

THE CHANNEL OF OUR GENERATION

This week sees the 30th anniversary of Channel 4. We celebrate the most influential screen moments

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STARS OF THE SHOWS:
CAN YOU NAME 30 YEARS
OF CHANNEL 4 TALENT?

We have a lot to thank Channel 4 for: Jon Snow's ties, *Friends* (imagine life without it) and reality TV. But it was *Countdown* which launched the channel 30 years ago. Here, the long-serving co-host Carol Vorderman tells us why it's such an important channel.



"I never really wanted to be on the telly. But I was working as an engineer in a frozen pea factory in Lancashire when my mum presented me with the newspaper advertisement for *Countdown*.

The producers of a new station, Channel 4, were in a panic, the advert said. They couldn't find anyone to present the numbers section of their new game show and they desperately needed help. "You'd be good at this," she said. "Don't be ridiculous, Mum," I replied.

Little did I know that my mother had written a letter to Yorkshire Television and forged my signature; a few days later I was in the studio. With no screen test or preparation I was set to work on the numbers game. I got the answers within milliseconds (I hadn't realised you were given 30 seconds to work it out, so blurted them out immediately) and I was hired on the spot.

Six million people tuned in to watch our first show at 4.45pm on Tuesday 2 November, 1982. The channel would launch with *Countdown* and my co-presenter and great friend Richard Whiteley would be the first face live on air. I got something like £20 a show and had to take

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holiday time from my proper job to go into the studio for filming. But I was only 21. I didn't even know that the red light meant we were on air. All I can remember thinking is, 'Well this is a bit of a laugh; something to tell my children when I'm older.' We made television history that day, but our second episode was even more momentous. Overnight we lost 95% of our audience. That's the biggest percentage drop of any show in history. "It's normal!" We were told. The previous afternoon the whole country had tuned in to watch the launch of a historic channel, they weren't necessarily interested in an afternoon letters and number show.

We went on to be one of the top five shows on Channel 4 for over 15 years. I always chuckle when I think of the big execs telling people that one of their most popular shows is a daytime letters and numbers game. Thirty years later, the show's still going. When I left in 2008 (with the picture of Richard and I which I stole from outside my dressing room under my arm) I knew I was leaving a place with real creativity and diversity. Channel 4 has had a massive effect on the business of broadcasting and has revolutionised the way the industry and audiences view independent programming. Film4 is a personal highlight for me, as well as *Channel 4 News* and the station's groundbreaking documentaries that have changed whole industries and even shaped our country. It is an extraordinary thing."



TUESDAY 2 NOVEMBER, 1982: THE LAUNCH

Who was the first man on Channel 4? Clue: it's not Richard Whiteley. The first man to be *heard* was continuity announcer Paul Coia who chimed, "Good afternoon. It's a pleasure to be able to say to you: welcome to Channel 4." 3.7million people tuned in as the iconic multicoloured '4' was beamed into living rooms, followed by clips from shows such as *Brookside* and *Comic Strip Presents*.



1989: DESMOND'S CHALLENGES PREJUDICES

Set in a Peckham barber shop (although we can't recall any evidence of any hairdressing actually taking place) *Desmond's* wasn't the UK's first black sitcom, but it was the first where the mainly black cast were shown to be socially mobile and aspirational. It was a regular fixture for five years and paved the way for more predominantly black programming like the BBC's *The Real McCoy*.



1994: PAULA MEETS MICHAEL

Everybody remembers *that* interview; 1994, on a bed, in *The Big Breakfast* studio, a giggling Paula Yates (her leg thrust over INXS frontman Michael Hutchence) provided the most cringingly flirtatious moment in the history of live broadcasting. The two had already met, in 1985 on C4 music show *The Tube*, when a similarly fawning Paula in her words, "interviewed Michael Hutchence's crotch".



1982: FILM4 PRODUCTIONS AIRS ITS FIRST FEATURE

"One of the most shocking films about mental illness ever shown on British TV." That was the *Evening Standard's* view on *Walter*, Stephen Frears' film which kicked off Channel 4's commitment to homegrown, uncompromising film. Without Film4, *Tyrannosaur*, *Four Lions*, *Slumdog Millionaire* and, of course, *Shane Meadows' This Is England* would have struggled to see the light of day.



1992: SHABBA RANKS UPSETS THE WORD

We will never forget watching a man eat a worm sandwich or Nirvana playing their first international performance of *Smells Like Teen Spirit* followed by Kurt Cobain discussing Courtney Love's bedroom skills. But our one indelible memory of *The Word* is Shabba Ranks announcing on live TV that gay people should be crucified. Mark Lamarr listened patiently then chose his riposte: "That's absolute cr*p."



1994: BROOKSIDE'S LESBIAN KISS

Flagship soap opera *Brookside* was not a show to shy away from controversy. As well as incestuous relationships and bodies under patios, it made headlines with the first ever pre-watershed lesbian kiss. The era-defining scene (arguably pretty tame today) generated a storm of complaints and turned Anna Friel (as Beth) and Nicola Stephenson (as Margaret) into gay pin-ups.





1996: TFI FRIDAY RESCUES FRIDAY NIGHTS

Think of *TFI Friday*. Finding it hard to shake Ocean Colour Scene's *Riverboat Song* out of your head? Chris Evans' high-octane chat show launched many British bands – and famously provided the platform for Black Grape's Shaun Ryder to swear his way to a lifetime ban on Channel 4 live TV. No other show better embodied the Nineties zeitgeist.



1999: QUEER AS FOLK ACKNOWLEDGES GAY SEX

By 1999, gay characters on British TV were often thrown into soap operas to highlight 'hard-hitting' issues. Russell T Davies' *Queer As Folk* re-wrote the rulebook with its unapologetically confrontational take on gay life with graphic sex scenes and controversial storylines – such as 29-year-old, Stuart (Aidan Gillen) seducing a 15-year-old boy.



2000: BIG BROTHER LAUNCHES REALITY TV

If one show changed the face of TV entertainment forever it *has* to be *Big Brother*. From the first series – starring Nasty Nick and winner Craig Phillips – its simple-but-winning format marked a landmark shift. Countless reality shows such as ITV's *I'm A Celebrity...* followed and who could forget George Galloway's cat impression on *CBB?* Make. It. Stop.



2001: CHRIS MORRIS ENRAGES THE TABLOIDS

Chris Morris' *Brass Eye* series changed the face of satirical television. A one-off special titled *Paedogeddon!* sent up what Morris saw as the sensationalism that followed the death of Sarah Payne and the *News Of The World*'s 'name and shame' campaign. The show received 3,200 complaints but 920 messages of support.



2003: JON SNOW TAKES ON ALASTAIR CAMPBELL

This live TV battle took place at the height of the "dodgy dossier" affair. Alastair Campbell, Downing Street's then director of communications, marched unannounced into the Channel 4 news studio to rebut statements made by the BBC. A masterful Snow, with no preparation, no production staff and no notes grilled Campbell live on air. Unmissable.



2004: DERREN BROWN'S SÉANCE

Derren Brown's live séance became one of the most complained about shows in broadcast history after he invited 12 participants to contact members of a teen suicide pact. The mind control expert coaxed them into "communicating" with the dead teenagers using a Ouija board. Despite the suicide story being a hoax, Channel 4 received 700 complaints.



2007: DIANA: THE WITNESSES IN THE TUNNEL

Princes William and Harry campaigned for this documentary – told from the point of view of the paparazzi arrested on the night of Diana's death – to be axed. They urged the channel not to broadcast the images taken in the aftermath of the crash, and while Ofcom received 62 complaints it upheld the channel's decision to air the show.



2010: BIG FAT GYPSY WEDDINGS DOMINATES

Bafta-nominated *Gypsy Weddings* introduced new words into the English lexicon. Irish traveller girls were 'grabbed' while provocatively dancing, adjusting their diamante-and-tulle dresses and fluttering mascara-laden lashes (at the age of eight). We were transfixed. Ratings hit 7.4million but raised debates about 'middle-class voyeurism'.



2012: THE PARALYMPICS

The station stockpiled its *Come Dine With Me* repeats in favour of Paralympic Games coverage this summer. Good move, as the channel was rewarded with a record audience of 11.2million on opening ceremony night. Records were smashed, heroes were made and prejudices were cast aside and the country enjoyed some pretty compelling TV in the process.

TO SEE ALL OF CHANNEL 4'S GREATEST MOMENTS GO TO STYLIST.CO.UK/LIFE/CHANNEL4