chris would often work a thirteen hour day,

responding to queries from assorted companies, journalists and members of the public. She was also able to shed light on his influence as a senior Channel 4 staff member. When describing her first months at the channel prior to the launch in November 1982, she said that Chris: 'had lots of meetings with Jeremy [Isaacs] discussing creative ideas, but he had [...] a very definitive view about what journalists needed in press information'.³ Using this statement as a starting point, it may be suggested that Chris had his own distinctive approach to press communication, which influenced the eventual design and content of these documents. The Channel 4 press packs were designed to be comprehensive, including full listings, synopses, news, reviews and photographs. The equivalent press information produced by the BBC and ITV companies at this time was very different, consisting either of basic programme listings with brief synopses, or season highlights, focusing on a few featured commissions.

Our collected interview data not only helped us to better understand Chris Griffin Beale's character, but also helped to clarify the authorship of the press packs. Although Chris is listed as the key press contact in early documents, there is no reference to the authors responsible for writing the content. The press information produced throughout the 1980s is incredibly comprehensive and often very well written. The Movie Notes section, which includes weekly film listings and synopses, is particularly noteworthy. On average, two A4 pages were devoted to the write-up of each film shown in any given week, with detailed criticism and quotes from contemporary reviews, which were often obtained from respected journals such as *The Cinema* and *Kinematograph Weekly*. These reviews are knowledgeable and playful, conveying the authoritative tone of a cineaste or film scholar. We initially concluded that Chris was likely to have been the author the press packs, given his working ethos and investment in their content. However, when questioning Diana further, we discovered that they were in fact produced collaboratively, with several authors contributing to content across different sections. Although the first press pack was written by Chris, he subsequently delegated to other staff members with some text produced by the channel's commissioning editors. The aforementioned Movie Notes section was written by freelance film journalist Alan Frank. According to Diana, 'Alan's brief, right from the beginning, was to produce Movie Notes on all the old black and white films. C4 very much wanted to bring good old films to people's attention'.⁴ In creating comprehensive listings and reviews, the press office

encouraged journalists to lift text directly from the press packs, which would then be included in listings magazines such as the *TV Times* and *Time Out*. With their skilfully written reviews regularly reproduced in the national press, it may be suggested that the press packs contributed to a national film culture, drawing viewers' attention to the merits of genres and periods that they may have previously overlooked. They certainly contributed to Channel 4's distinctive identity as a broadcaster devoted to the tastes of movie buffs and cineastes.

Now that I have spoken about some of the supplementary data used to contextualise the press packs, I am going to discuss the ways in which these documents have contributed to my own research. The main aim of my PhD thesis will be to assess Channel 4's role as a broadcaster and sponsor of film. I am particularly interested in the channel's scheduling of film and hope to chart its evolving relationship with this area of programming. I would usually rely on magazines such as the *TV Times* for detailed listings information relating to the commercial channels. Although these sources have formed a significant part of my research, I have been able to use the press packs to gain a slightly different perspective on the Channel 4 schedule. Authored entirely by its own staff, they provide snapshots of the channel's identity at specific moments in time. The use of terminology and choice of supplementary material sheds light on its broadcasting ethos, which may be analysed in light of notable inclusions and omissions. When analysing these documents, I made a note of programmes identified as highlights, or examples of 'event' TV, alongside those assigned basic listings with minimal elucidation. If we turn directly to the press packs, referring to pages taken from their different sections, it will be possible to gain a better understanding of their content, while also beginning to chart emergent patterns in Channel 4's early scheduling.

The first page of the press packs always included contact and copyright information, with details of the channel's key personnel.⁵ This was followed by a listings section for the entire week, running from Saturday through Friday. For programmes commissioned by the channel, a range of details were provided, including their:

- Producer
- Director

- Production Company
- Channel 4 press contact and
- Channel 4 Commissioning Editor.

Wherever a film appears in the listings, there is an addendum prompting the reader to consult the attached 'Movie Notes'. This refers to a section in a subsequent part of the press pack providing supplementary film data, which includes reviews and full synopses. After the Movie Notes section there are concise listings, which offer a quick overview of the week's schedule. Following on from these listings, there is a final sequence of pages with the title 'Photos from 4', which includes stills from a number of the week's programmes and films. These were printed with 'a coarse dot structure to make them suitable for dot-to-dot reproduction in most newspapers'. The inclusion of these easily duplicated photographs arguably reinforced the accessibility of Channel 4's press information, which provided an officially authored narrative from which journalists could effectively cut and paste content.

Having examined a number of press packs in close detail, I became aware of their use of terminology, which subtly impacts upon our understanding of the channel's film programming. Cinema is not simply categorised as an amorphous entity, but is instead defined according to implicit value judgements. For instance, the films assigned to the Movie Notes section were frequently purchased by the channel's film buyers and consisted predominantly of Hollywood cinema, with some international fare and vintage British film. These features were described as 'movies', a term which is commonly associated with the light entertainment provided by the local flicks on a Sunday afternoon. Conversely, the low-budget films directly funded by the channel are referred to as '*Film on Four*' dramas. The 'Film on Four' strand originally ran on Thursday nights, with films broadcast at approximately 9pm, in a slot that could demand a competitive audience share. It can be argued that Channel 4 sought to reclaim the 'film', in the same way that the 'play' had been appropriated by an earlier generation of television producers. The 'Film on Four' banner became a distinct entity, signalling a specific type of drama. Although a number of critics attacked Channel 4 films for having a television-friendly aesthetic, the channel did not conceive of its commissions in this way. In fact, films categorised as 'TV Movies' were clearly demarcated in the early press packs and

deliberately excluded from the 'Movie Notes' section. These 'TV Movies' were predominantly low-budget made-for-television melodramas released by American studios, which were typically considered a cheap form of entertainment. Similarly 'Film on Four' features were separated from the Movie Notes section and given full synopses and reviews in the main listings. These films were evidently deemed to be television events, of which the channel's commissioning editors were particularly proud. So, in certain respects, Channel 4 corroborated traditional notions of the movie purchase as an economical form of television entertainment, echoing the words of earlier critics like Edward Buscombe, who described them as 'one of the cheapest kinds of television programme'.⁶ Through separation and classification, the 'Film on Four' commission became a distinct entity, removed from the associations inherent to the term 'movie'.

When viewed collectively, the press packs reveal Channel 4's changing attitude to film across several decades. As viewers we may be aware of the ways in which this broadcaster has gradually altered its image, moving away from idiosyncratic commissioning and minority interest programming to ratings-friendly lifestyle and reality television shows. Using the press packs, it is possible to chart this shift more gradually; identifying the introduction of new initiatives and ways in which the press packs' content has altered over time. I am particularly interested in the changing physicality of the press packs, which become thinner throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. The Movie Notes section similarly becomes smaller, even though the number of films broadcast on a weekly basis actually increases. Furthermore, the well-written, detailed reviews of the 1980s and early nineties are abandoned, with more accessible, brief synopses taking their place. Returning to our earlier research context, it may be suggested that the altered content of the press packs was, in part, attributable to the death of Chris Griffin-Beale in 1998. As our interview with Diana Pearce revealed, these documents were his inspiration and, although not solely authored by him, the content did adhere to his exacting specifications. However, he was not responsible for the channel's scheduling and choice of film purchases, which also changed throughout this period. I would argue that although film has remained a significant concern for Channel 4, the broadcaster's relationship with this area of programming has altered over time. The press packs simply act as barometers that can be used to chart the different stages in this evolutionary process.

To conclude, I hope that this paper has helped to emphasise the ways in which film and television scholars may use the Channel 4 press packs in their future research. While providing a detailed and accurate source of scheduling information, they also reveal the broadcaster's self-image and can be used to chart its changing ethos over the course of several decades. Employing close textual analysis, they can be used to examine patterns in scheduling, relating to a range of programming initiatives. The techniques that I have used to examine film could, for example, be applied to research covering areas such as television drama, sitcom or lifestyle programming. Using the BUFVC's searchable database it will be possible to carry out keyword searches to access content that may have otherwise been difficult to locate. Although the press packs contain a wealth of data, my analysis has been enhanced by further contextual material, which helped to clarify the ambiguities of these documents.

As with many archival sources, they ultimately call for an interdisciplinary approach, which will alter according to the objectives of the individual research project.

¹ Raphael Samuel, 'Perils of the Transcript', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 389-392; p. 389.

² Diana Pearce, personal communication, January 28, 2011.

³ Diana Pearce, personal communication, January 28, 2011.

⁴ Diana Pearce, personal communication, January 28, 2011.

⁵ Example press pack used: 21st-27th July, 1984.

⁶ Edward Buscombe, *Films on TV: A Report*, (London: Unesco, 1971); p. 5.