

PROGRAMMING: NEW VENUES, NEW FORMS

Introduction

The 1980s and 90s ushered in a new era of television, marked by increased commercialisation and competition, new social and cultural norms, and by the globalisation of the media market. The revolution began early in Britain with the introduction of Channel Four, whose redefined hybrid public service/commercial mission produced unique programming and addressed hitherto ignored audiences. Series like *Asian Eye* and *Black on Black* reflected a change in the meaning of 'minority' in Britain, and an innovative film policy underwrote independent productions such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Mona Lisa*, along with new and controversial drama, series, comedy, news, documentary and chat-shows, as well as imports of 'quality' American programmes. Its impact echoed in the US, in the major networks' response to cable and upstart Fox competition by producing a run of highly regarded drama series unsurpassed in US television history. With roots in the live anthology drama of the 1950s, sustained by innovative series such as *Hill Street Blues* in the 1980s, the 'quality drama' dominated schedules in the 1990s in the form of such programmes as *thirtysomething*, *ER*, *Homicide*, *Law & Order* and *China Beach*. Cable television came into its own during this period, producing critically acclaimed first-run programmes like *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*.

Debates over 'quality' became a central feature of the 1990s as the enormous expansion of programme offerings on a plethora of channels called old standards and expectations into question. Anxieties over 'dumbing down' existed side by side with 'quality' discourses, as such programming trends as the perceived decline in serious factual, documentary and public affairs programmes met with the rise of reality shows and 'lifestyle' TV. The 'docu-soap' and the makeover show proved highly popular with audiences, injecting a new kind of 'intimacy' and audience participation into network television, along with what some feared as a 'feminisation' of the television schedule in its shift in address from the 'citizen' to the 'consumer'. In the US, the introduction of the new networks Fox, WB and UPN, as well as the rise of original cable programming, challenged the comfortable practices of the former 'big three' and led to a rise in shows that 'pushed the envelope' of television practice. Fox led the pack with a schedule that

blatantly appealed to youth and minorities, with such controversial programmes as *Married . . . with Children*, *The Tracey Ullman Show* (1987) and *The Simpsons*; prime-time soaps like *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *Melrose Place*; so-called reality shows such as *Cops* (1989) and *America's Most Wanted* (1988-); and black-oriented comedies such as *In Living Color* (1990) and *The Sinbad Show* (1993-4).

As satellite and cable channels expanded in both countries, the expansion of specialised programming – films, news, sports – along with an address to niche audiences led to fears that national identities and cultures might be weakened by the new television's globalising influence. In Britain, this has led to a reassessment of what constitutes British television culture, calling into question previous ideas of quality and cultural cohesion. In particular, the dominance of US television in global markets has frequently met with fears of 'cultural imperialism' and 'wall-to-wall *Dallas*', even as audiences clamour for more and as local and national production often receives a stimulus from the introduction of competitive channels and forms. Meantime, the brisk international trade in television programmes and formats has made it increasingly difficult to specify the national or cultural origins of many televisual forms (or to enforce intellectual property rights), most notably the game show and reality genre, and has created new media giants like the UK-based Pearson Group and the Dutch firm Endemol Productions.

Michele Hilmes

Channel Four: Innovation in Form and Content?

Channel Four opened in November 1982 as a unique experiment in television's first era of scarcity before multi-channel and twenty-four-hour broadcasting had arrived in Europe. Broadcasting to England and Scotland (Wales would soon get its own channel), it was charged with providing programmes that were 'innovative in form and content' and distinctive from those offered by the other three channels, and was to find its income, eventually, from advertising. This programming brief, both ambitious and

imprecise, has seen three successive phases of implementation, roughly coinciding with the terms of its first three chief executives.

Jeremy Isaacs' tenure from 1982–7 was one of defiance, fizz, bold innovations and heroic failures. It tapped the pent-up creativity of producers drawn from established broadcasters and radicals from the film industry and independent cinema. It also provided, under the banner of liberalism and innovation, a substantial platform for left-wing ideas that were being squeezed out of other media, especially the BBC, by the prevailing orthodoxies of Thatcherism.

It was adventurous enough of Isaacs to establish an hour-long evening news bulletin, supplied by the established agency Independent Television News, in the days before rolling news and CNN. But he went further, reducing the Friday bulletin to half an hour to fit in the subversive *Friday Alternative* (1982), a mixture of critiques of 'dominant' news coverage; campaigns (including one in favour of hanging); and exclusives like the pirated recording of Thatcher's press secretary Bernard Ingham crowing about the sinking of the battleship *Belgrano*. All of this was wrapped in an innovative use of computer graphics. Elsewhere, an adventurous cultural agenda offered series addressing British Asians (*Asian Eye*, 1993–) and Afro-Caribbeans (*Black on Black*, 1983–5); an unashamed high-cultural arts agenda including *Voices* (1982), a discussion series featuring Susan Sontag and John Berger; and the cinema series *Visions* (1982–5) offering profiles of avant-gardist Michael Snow, animator Jan Svankmajer and features on cinema in China and Africa. *Eleventh Hour* (1982) was a portmanteau slot (a device often used by Channel Four to corral the diverse single offerings of film-makers) offering radical voices from British and world independent cinema like *Handsworth Songs* (1986). Documentaries featured substantial coverage on environmental issues, a twelve-hour series *Vietnam* (a UK/US/France collaboration, 1983) and a serious science series *Equinox*.

An innovative film policy wholly or partially financed movies rather than TV drama, including Frears' *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), Greenaway's breakthrough *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982) and early Neil Jordan films like *Mona Lisa* (1986). Drama series included G. F. Newman's grim indictment of medicine and the National Health Service, *The Nation's Health* (1983). Entertainment included traditional material like the chase/game show *Treasure Hunt* (1983–9) and the word game *Countdown* (1982–) which survived into the twenty-first century still with large audiences for its late afternoon slot. Shrewd buy-ins included the US sitcom *Cheers* (1982–93). Other entertainment was distinctly edgy, including the live *Whatever*

You Want (1982), which proved too routinely obscene for the times, and the innovative music show *The Tube* presented by Jools Holland and Paula Yates. Channel Four also launched its own soap, *Brookside* (1982–), innovative in its location (a modern housing estate in Liverpool) and its mode of production (using real houses rather than sets).

This first phase involved almost daily battles with press derision (it was dubbed 'Channel Snore' to allege that no one was watching, or 'Channel Swore' because of its realistic use of language). It was also the period of the ultimately successful guerrilla war by programme-makers to overturn the regulatory principles of the era of scarcity, especially the idea that individual programmes or series had to be 'balanced' between the prevailing viewpoints in society. Channel Four's contention was that balance could be found across its output rather than within any one instance of it, opening the way for more opinionated and diverse programming. In this sense, Jeremy Isaacs' Channel Four defined many of the terms for British television in the emerging era of availability. It was the crucible in which programme-makers haltingly learned how to address niche or targeted audiences rather than use the universalising forms of address developed for a mass audience.

Isaacs' resignation was typical of his programming strategy: he believed that no feature of Channel Four, not even the successes, should be retained for long. His surprise successor Michael Grade (1987–97) embarked on a policy of consolidation, taking the channel from an audience share of around 5 per cent, to one of 10 to 12 per cent, which it still maintains. Isaacs' eclectic scheduling pattern, based on variety with a few key anchor points like the *7pm News*, was replaced by a more aggressive and familiar strategy of stripping similar programming across the week in key slots. Ten in the evening became the drama slot, more often than not imported US quality series like *St Elsewhere* (1982–9) and *NYPD Blue* (1993–) leavened with occasional UK commissions like *The Canonicle Lawn* (1992), *A Very British Coup* (1988) and *GBH* (1991). Where Isaacs had joined the consortium producing the ill-fated euro-soap *Chateaufallon* (1985), Grade banished subtitled material to the very edges of the schedule. Grade's policy succeeded, leaving Channel Four able to support itself from its own revenue, and the owner of a handsome headquarters building designed by Richard Rogers: an asset to tide it through the coming turmoil of intense multichannel competition.

Increasing prosperity saw the end of the necessary cheap commissions like *Opinions*, where an intellectual struggled with reading from autocue for half an hour. Instead the current affairs series *Dispatches* offered committed investigative journalism and the occasional series

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like *This Food Business* revealed the horrors of Britain's food supply. Documentary strands like *True Stories* and *Cutting Edge* developed a school of politicised personal stories, illustrating the underbelly and less savoury sides of the 'yuppie era' of the late 1980s and early 1990s. With increasing confidence, Channel Four introduced the irreverent *Big Breakfast* into its empty early morning slot, launching Chris Evans into a broadcast genre hitherto dominated by news and soft sofa chat. Personalities became an uneasy addition to the Channel Four repertoire, with the development of such stars as the duo Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer, of Clive Anderson and Jonathan Ross. Their increasing identification with Channel Four focused attention on two growing problems inherent in the channel's initial conception. The need to work through independent companies meant that they would own (or indeed be owned by) this valuable talent; and the desire to innovate continuously meant that these talents, once established by the channel, would inevitably drift towards the richer competing channels of the BBC or ITV. The logic of Grade's strategy of consolidation was inevitable: stars like Graham Norton were placed on direct, exclusive contract to Channel Four.

Elsewhere, distinctive sitcoms became a feature of the channel, including the long-running *Drop the Dead Donkey*, set in a TV newsroom; *Desmonds*, set in a Brixton barbers' shop; and *Nightingales*, in which three male security guards fought boredom and each other in a surreal limbo. The channel's feature film policy continued, providing much-needed financing for innovative British movies like *The Crying Game* and a series of Ken Loach films including *Raining Stones* and *Riff-Raff*. Increasingly Grade, assisted by his programme controller John Willis, established a market identity for Channel Four. It combined an explicit up market address, exemplified perhaps by the provocative arts journalism of the *Without Walls* series, with an increasing exploration of the post-adolescent, post-pub audience. This led to the scheduling of repeated sitcoms against the complementary early evening news sequences of BBC1 and ITV between 5.45 and 6.45pm, perceived at the time as somehow breaking the unwritten understandings by which public service TV had been run. It also, and more controversially, led to a series of themed evening 'special events' like *Pot Night*, and commissions for the late evening, especially Friday, like *The Word* and *The Girlie Show*. They were intended to present the brash irreverence of the post-feminist 'girl power' generation, and the 'trash culture' of stunts like vomit drinking, but also led to the designation of Michael Grade as Britain's 'pornographer in chief' by a choleric newspaper



Showcasing the 'girl-power' generation: *The Girlie Show*

columnist. Other commentators wondered whether provocation had not replaced innovation as Channel Four's guiding principle. Nevertheless, they vividly illustrated the growing visibility of cultural diversity in Britain in the 1990s.

Grade left Channel Four after ten years, as a secure and distinctive freestanding single broadcast channel within an increasingly competitive market. The channel's independence as a publicly owned commercial channel had been secured by his efforts, but diversification had not been addressed. Michael Jackson, his successor from 1997-2001 brought with him lessons learned from John Birt at the BBC. He conceived of Channel Four as a brand to be exploited in several areas of the fragmenting media landscape of Britain. In his four-year tenure, several subscription and/or digital channels were launched or planned. Two quickly established a place in the marketplace: FilmFour, which exploited Channel Four's own co-financed movies as well as a market for subtitled and cult films not served elsewhere; and E4, devoted to youth-oriented entertainment. Behind E4 lay some controversial business deals, particularly the expensive purchase of all broadcast rights to the US series *ER* and *Friends*. Both established features of Grade's Channel Four, they had hitherto had their first runs on the subscription satellite service of BSkyB. Jackson was now determined to exploit their value to the Channel Four brand into the market for digital services, believing that the essence of Channel Four's identity lay in its programming. Similarly, Jackson bid successfully for the rights to cricket and horse racing in Britain, allowing the possible development of interactive services based around betting. Some of these commercial operations were undertaken by an 'arm's length' company similarly to those operated by the BBC, in order to protect Channel Four's public service operations from cultural contamination and commercial risk.

Jackson's commissioning developed the directions

initiated by Grade, but managed to avoid the worst excesses both of programme content and attacks in the press. Drama series commissions included the arresting *Queer as Folk*, with its matter-of-fact attitude to gay romance, and *Teachers*, which concentrated on their arrested emotional development rather than problems of paedogogy. The impressionist Rory Bremner developed the satirical series *Bremner, Bird and Fortune*, reminiscent of the 1960s' *The That Was the Week That Was*. The uneven late-night topical *The Eleven O'Clock Show* introduced the successful character of Ali G. Comedies were nursed into life in a Friday-night slot hammocked between *Friends* and *Frasier*. They included *Smack the Pony*, featuring three women comedians, and sitcoms *Father Ted*, *Spaced* and *Black Books*, which all developed a distinctive absurdist approach to the genre. Elsewhere, event programming became a distinctive aspect of the channel, from the rescue archaeology of *Time Team* to the highly successful British version of *Big Brother* which ran over successive summers from 2000. *Big Brother* also established Channel Four as an interactive broadcaster, through almost-live web links and the astonishing success of its voting procedures. On the negative side, arts coverage almost disappeared, being replaced by list programmes like *A Hundred TV Moments from Hell*.

Channel Four was originally conceived in the era of scarcity of British television, as an industrial and programming irritant in an enclosed system of just three channels. It broke that mould, introducing both independent production and programming that was both tendentious and targeted in its address. During its early years, therefore, Channel Four was bringing about the demise of the system that had given birth to it. It enjoyed a brief period of comparative richness within the oligopolistic TV advertising market that existed before the arrival of BSkyB and multi-channel TV as a major force. This allowed it to develop a distinct programming profile, an identifiable brand. Its current gamble is to extend that brand into new broadcasting and electronic markets, where it is a relatively small and undercapitalised player. Mark Thompson arrived from the BBC as the new chief executive in 2002, and faced essentially the same challenge as Jeremy Isaacs twenty years before: how can a commercially funded public service programme provider develop and maintain distinctive and innovative programming in an increasingly competitive environment?

John Ellis

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Quality Drama in the US: The New 'Golden Age'?

'Quality TV' has taken on so many different meanings that no two users of the term seem to agree even on the basics (such as which programmes the term references). 'Quality' in the US context could mean non-commercial (anything on PBS), it could mean suitable for children (tame sexual content) or it could mean programming in any TV genre that appeals to a more highbrow, educated audience. 'Quality drama', on the other hand, is a term on whose meaning there is more general agreement. By the 1990s, Robert Thompson was able to argue that, 'quality [drama] has become a genre in itself, complete with its own set of formulaic characteristics' (1996, p. 16). Moreover, it's possible to trace the history of 'quality drama' on US television from its early days in live television of the 1950s to its current incarnation in the HBO 'quality' drama. When HBO advertised shows like *Sex and the City* (1998–) and *The Sopranos* (1999–) with the claim 'it's not TV, it's HBO', they were following a five-decade tradition of distinguishing 'quality TV' from 'regular TV'.

Even before a normative notion of 'everyday television' had solidified, the idea of 'quality drama' existed in the form of the live 'anthology' teleplays of the 1950s. Written by New York playwrights, appealing to an elite audience, and financed by individual corporate sponsors as prestige productions, these live TV dramas carried the cachet of the 'legitimate' theatre. In their minimal use of film techniques as well as the excitement of their live broadcasts

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THE TELEVISION HISTORY BOOK

