



7 March 2002

The Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP
Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
2-4 Cockspur Street
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I am writing as Joint Managing Director of Lion Television – one of Britain's leading independent production companies, in support of the new plans for the BBC THREE Digital Channel. Lion specialises in factual television and won last year's Broadcast Award for Independent Production Company of the Year. We produce a considerable number of hours of television for the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5, as well as UK channels available to digital/satellite and cable viewers such as Discovery Europe and UK Horizons. We also work together with major US Broadcasters such as PBS, the Discovery Channels, HBO, A & E, the History Channel, etc.

We have already been enjoying a positive experience of the new channel structure – producing a weekly book programme – the Readers and Writers Roadshow for the new BBC4 channel through our Glasgow-based company, Lion Scotland. From our standpoint it seems to us that the improved proposition for BBC THREE is exciting and positive for a number of reasons.

1. Given the quota which ensures 25 per cent of production in BBC Television is placed with the independent sector, the channel will increase the spend with UK indie production, by at least £25 m a year. This is, in general, a very positive thing for the health and creativity of the independent production sector.
2. The current near universal pressure on the main channels to maintain ratings means we are working in a highly risk-averse climate, leading too often to imitative, formulaic, and copy-cat programming. From what I understand, BBC THREE offers the prospect of a Channel better placed to take the creative risks which commercial channels can't, and which is the only way we can guarantee refreshing, innovative broadcasting and a vibrant production sector.

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3. BBC THREE is just the sort of channel we need to develop new talent. Both on-screen in terms of new faces who can take their first steps in a more protected environment before moving to the sink or swim environment of the main terrestrial channels. However, it also has a part to play in the crucial role of developing behind the camera production talent. As a significant employer of production staff, a continuing complaint is that there are no longer any 'nursery slopes' where staff training and development can take place, and where less experienced staff can develop their potential.

A good example of one of our programmes that we made is 'Backstage'. This was during the early days of BBC Choice, where we were commissioned to make an hour-long daily programme. On a restricted budget, it required us to develop a fresh way of broadcasting – both in terms of equipment and production techniques. The technology we developed for it has been widely copied and used since. We undertook a considerable amount of training to bring on the big staff required for such an undertaking. Many of them are now spread throughout the production community. The series producer used the live experience he gained to go on to run the ambitious month-long 'Kumbh Mela' project from India for Channel 4. The presenter of the show Kaye Adams went on to host a high profile daily afternoon programme for ITV. Lastly, one of the production secretaries – Liz Barker – showed particular aptitude in front of the camera, so we gave her an opportunity to present parts of the show. On the basis of this experience we helped her audition for BBC1's 'Blue Peter' which she now presents. It seems to me, these opportunities – typically only afforded on channels like the proposed BBC THREE – bring benefits to both broadcasters and the production sector in general.

4. As an independent that hitherto has made mainly factual programming, we are excited by the new proposals that BBC THREE will be commissioning across all genres, not just entertainment programmes. The British production industry is currently a world leader in developing new formats and new approaches to factual television, as well as entertainment and there will be new opportunities to enhance this. As a company with many years of factual experience, both inside and outside the BBC, we relish the challenge of finding new ways to make important documentaries and current affairs programmes that are relevant and interesting to a younger audience.
5. The fact that BBC THREE is stating its intent to commission at a price comparable to terrestrial broadcasters is also reassuring. Whilst there is much low-cost programming that is innovative and exciting, there is also a good deal in which the production values are low and editorial content derivative and unimaginative. The fact that the budgets available are realistic mean the programme content can be properly resourced and greatly enhance the probability that the channel can provide programming of real substance and the highest production values.

In summary, we feel that BBC THREE will be an exciting and positive addition to the broadcasting landscape – one that both licence payers and those of us in the independent production community should welcome.

Yours sincerely


Richard Bradley
Managing Director
Lion Television