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Introduction

This short commentary piece arises from completing an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded research project into the relationship between representations of business on factual television in the UK and the public's perception and understanding of entrepreneurship (Boyle and Kelly, 2010; Kelly and Boyle, 2011; Boyle and Kelly, 2012). (1) What we would like to do here is reflect on some of the implications of this work with specific regard to the research agenda around the media and civic culture. We remain convinced that even in the digital age, popular television remains a central entry point into debates about the relationship between broader civic and political culture.

The study was UK based, with reception studies carried out in both Glasgow and London, so we limit our discussion to that context and specifically to UK television culture. This is not unimportant. Many of the studies regarding the role that television can play in shaping broader civic culture have often been US based and informed both by the particularities of the American television industry, but also that specific cultural and political context. Thus, work such as Ouellette and Hay (2008) often make claims regarding the space occupied by television in the cultural and political life of the US that remain anchored in the US experience and cannot be simply transported across the Atlantic and imposed on the complexity of experience for the UK television audience. We should add that this is not what Ouellette and Hay are claiming to do, rather to highlight the specific cultural and geographical context of many of these studies. In that spirit, our work is also rooted in the UK experience and enmeshed in the complex political and cultural environment that is the devolved culture of the UK with its mix of London centric UK government and

1

various devolved political cultures across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This broader political culture shapes the policy context within which television operates within the UK as well as interacting with popular cultural expressions of this environment.

Our study also was interested in the broad production context of television and of placing this within the context of the continual influence of public service broadcasting in moulding the television culture in the UK (Brunsdon 2003: Hill et al, 2007). Again we argue that popular television is both an important entry point into the construction of aspects of public knowledge as well as a jumping off point for viewers as they seek additional information. We were also equally interested in the narratives that factual television creates around business and entrepreneurship and, crucially, how the audience engages with this range of representations. Again the latter is important, in that there can be a tendency to assume much about the audience from television's textual representations. However as protagonists of reception studies (Hill, 2005, 2007) will recognise, when you ask the audience, they often surprise you as well as re-affirm certain assumptions about how audiences use television for a range of social purposes.

The Project: Production, Narratives and Reception

Tracing the evolution of what has come to be known as the 'business entertainment format' to the BBC's production of *Troubleshooter* in 1990, our research demonstrates how the entrepreneur has moved into the mainstream of British popular culture over the last two decades while also highlighting how business and entrepreneurship can provide material for entertainment–led factual productions that

2

move beyond the arena of news and current affairs (Kelly and Boyle, 2011). We identified two main strands of business entertainment programming in the form of the aforementioned 'troubleshooter' format, which has its roots in the documentary tradition, and the 'business gameshow', which is derived from the more recent emergence of reality television. As such, we argue that business entertainment programming can be placed within a continuum that features lightly–constructed documentaries at one end of the scale through to highly–formatted reality television at the other. Examples of the former include *Property Ladder*, *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares, Mary Queen of Shops* and *Undercover Boss* while the latter comprises series such as *Dragons' Den, The Apprentice, The Restaurant* and *The Last Millionaire.*

By drawing on interviews with channel controllers, commissioners, producers and presenters from across the BBC, Channel 4 and the independent sector, we sought to highlight the key individuals and the decision–making processes that have shaped the development of the business entertainment format and locate this within the broader socio–economic context in which the television industry has structurally changed during this period. In doing so, we acknowledged that the television industry has itself developed into a business during this time, with the result being that rather than operating primarily within creative terms, broadcasters and programme makers have increasingly come to view themselves as [creative] entrepreneurs. Moreover, we were also concerned with the ways in which particular television formats appear to get mobilized in wider articulations of the changing role and function of public service broadcasting in the multi–channel digital environment. In other words, business entertainment formats such as *The Apprentice* or *Dragons' Den* have been framed by

3

the BBC as exemplars of contemporary public service content. They are not simply about entertaining but serve broader educational and public knowledge provision functions, which a multi-platform BBC can exploit as part of what it views as its public service remit.

In addition to a consideration of the historical, institutional and textual nature of business entertainment formats, our study also looked at the ways in which the wider viewing public engages with the types of programmes outlined above and the concept of entrepreneurship more generally in society. This involved 'asking the audience' through semi–structured focus groups about their levels of engagement with business on television, their knowledge and understanding of business and the term entrepreneur and the relationship between television representations of entrepreneurship and the role and function of the entrepreneur in cultural and economic life. Essentially, we found that respondents were largely knowledgeable about television as a medium and aware of the many complexities involved in the production of factual entertainment programming of this type. Due to the formatted nature of the shows and their prime-time position on public service terrestrial channels, there was an agreement that although primarily entertainment–based, the use of weekly, repeatable narratives nevertheless allowed such programming to put forward certain basic principles about business and how to succeed in certain sectors in ways that are accessible to a wide audience.

Television and Popular Culture

There has always been tension within television culture between the role of television as an entertainment medium, and its functionality as means to educate and inform the

public. Indeed the latter aspects of this are often viewed as central to television's position within a broader civic or political culture that, at its core, views the informed citizen as being an integral component of society. We would argue, as recent research by Klein (2011) suggests, that often these terms are not mutually exclusive. In other words television entertainment vehicles often play an important part in the construction of a broader range of representations of society that help shape how people think about the world around them. This isn't of course new and was one of the driving principles behind the early evolution of media and communications studies in the UK and elsewhere in the late 1960s and throughout the 70s and 80s, that recognised that popular media culture is saturated with politics, both in a formal senses and in terms of how it represents differing groups and ideas in society (Dahlgren, 2005; Van Zoonen, 2005).

So for example what becomes clear from our research is that television programmes such as *The Apprentice* and *Dragons' Den* do encourage a learning of 'soft skills' amongst audiences and while this may be more pronounced for younger viewers it also resonates across other age groups. A central element in this process is of course what audiences bring to the viewing experience. Thus, where people are in the entrepreneurial cycle helps determine the manner in which they engage with these programmes. This means that there is often an 'active audience' watching the same programme on differing levels, some purely for enjoyment and others for information and entertainment.

Business people in the latter stages of the entrepreneurial cycle often saw these programmes as unrealistic and a form of heightened reality that did not reflect their

5

own experiences of business life. This did not mean that they did not enjoy them or engage with them; rather that they did so in a differing manner than other sections of the audience. By contrast those with no experience of running a small business were often intrigued by the possibility of doing so and found such programmes a useful initial starting point for thinking about this possible development.   An interesting aspect throughout the project was the extent to which the business community would often attack such programmes as offering an unrealistic and distorted view of business culture. However, as television scholars are well aware, this is what television does to all aspects of society it comes into contact with: it mediates it often through a formatted structure. Indeed we would argue that some of the formatted 'troubleshooter' television was no more constructed than traditional documentary engagements with business culture.

A different question then was not are these *accurate* representations of business life (as they were mediated and constructed versions) but rather are audiences aware of this (and our research suggested very strongly that they were) and do these representations influence behaviour or thinking. On this latter point we argue that this depends on what members of the audience bring to the programmes in terms of their own experiences, and television is as likely to reinforce ideas (I don't want to start my own business because it is too risky, for example) as to change them.

We also found that many value the importance of 'vocationally skilled' presenters as opposed to 'televisually skilled' (Bennett and Holmes, 2010) and that the issue of the 'celebrity entrepreneur' is an attraction in raising the profile of a programme in the cluttered digital landscape. Programmes that work best however clearly understand

6

the importance of narrative and emotional identification and seek to humanize the business world by encouraging audiences to ask themselves questions such as 'how would I feel?' or 'what would I do?' if placed in a similar situation.

It emerged that for younger members of the audience in particular these programmes can be inspiring and empowering but again it's important to note that audiences are extremely 'media literate' and acutely aware of the limits and constraints of formatted television. In other words, they understand the constraints of representing reality on television but this does not negate the pleasures they may take in negotiating their way through these discourses and representations.

With regards to the term 'entrepreneur', there were regional and national differences in its usage. We found for example that the term was marginally less popular amongst Scottish based respondents than with those in London and, for many, it has become so synonymous with television that it is in danger of becoming redundant. With regards to how the programmes we looked at in this study represent specific groups in society, it appeared that while most perceived them to offer a broadly positive view of business amongst ethnic minorities, the range of entrepreneurs on television remains narrow with more women needed and different aspects of the worlds of work and business explored because, at present, there is too much emphasis on retail and sales.

These programmes and the media profile they generate for the entrepreneurs who take part also helps open political doors and offers them opportunities to become policy shapers, something again recognized by the members of the audience we spoke to. What is interesting here is not only are these programmes popular with the audience,

they also resonate among policy-shapers keen to mobilise television as one means in encouraging a more entrepreneurial culture across the UK.

What is crucial in terms of audience engagement is that these forms of popular factual television connect with audiences in a manner that is often more intense than their engagement with business content in news and current affairs. In so doing, business entertainment formats naturalize and offer the possibility of lifestyle change for certain segments of the audience, although this is dependent on their own background and experience. In short we found that audiences can gain basic knowledge from these programmes that facilitate some development in business skills and language, but this cannot be simply read as being significantly likely to alter their behaviour.

We would argue that television remains a compelling medium for constructing emotional identification with its audience through the template of the 'journey', and to this end it is simply mistaken to suggest that entertainment and knowledge are mutually exclusive. Television (with a growing social media dimension) remains to us central in debates about the creation and dissemination of public knowledge and the functioning of a broader civic culture. Yet while these programmes, mixing entertainment, information and even at times education appear to have become part of the public service portfolio of content in the digital age of television (the most successful business related programmes tend to appear on the BBC and Channel 4 for example), the core mantra for television producers remains the need to first and foremost entertain the audience.

Television in Context

8

What clearly emerges from the research is the continuing central role that television plays in British popular culture even in the digital social media age. It is television that remains important within a mix of media usage among the audience. However we would also argue that one cannot take a media-centred view of the world or the audience. In other words, television is important, but it is only one source of information among a myriad of sources that inform and influence behaviour. In addition viewers do not engage with any one area of the media landscape in isolation, they join up differing elements from news and current affairs output, to factual content, to sport and so forth. In terms of business related content we found for example that many members of the audience would use material they had come across on television as a jumping off point to pursue other sources of information regarding business start ups.

Also of central importance for us were the ways in which a more commercially orientated television production environment also resulted in more business related content being commissioned onscreen. By this we mean that as television producers have increasingly viewed themselves as more entrepreneurial and their self image has shifted over the last decade or so from makers of television to people involved in the business of television, this cultural shift has been reflected through onscreen content.

This process extends across the UK television industry and significantly it has been two of the public service providers, the BBC and Channel 4 that have mobilised the 'business entertainment format' to the greatest degree securing both audience and critical success in the process. These formats allow an entertainment led approach to also contain (for producers and commissioners at least) enough journalistic or

9

educational content to justify its PSB label. At the same time, we also found clear evidence that indicated the important roles that certain individuals play in shaping television culture at key moments. For example, producer Robert Thirkell has for over 20 years been instrumental in creating and nurturing a range of business entertainment formats that have facilitated business related content finding a mainstream television audience. In addition, Jane Root, then controller of BBC2 (1999 – 2004), was a key figure in commissioning such content for the screen at a time when it was not universally popular at the BBC. Thus this combination of structure and agency are crucial in shaping the context within which television content gets produced, while broader cultural shifts in the audience are often crucial in giving content and formats traction at key moments in terms of popularity.

Conclusion

Popular television remains a central part of the cultural landscape of the UK. While a research focus on journalism and news/current affairs and its role in creating and nurturing a civic and political culture remains important, so too does the role that popular factual television and its representations play in feeding into the politics of the popular (Corner, 2009; Couldry, 2009; 2010). It is the ability of popular television to often engage the audience emotionally that makes it so compelling.

This project was not a production study; however its interest in the production context of these programmes was we feel important in helping to better understand the tension between the structural constraints of the television industry while also recognising the role of agency and key individuals in shaping the trajectory of television output. In other words it's impossible to understand the plethora of entrepreneurs on UK

10

television screens without being aware of the commercialisation of television production, the rise of formatted television (Moran, 1998; Steemers, 2004) and the key role played by ground breaking producers such as Robert Thirkell in this process.

By also focusing on both the range of narratives produced by television and how audiences engage with these we get a more holistic view of the complex nature of how television plays into and shapes the broader climate of opinion that informs political and civic culture. One becomes less prone to simply impose a reading on television narratives as being indicative of how all members of the audience will understand that television representation. If nothing else, this project confirmed to us the high levels of media understanding around formats and television production that exists among large swathes of the audience and the complex and contradictory ways in which individuals engage with television as one source of knowledge about the world around them and their place within this space.

Representations of business, entrepreneurship and the world of work remain ideologically important as well as compelling aspects of television in the UK for sections of the audience. Given the turbulent economic and political climate that surrounds the economy, this looks likely to remain an area that British television will view as important for some time to come. And while television can act as a barometer of popular taste, it is important now, more than ever, to recognise the complexity of audience engagement with such content. Will putting more entrepreneurs on television encourage us to become more entrepreneurial? For some sections of the audience these programmes and the entrepreneurs featured are a source of inspiration, for others sources of fun or even ridicule. To be clear, we are not

arguing for some television-centric view of social development that has often been too implicit in other research into television.   However we do believe television remains a key arena in the construction and re-constitution of ideas about who we are, and who we may wish to become. The public service aspects of the programmes we examined in this project although not without controversy did unquestionably open up a public space within which citizens debated and discussed the role of business and entrepreneurship in shaping their lives and the society around them.

Notes

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