
Contemporary British television

Introduction

British television was often referred to in the past as ‘the best in the world’, but now the very idea of thinking of television as intimately bound to a sense of national pride seems almost quaint in a period where, especially for many young people, television is losing its special role as a focal point for a shared national culture. But the contribution of television to a unified British culture was of the utmost concern when the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) first started a television service in 1936, building on the approach it had established as the only radio broadcaster. While the BBC was always expected to be loyal to the nation-state in times of crisis or war, it was also structured to be at one remove from direct government control so that it could not be used simply as a propaganda tool for whoever was in political power. This ideal of political impartiality and unbiased information contributed to an ethos of television as a public service that was also free from commercial pressures, financed not by advertising but through a directly paid licence fee, offering improving education as well as entertainment for the masses. When Independent Television (ITV) was introduced in 1954, its reliance on advertising for finance was also offset by stringent public-service regulations to ensure it also fulfilled these broad aims.

This first era of television was based on a very small number of networks addressing a relatively undifferentiated, mass audience within national boundaries. The second was an era of expanded choice with multi-channel systems gradually being added which offered more minority-interest programmes. This happened gradually in the UK: the

mainstream BBC and ITV terrestrial channels were supplemented by BBC 2 in 1964, Channel 4 and the Welsh language channel S4C in 1982 and Channel 5 in 1997, while the cable companies NTL and Telewest (now merged into Virgin Media) and Sky satellite television also increased capacity from the mid 1980s. There is a widespread agreement that we have now entered into a third era in television. British television is at the forefront of changes that are affecting broadcasting systems throughout the world as a result of a huge expansion in the number of channels, many of them originating from outside the UK, and its convergence with the Internet. Programmes can now be accessed via a range of interactive computer devices and watched on multipurpose screens, which vary from very small mobiles to large, flat, high-definition screens hanging on the wall, rather than the 'box in the corner' that has been the norm until now. The speed of change affecting the industry has sparked a period of intense corporate and political debate over how to adapt British television to these new economic and technological imperatives. Contested ideas about how the mixed system of public service and commercial provision should change to remain economically viable are accompanied by concerns about maintaining the quality of distinctively British programming in the face of globalising pressures.

Culturally powerful interests in the UK have over the past seventy years established and maintained television as a democratic 'public sphere' as well as a conduit for popular entertainment. Debates over the relative claims of 'public service' or 'the market' to be able to deliver 'quality' television that provides for minority as well as majority tastes and interests have recurred at regular intervals. The audience, in whose name this political wrangling is conducted, has been defined by two key rhetorical figures: the 'citizen' of a nation-state and the 'consumer' in a global market. These are not static categories but are open to redefinition as, for instance, new claims for citizenship emerge or new markets are exploited for profit. Neither are they entirely separate, as increasingly citizenship has become redefined in consumerist terms with the government merely providing the conditions within which private enterprise can deliver the services for which consumers pay.

The regulatory framework for this approach was established in the 2003 Communications Act, which is the most comprehensive legislation of its kind in British history. It is now being implemented by Ofcom, an organisation set up by the Government to regulate the converging communications industries, whose close relationship to government is

maintained by their appointing six of its nine board members, including the chair. But whereas regulation in the past has maintained a tight control over the content of broadcasting, Ofcom's primary task has been redefined by the Government as economic regulation to promote competition. As part of this remit, they have been charged with overseeing the successful transition to a fully digital service and reviewing the provision of public-service broadcasting within the overall ecology of the British market. This chapter will explore these contemporary developments in British television and assess some of the effects it is having on content as producers and audiences adapt to these transformations.

The impact of technological change

2006 was the year when convergence stopped being a concept and became instead a corporate priority.¹

Digital technology towards the end of the 1990s brought a new era of abundance in which the number of channels has multiplied and their global reach extended while new interactive and storage capabilities are now being added. The complete replacement of analogue television is planned to roll out in the UK region by region between 2008 and 2012. By 2008, nine in ten UK households already had digital television while over half of secondary televisions in bedrooms and kitchens were also now digital. This has been boosted by the high take-up of Freeview, a free-to-air digital service of around thirty-five channels, while only just under half of UK households pay extra for cable and satellite subscription services with their 350 or so channels. Previous objections to a two-tier system of access based on ability to pay are to some extent answered by this development and by the announcement of a £600 million programme of support financed out of the licence fee to help the over-seventy-fives, the disabled and other people on low incomes to convert their television sets to digital.

Whether via niche channels or assumptions about what genres will appeal to audiences at different times of day on the mainstream channels, viewers within Britain are addressed not simply as citizens of a nation-state but according to their age, class and gender, as well as more varied cultural tastes. Premium content for which subscribers are willing to pay is the foundation of Sky television's success in the UK with sport marketed to men and movies to women, in addition to the six channel 'mixes' from which subscribers can select. Free-to-air

Table 10.1. Annual percentage shares of viewers (individuals) in 2006.

	BBC 1	BBC 2	ITV 1	Channel 4	Five	Digital
2000	27.2	10.8	29.3	10.5	5.7	16.6
2001	26.9	11.1	26.7	10.0	5.8	19.6
2002	26.2	11.4	24.1	10.0	6.3	22.1
2003	25.6	11.0	23.7	9.6	6.5	23.6
2004	24.7	10.0	22.8	9.7	6.6	26.2
2005	23.3	9.4	21.5	9.7	6.4	29.6
2006	22.7	8.8	19.7	9.8	5.7	33.3

Source: Broadcasters Audience Research Board Ltd.

broadcasters are following suit as they split their programming across a steadily increasing number of digital channels. For example, the BBC now offers the youth oriented BBC 3 and the more high-brow BBC 4, News 24, BBC Parliament, as well as the children's channels CBBC and CBeebies and the interactive service BBCi. Table 10.1 shows the upward trend for digital viewing and the impact on audiences for the more established channels, with the BBC and ITV seeing the greatest losses.

The expansion of digital channels has had various effects on the kinds of programmes produced and their scheduling. High-budget peak-time programmes on the BBC still get made, such as the popular 'family' sci-fi drama *Dr Who* (recently revived by well-known TV-drama writer Russell T. Davies's update of its quirky appeal), period costume dramas based on nineteenth-century novels such as Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, light-entertainment shows such as the celebrity dancing contest *Strictly Come Dancing*, or the natural-history series *Planet Earth*, but they are potentially much less visible amongst the increased volume of low budget 'ordinary television' that is required to fill this expanded air time. More intensive marketing of 'event television' seeks to maximise the visibility of these programmes using the cross-promotional potential of multiple channels, web-based and mobile media. For example, the new *Dr Who* series, which returned after a gap of fifteen years, was preceded by a documentary on BBC 3 and a fake fan website 'Have You Seen This Man?', which then continued as a metatextual blog, as well as the usual trailers. Niche programmes form the 'long tail' that characterises the pattern of viewing in an era

of expanded choice. In comedy, for example, contemporary performers such as black female comedian Jocelyn Jee Esien in *Little Miss Jocelyn* or *The Thick of It*, a risky political satire of New Labour's inner circle written by Armando Iannucci, can be tried out and only moved to the main channels if they are a success. More upmarket programmes that once would have found a place in the mixed schedules of the main channels are now to be found on the digital channel BBC 4 instead, often as part of themed short seasons of programmes on topics of current concern such as terrorism or climate change. Digital channels with very low viewing figures and budgets to match at the other end of the 'quality' spectrum rely on cheap imports and repeats, often airing the same programmes several times across a day or week, or on extended live shows based on one talking head, as in, for example the expanding range of phone-in quiz or shopping channels, such as Quizmania and QVC, which, along with the newly legitimate corporate-sponsored channels represent commercial television in its 'purest' form.

The potential for 'on-demand' downloading of programmes in the UK has been enabled by the increased availability of high-speed broadband connections to the Internet, available by 2008 to over half of all households, although a wide gap remains between those on high and low incomes. The impact of this development is in its early stages but will soon transform television into something more like an online retailer, alongside the scheduled service we know today. First into the market, Sky+ at its launch invited consumers to use its download and playback technology to 'Create Your Own TV Channel', while Channel 4's 4OD, the BBC's iPlayer and Virgin's cable service now also give access to a free seven-day catch-up download option for selected programmes. Ofcom has identified the need for a new level of 'media literacy' enabling the population to find and access content amongst a continually expanding range of possibilities and to ensure the success of these new developments. New business models are also emerging, such as copyright systems enabling payment of producers on the basis of serial usage, whereas rights were previously forfeited to the broadcasters. The financing provided by spot advertising may also be replaced in the future by adverts downloaded as personalised content based on viewer preferences.

Future trends in media consumption are signalled by the data from Ofcom on sixteen to twenty-four-year-olds who are not only spending more time accessing content online but who are also developing

'communities' that construct and share material rather than simply downloading pre-packaged programmes. Broadcasters are catching up with these so-called 'Web 2.0' developments by buying in the expertise of successful internet operators, as in ITV's purchase of the social networking site Friends Reunited. The BBC piloted the Creative Archive, along with partners Channel 4, the Open University and the British Film Institute, amongst others, which opened selected content for free non-commercial uses based on a 'creative commons' licence. Its website masthead, 'Find It, Rip It, Mix It, Share It' invited us to imagine playful uses for archive material enabling a more expansive understanding of media literacy than in Ofcom's more functional approach.² But commercial objections to free access will have had to be negotiated for this public-service initiative to survive, and much of the archive will be retained to be exploited for profitable uses, just as DVDs of programmes have been sold in the past. The attempt to attract youth audiences has led the BBC to team up with Google's YouTube website to carry promotional clips that allow UK users to click through to the full programme free of charge, although it also carries two commercial BBC Worldwide channels for global audiences offering entertainment and news. This encroachment onto YouTube of the mainstream broadcasters may, however, simply reduce its appeal to young people who were previously attracted by its anarchic, unregulated content.

Technological developments have also changed the processes of production. The BBC, for example, has moved to fully integrated cross-platform commissioning and production, supported by a unit dedicated to developing technological innovations for new-media uses. This means that new television programmes are now being commissioned along with 'brand extensions' on other platforms such as the Internet or mobile phones. Or ideas may flow in the other direction, with interactive content designed for the BBC website influencing programmes for broadcast. The natural-history programme *Springwatch* presented by Bill Oddie is a highly successful example of this trend with its 'brand' connecting content across radio, television, mobiles, print media and the Internet. The BBC's digital policy seeks to offer opportunities to outside people and organisations. A higher percentage of content, up to 50 per cent, is now commissioned in partnership with independent producers, and so-called 'user-generated' material will be drawn from multiple sources, with the BBC acting as a host and aggregator for a wide range of amateur content. Meanwhile, the miniaturisation of digital

cameras, which during the 1990s made possible the intimate portrayals of everyday life in the generic innovations of reality programming, has now moved to the 'personal digital production' of news. This includes use of camera-phone footage from 'citizen journalists', whose on-the-scene 'scoops' at the scene of the 7 July terrorist bombings in 2005 are seen as a turning point. Regional news segments at the BBC are now produced from start to finish by a single 'video journalist' whatever their previous production expertise. The cost saving allows more time for development, moving the news away from its previous reliance on press releases for pre-planned media events and towards more intimate projects, while the reduction in coverage of on-the-day stories has some journalists complaining that it's no longer recognisable as news. These developments are perceived in some quarters as a threat to the quality guaranteed by professional expertise, but it is too early to say what impact they will have in the long term.

British television in a global market

[T]elevision is simultaneously global and national, shaped by the globalization of media economics and the pull of local and national cultures.³

Global television addresses diverse cultures of taste that cut across national boundaries. In describing this 'post-national television', Timothy Havens notes the way in which assumptions about taste cultures are exchanged internationally via buyers and distributors at trade fairs so that programming strategies for attracting audience segments are quickly copied across the world and become part of the common-sense assumptions about audiences that structure the schedules.⁴ But despite globalising tendencies, markets remain primarily national in orientation where the costs of making local content can be afforded. A medium-sized market such as Britain can support a viable industry but regulation and public-service financing maintains the current high levels of domestic production. Investment per capita is more than in any other country in the world, with three-quarters of terrestrial television still made in Britain (though there are wide differences between channels) compared to only one fifth of domestic cinema.⁵ Audiences generally prefer local content, but it is expensive to provide, and the majority of 'ordinary' television – soaps, sitcom, national news and current affairs – is not suitable for export. The continuing ability of drama

serials, such as *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960–) and *EastEnders* (BBC1, 1981–), to top the ratings ensures their place in the early evening schedules across the week despite being rooted in the working-class cultures of a regional locale and their consequent lack of global appeal.

Relaxed rules for foreign ownership of the commercial broadcasters Five and ITV enabled by the 2003 Communication Act were intended to help boost the global impact of domestic production, but the Act may mean instead that imported programmes will fill up the schedules once their remaining public-service obligations are removed. Many transnational channel headquarters are already located in the UK because of the liberal laws governing satellite transmission and the renewal of satellite licences. Both terrestrial broadcasters are in need of a renewed programming strategy at the time of writing, as a result of declining audiences, advertising and share values. ITV was substantially weakened by the failure in 2002 of its subscription digital venture and is struggling to find a role in the changed television marketplace. The sex and sensationalism of Five's launch strategy has been replaced by a greater reliance on drama series from the USA in an attempt to take it upmarket prior to its takeover by RTL in 2005.

Although the USA and Britain dominate the export market, together creating a global culture in television, Britain's 10 per cent share comes a very long way behind America's estimated 75 per cent and in monetary terms, at £430 million, is a fraction of the £7.7 billion total revenues earned by the domestic industry.⁶ 'The idea that TV exports might function as a showcase for Britishness and British life is contradicted by the realities of the marketplace where Britishness is not a major selling point'; instead, it is seen as 'stuffy, class conscious, parochial'.⁷ In the past, Britain was seen as a provider of 'quality' programmes as an alternative to US fictional entertainment, with high-budget period drama, factual programmes and innovative 'oddball' comedy finding niche markets on the margins, such as PBS or HBO in America. The USA dominates the global market in fiction (90 per cent), while one-off dramas made in the UK rely on co-production money, and topics with global relevance, such as the award-winning *Sex Traffic* (Channel 4, 2004), whose drama about trafficked women spanned Eastern and Western Europe, Canada and the USA. Its multi-strand narrative was able to address the political and ethical complexities of the global trade in women while also offering a gripping drama of suspense whose threads were drawn together in a climax centred in the city of London and its

migrant communities. It offered a realist version of a modern cosmopolitan Britain sharing many of the same concerns as other regions of the world.

More generally, it is those programmes that are not recognisably British and that can be 'indigenised and adapted to the receiving culture' that are more successful in the global market.⁸ Success often depends on the ease with which programmes can be re-voiced into other languages, such as the children's animation series *Bob the Builder* and *Teletubbies*, or natural-history programmes such as *Blue Planet* and *Planet Earth*, but here again the trend is towards co-production and co-financing deals with US companies such as the Discovery Channel. Some high-risk attempts have been made to remake sitcoms and series drama for the US market with, for example, the more 'alternative' *Queer as Folk* drama series and 'reality sitcom' *The Office* finding niche success, but many others have failed to survive the process of translation.

These two shows exemplify the tradition of the short-run, single-writer series in the UK, which is seen to foster innovation but which limits their commercial potential in the US market. *Queer as Folk*'s innovative portrayal of a diverse group of gay men set in the club scene of Manchester city's 'queer quarter' challenged television's previously cautious approach to minority sexual cultures and was a cult success with gay audiences. The concept transferred to the USA to enable it to be exploited further through a spin-off serial that was team-written and stretched over several seasons. But the most significant commercial success in recent times has been in sales of formats for hybridised lifestyle, reality and quiz shows such as *Changing Rooms*, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and *The Weakest Link*. In these cases, it is their acquired production expertise that is sold rather than the programme itself, thereby reducing the risk of failure; these are then produced locally and fully adapted to the domestic culture.

One exception is the global value placed on the BBC's long-established reputation for impartial news, which has been maintained in the face of competition from the rise of other worldwide news channels such as CNN. BBC World is the only British overseas channel. 'Seen in 270 million homes in more than 200 countries', it carries international news and 'the best of the BBC's lifestyle and factual programming'.⁹ Unlike the globalising strategies pursued by transnational corporations such as MTV, BBC World broadcasts a single feed rather than being customised for different national and regional markets. It targets an elite,

cosmopolitan audience who can understand English. It forms part of the commercially funded BBC Worldwide, which accounts for half of all UK television's export revenues.¹⁰

The future of public service television

Television is important. But not as important as the people who work in it think it is.¹¹

The product of a cultural attitude as much as spectrum scarcity, public-service broadcasting is now under severe pressure from proponents of the 'customer service' model, who argue that regulating for quality, plurality, balance and impartiality will be irrelevant when the interactive capability of broadband services enables entertainment for every taste and political discussion from every perspective. In view of the digital transition, Ofcom's conviction is that broadcasting is becoming analogous to any other customer service which 'needs to deliver content according to the retail imperatives of convenience, price, range and quality'.¹² Ofcom predict only the most minimal of public-service obligations by digital switchover as broadcasting ceases to be a special case and becomes instead merely part of the larger communications landscape. Only where there is 'market failure' is there any need to 'bridge the gap between what a well-funded broadcasting market would provide and what UK citizens want'.¹³ As Gillian Doyle and Douglas Vick point out, this redefines public-service broadcasting in consumerist terms – giving people what they want – rather than the high principles that informed the system in the twentieth century, that is to say, to act as a force for cultural improvement and a public sphere for political debate for citizens of a nation-state, which aimed, in the words attributed to the BBC's first Director General, Lord Reith, to give people what they need.

One of the areas of political wrangling as television merges with the Internet is how to handle the regulation of content to avoid 'harm and offence'. Ofcom envisages a system in the future that relies far more on self-regulation by producers and consumers, backed up by laws that offer protection against risks such as incitement to racial hatred, invasions of privacy, libel or obscenity, as is now the case for the print media and the Internet. Media organisations, they argue, have the incentive to maintain consumer trust in their 'brand'. 'Media literate' consumers, meanwhile, will be encouraged to become self-regulating, helped by information that allows them to avoid content they might find offensive

for themselves or harmful for their children. In the short term, however, scheduled broadcasts will retain most of the existing controls, such as the 9.00 p.m. 'watershed' for adult material, whereas video-on-demand services will rely more on advance content guides and PIN protection.¹⁴

The continuing relevance of a publicly funded BBC in the digital era is another key issue. The BBC remains the only broadcaster partially outside Ofcom's regulatory control and has a weighty role to play in sustaining the public-service purposes of television. It has been fighting for its survival ever since the 1986 Peacock Report recommended getting rid of the licence fee paid by every household with a television. More recently, its relations with Government were severely dented by a row over its reporting of the events leading up to the invasion of Iraq and the Hutton Report's controversial subsequent critique of the BBC's governance, which precipitated the forced resignations of its Director General and Chair of the Board of Governors. A new trust, holding the Executive Board to account, has been put in place to oversee the BBC's activities.

Renewal of its Royal Charter up to 2016 and a new licence fee settlement up to 2012 are two victories in the medium term over the forces ranged against the BBC. The Charter sets out, for the first time, a definition of the public purposes of the BBC as sustaining citizenship and civil society; promoting education and learning; stimulating creativity and cultural excellence; representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities; bringing the world to the UK and the UK to the world; and building digital Britain.¹⁵ It identifies audience evaluation of quality, impact and value for money as the central arbiter and 'audience reach' as the primary measure indicating universality of their provision rather than the competitive drive of the 'ratings'. The requirement to schedule a high proportion of well-funded, innovative and challenging UK-made programmes is a central priority. The BBC's contribution to regional economic and cultural development is to be strengthened by shifting some production activities from London to the north of England. Further expansion of online services at the expense of its commercial competitors has been curtailed.

In the longer term, Ofcom wants to break the BBC's monopoly on state funding. It has recommended distributing money from the licence fee to a wider range of content providers, as was first suggested by the Peacock Committee in 1986. One beneficiary could be Channel 4 who after twenty-five years of broadcasting has asked for a public subsidy to protect its public-service role in the face of a projected long-term

decline in audiences and advertising revenues. The final section offers a more extended discussion of Channel 4's address to the 'citizen consumer' and its current strategy for commercial survival in a global market while remaining true to its public-service purposes.

Programming for the citizen consumer

Channel 4 continues to be a unique national asset of which Britain can be proud.¹⁶

Reality TV has rapidly come to occupy a place at the forefront of contemporary television – a position from which it seems to 'speak' particularly clearly to the ways in which broadcasters are seeking to attract audiences in the multichannel landscape.¹⁷

Channel 4's remit is to cater for audiences not served by ITV, to encourage innovation and experimentation and to encourage wider access to programme-making for under-represented groups. Under the control of a board of trustees rather than shareholders, its unique public-private status and system of commissioning from independent producers has enabled it to adapt quickly to the changing environment. Channel 4 has built up a successful stable of digital channels although, since it began to sell its own advertising in the 1990s, its main channel has been criticised as being indistinguishable from commercial rivals with an early evening sequence of a quiz show (*Countdown*), game show (*Deal or No Deal*), chat show (*Richard and Judy*, *Paul O'Grady*), cartoon (*The Simpsons*) and soap (*Hollyoaks*). Despite retaining the hour-long news at 7.00 p.m., the channel's first chief executive laments that the 'quiet seriousness' of discussion and documentaries in peak time has been substituted by 'reality, lifestyle, US acquisitions and shock docs' and by an obsession with 'adolescent transgression and sex'.¹⁸ The reality game show *Big Brother* and its *Celebrity Big Brother* spin-off deliver its highest ratings for several months of each year, helped by the tabloids and celebrity magazines that circulate the scandalous events precipitated by the twenty-four-hour surveillance on which this genre depends.

Although these critics may be right about a shift in genres, provenance and subject matter, these kinds of sweeping criticisms invariably arise from the specificities of the writer's own tastes and expectations, which are formed in a particular era and social milieu. Channel 4's youth audience of sixteen to thirty-four-olds, which it needs in order to attract advertisers, have grown up in a changed media environment and

have different cultural tastes and ideas about what counts as quality programming; nor do they care whether programmes are made in this country as long as they can relate to the content. Minority-appeal arts, current affairs and documentary programmes whose absence is noted have moved to the digital channel More 4. In terms of quality, the really important question is whether the programmes are good of their type. US-originated drama series such as *Lost*, *Sex and the City*, *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, and *The West Wing* for example, have been aesthetically innovative and, in some cases, politically progressive additions to the schedules. The many documentaries about sexual topics, which have played a significant role in Channel 4's late-night schedules from the mid 1990s, vary widely in quality from the tawdry to the enlightening; but at their best they can be seen as enabling a welcome shift towards more open and less puritanical attitudes towards sex in British culture.¹⁹ *Big Brother* was innovative when it first aired in 2000, offering amongst other things a solution to the financing of multi-channel television through the additional revenues generated by phone-in voting, which has been widely copied since. But the format has always been controversial. Indeed, *Celebrity Big Brother 5* (2007) became the centre of an international media and political furore when one participant, Bollywood star Shilpa Shetty, was the subject of alleged 'racist bullying'. It provoked calls for Channel 4's licence to be revoked for inciting racial hatred, while her eventual win of the vote was used by the Government as evidence of the nation's credibility as a tolerant multicultural society.

We can also see how the belief in British television's role as a force for education and improvement of its populace has survived both the generic transformations of factual television and the commercial priorities that dominate the rhetoric of Ofcom's cultural policy. The generic innovations of popular factual entertainment, a global as well as British phenomenon, which has been accelerating since the early 1990s and which comes under such umbrella titles as 'lifestyle', 'makeover' or 'reality' programming, is generally acknowledged to be an ingenious solution to the problem of filling the exponential rise in broadcasting hours. These formats constitute a growing component of what has been termed 'ordinary television', and are very hard to classify given the dynamic processes of hybridisation that occurs as producers search for the next big hit.²⁰ They have multiple generic precursors, both factual and fictional: chat shows, fly-on-the-wall documentaries, talent contests, game shows, celebrity sitcoms and soap operas, which get mixed

and matched in different ways. Castigated as ‘trash TV’ for elevating the trivial and manipulating both participants and viewers, or alternatively praised for democratising television, their engagement with the everyday lives of ordinary people and their private experience, both pleasant and traumatic, offers emotional knowledge about events, about what it’s like from ‘the inside’.²¹

Just as the BBC has had to balance popular appeal with its claims for ‘public value’ in order to justify the universal licence fee, so Channel 4, in making a case for public funding, draws attention to those of its factual entertainment shows that also prioritise education and a version of British culture that foregrounds diversity and social inclusion. Channel 4’s annual report in 2006, for example, cites the celebrity chef Jamie Oliver’s award-winning *School Dinners* as an example in a context where television’s influence on the growing problem of child obesity has become an increasingly high-profile political issue in Britain, with Ofcom announcing restrictions on the exposure of under-sixteens to advertising on television for foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar despite an estimated loss of £39 million in revenues.²²

Jamie’s progress from ‘Jack the Lad’ to ‘Food Campaigner’ sums up his trajectory from when he was first discovered by a television producer as a young chef, while also demonstrating both the commercial and public-service potential of reality genres. He became a powerful commercial brand following the success of his three series of *The Naked Chef* (1999–2001), including being credited with the revival of Sainsbury’s supermarket through his promotion of this British chain. His central presence as a celebrity presenter was also the foundation of the show’s global appeal, despite differences in national culinary traditions.²³ This kind of lifestyle show harks back to the ‘hobbyist strand’ of close-up demonstrations of cookery, gardening and DIY techniques that were part of the ‘improving’ impetus of British television culture but which are now more focused on celebrity presenters and the melodrama of participants’ emotional reaction to ‘an instantaneous display of transformation’.²⁴ A sense of intimacy is accentuated through a shared experience of time as participants and viewers count down to this moment and by the colloquial tone of the address: ‘The voice of lifestyle media is “chatty” – utilising a diversity of regional accents, uses of slang, ways of talking and writing that de-emphasise authority and play on chattiness and matiness’, and which works to make expertise ordinary, accessible and inclusive.²⁵ Both Rachel Moseley and Joanne Hollows

show how the programme's complex presentation of his lifestyle, using a realist docusoap narrative style, constructs a hybrid 'youthful' national identity for Jamie, whose style of cooking is based in a British provincial culture of pub food learned, as a child, from his publican father but inflected by his subsequent training in a top-end Italian restaurant in London, mirroring the more general shift towards a cosmopolitan food culture in urban middle-class Britain.²⁶ He combines the familiar media figures of the 'new lad' and the 'new man' in his self-conscious use of Cockney slang, the urban 'mod' cool of his Vespa scooter as he travels round London to buy the ingredients, his 'Italian' attention to cooking at home for his friends and his 'missus' while presenting 'the domestic as a site of play' to distance it from women's work.²⁷

The more serious 'professional' approach of the 'chef-turned-socially-conscious-food-campaigner' comes more to the fore in his subsequent programmes. *Jamie's Kitchen* (2002) is in the popular format of the 'teenage makeover' in which fifteen disaffected and low-achieving young people are trained to become kitchen workers in a top-class London restaurant specifically set up for the project, a scheme that has been successfully reproduced in several other countries. And while *Jamie's School Dinners* (2005) has an element of 'lifestyle in collision' in which a situation is contrived to foreground clashes in lifestyle, especially those based in class differences here, as in the globally successful format of *Wife Swap*, this dramatic element is strongly combined with a transformative discourse in which each of the parties are changed by the encounter.²⁸ 'In the drab kitchens of a South London secondary school, passion and high drama raged as Jamie Oliver and his sometimes sceptical team of dinner ladies struggled to re-invent school dinners, not only creating radically new menus on impossibly tight budgets but, at the same time, winning the hearts and minds of the children they served', claims Channel 4.²⁹ Its policy impact was swift with the Department for Education and Skills announcing new nutritional standards for school meals and hundreds of millions of pounds to achieve them, but the clash of class and regional cultures was revealed in subsequent news stories showing resistant mothers passing fast food over school fences to their children.

Conclusion

The 'era of abundance' in the digital age has changed television's ideological role, reducing its power to delineate the centre and the margins,

to influence the shared assumptions of a national culture. Instead, it is suggested we should now think in terms of ‘diversity’ and a questioning of the ‘myth of the centre’ that television claims for itself.³⁰ Commercially, the battle of the ratings for peak-time programmes, which has dominated the industry for fifty years, is becoming less central, as economic survival depends less on sheer numbers as on the intensity of engagement with a wider range of more tightly defined user communities. Rather than mourning this loss of national cohesiveness in a narrative of cultural decline, I would rather tell a more optimistic story about television that helps us to imagine a future that is not necessarily better or worse but just different and that can be harnessed for both good and bad purposes, just as it was in the past.

The policy debates reveal a continuing commitment in the digital environment to the British tradition of public-service values in order to promote the formation of an informed and cosmopolitan ‘citizen-consumer’ and now ‘citizen-producer’. But there is greater emphasis on the market as a means to regulate and deliver this, and on the audience’s capacity to choose and to participate. ‘In a world of so many choices, the audience cares about trust, taste, relevance, usefulness’, argues one new-media commentator.³¹ ‘Trust’ in a market-led system depends on protecting the commercial value of the ‘brand’ and, as Ofcom has suggested, leaving the industry to decide on and police self-regulating codes of practice. The worry is that this leaves out of account the broader interests that make up a democratic public sphere and may encourage a ‘tabloid’ cultural agenda as companies seek to manipulate the risks and benefits of scandalous publicity. The creation of content for a diversity of ‘tastes’ can also be left to the market, but this ignores the processes of taste formation that informed the original conception of public-service television. One answer is to supplement Ofcom’s more narrowly conceived promotion of media literacy with a national strategy for media education and a public culture of critical debate to inform shared values and to challenge existing cultural hierarchies and exclusions. ‘Relevance’ and ‘usefulness’ may be discovered through ‘the wisdom of crowds’ harnessed by ‘friend of a friend’ network technologies to make visible what is available but will also require forms of specialist expertise to anticipate and mould content for those uses in imaginative ways. An expanded conception of media literacy needs to encompass the creative and technical skills for producing media which can now be distributed more widely. We still need a range of public-service institutions, such as the BBC and

Channel 4, to make this possible, but working in partnership with other cultural and educational organisations. The metamorphosis of British television into the digital media of the future requires widespread public engagement with accompanying debates about ethics, quality and taste, embedded in a broader culture of creativity, if we are to sustain and enhance its full potential to enrich the lives of its citizens.

Notes

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