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**Introduction: Trans TV as Intervention into Contemporary
Television, Trans TV Dossier 1: Platform Television, Netflix and
Industrial Transformations**

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Abstract

This dossier is the first of two to emerge out of the recent Trans TV conference held at the University of Westminster in September 2017. The focus of this specific dossier is in tracking the latest developments and emergent trends affecting contemporary television, especially as delivered via new online streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon. The article and series of interventions within this dossier set out to challenge both popular and scholarly discourse around these contemporary transformations, pointing not only to technological shifts in television but also to changes in terms of branding, regional and transnational delivery of content, viewing practices, mobile consumption and 'transfandom', among other factors. The dossier poses the key questions that if television is undergoing a process of transformation as the title Trans TV suggests, what is television becoming and to what extent and in what aspects can we still recognise it as television? While there are a variety of answers to these questions within the dossier, there is a consensus that in the light of these multiple transformations of television, many of the key concepts and assumptions of television studies now require a thorough reconsideration.

Keywords

Platform television, SVOD, binge-viewing, transfandom, transnational TV, branding, Netflix

As many television studies scholars have pointed out, including some included in this dossier (e.g. Jenner 2016; Lotz, 2017), if there is one thing on which we can agree about contemporary television, it is that its modes of production, distribution and consumption have been radically affected by the implementation of digital technologies in the era of 'Internet-Distributed', 'SVOD', 'Platform' or 'TVIV' television. Indeed what we mean by the word 'television' has changed radically from the classical network era model of one-to-many transmission. So much so that such key television studies terms as 'channels', 'audiences', 'schedules' have radically transformed meanings, if they even remain meaningful at all. Yet sometimes these kinds of discussions have taken place fairly separately from discussions of contemporary television aesthetics, representation and new forms of content, which have also been undergoing radical transformation. It is not that the connections have gone unnoticed as much as that they have rarely been given balanced attention, depending on whether the discussion is more oriented towards empirical industry studies or aesthetic close reading and representational approaches.

Trans TV operates as an intervention into these multiple contemporary transformations of television, arguing that they need to be thought of together, and especially discussions of technological transformations of industry cannot be separated from aesthetic transformations both of televisual programmes and the televisual experiences of audiences. While both the 'production studies' and 'aesthetic' turns of television studies are welcome, these should not be seen as separate endeavours, especially considering the convergent tendencies of digital delivery systems in which televisual content is being distributed in ways that go against almost every aspect of prior models of network television. More than this, it suggests that these new modes of production, distribution and consumption, defined as they are according to the active desires of niche users rather than the controlled transmission model of the network, schedule and advertising, might themselves open new avenues for a trans or queer aesthetic, not only in the greater proliferation of non-heteronormative characters, narratives and viewer experiences but also as a queering of television itself into a kind of divergent heterotopia, radically different from preceding corporate or national spaces of televisual transmission. It has been argued that the key TV shows that epitomise the so-called third golden age of the rise and hegemony of US cable television, such as *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *Mad Men* (2007–2015) and *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), were largely concerned with toxic masculinity or 'difficult men' (see Martin, 2013). In some of the key instances of television in the era of Netflix and Amazon, however, heteronormative 'man' is off the menu in favour of a proliferation of queer, trans and ethnically diverse characters, whether in *Orange is the New Black* (2013–), *Sense8* (2015–2018) or *Transparent* (2014–), to name only the most obvious examples. This is driven in part by the new online ecologies in which television finds itself, and is also in part due to a lag between the emergence of new sexual identities and practices, and conventional televisual representations. This is not a claim that all internet distributed television is aesthetically progressive but rather that these new models of television, with their appeals to ever more niche and activated users, at least allow for a potentially more open manifestation of television.

This was the thinking behind the recent Trans TV conference that took place at the University of Westminster in September 2017. Organised as an experiment to see whether the above-described transformations of both television and television studies, in terms of both technologies and delivery systems, as well as content and aesthetics could be thought together, and a dialogue generated between the recent productions studies and

aesthetic turns in television studies. To cite the report on the conference that appeared in CST Online, it aimed to examine whether ‘new directions in television production and distribution might do more than just provide creative freedom for artists, and could also allow for a more diverse space of representation across the landscape of what we are for now still calling “television”’ (Lynch and Scarlata, 2017).

This dossier is the direct outcome of this event, an attempt to extend the conversation around ‘trans TV’ by presenting both original and cutting-edge articles by emerging scholars and shorter interventions by key scholars in the field. In this first dossier, the focus is more on industrial transformations but considered as inseparable from specific strategies in terms of content, and especially new modes of consumption from binge viewing to transfandom, to mobile televisual consumption. In doing so, these discussions necessarily engage with a range of contemporary television programmes from Mexican telenovelas, Slow TV and *13 Reasons Why* (2017–) to *Black Mirror* (2011–) and the innovative Norwegian youth-oriented programme *Skam* (2015–2017).

The dossier begins with five short interventions that offer some foundational observations regarding the consequences of TV’s current ‘trans’ period, from the perspectives of audience, industry and scholarship. The interventions of Gry Rustad and Tanya Horeck, Mareike Jenner and Tina Kendall map current changes in TV viewing practices connected to technological transformations of content delivery. Rustad focuses on a specific and innovative case study, the Norwegian youth-oriented programme, *Skam* (2015–17), which raises crucial questions about the ways that television is being consumed are changing, and which she addresses both temporally, in terms of the concept of ‘rhythms of reception’, and spatially, in terms of television being consumed in unexpected locations—even the bathroom. Building on similar concerns, Horeck, Jenner and Kendall tackle the much-discussed notion of ‘binge viewing’, presenting nine critical propositions that serve both to debunk some of the clichés and misunderstandings surrounding binge viewing, as well as proposing constructive ways of understanding it more fully. Matt Hills refines the focus of enquiry in his intervention, considering ‘trans TV’ in relation to evolving experiences and conceptualisations of TV fandom and fan communities. Using Netflix as a basis for his discussion, Hills equates the platform’s hybridised and multi-discursive branding strategies and content delivery to a corresponding ‘transfandom’ which transcends the traditional binary of communal/individual fandoms, instead enabling viewers to reflexively negotiate their sense of belonging (or resistance) to the datafied fan categories of content providers.

Further charting the implications of ‘trans TV’, Amanda Lotz and Michael Wayne adopt a more industrial perspective, with Lotz reflecting upon her recent work examining the changes brought about by TV content being delivered via online portals (Lotz, 2017) and Wayne exploring TV’s transforming branding strategies, resulting from the growing interpenetration of national and global TV industries. Both arrive at the conclusion that such transformations necessitate new ways of thinking, in industry and academia. Lotz argues for the need to abandon the ‘silos’ that have until now made strong distinctions between media which are now frequently being delivered via overlapping portals, and Wayne stresses the need for new vocabularies to more accurately articulate emergent transnational approaches to TV branding.

The dossier concludes with Sofia Miranda Rios and Alexa Scarlata’s article, which offers a valuable counter-narrative to dominant US and Netflix-oriented accounts of contemporary SVOD television, by presenting a comparative analysis of the subscription video-on-demand platforms Stan and Blim based in Australia and Mexico respectively. Focusing on the industrial and marketing practices of these platforms, Rios and Scarlata evidence the ways in which both Stan and Blim have garnered success through providing and promoting geographically localised content to their viewers, as a point of contrast to Netflix’s (often problematic) status as ‘global’ content provider. As such it points to one of the most important transformations affecting contemporary ‘Trans TV’, namely shifts in the geopolitics of the transnational. Collectively, what the article and interventions signal is the profound impact of ‘trans TV’ on television production, distribution and viewing experiences, complicating many fundamental assumptions of what it means to ‘make, distribute and watch TV’ as formulated in twentieth century television studies and popular discourses.

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Author biographies

Michael N Goddard is Reader in Film, Television and Moving Image at the University of Westminster.

He has published widely on international cinema and audiovisual culture as well as cultural and media theory. His latest book *Guerrilla Networks* on urban guerrilla movements and radical media practices in the 1970s has just been published by Amsterdam University Press. His previous book, *Impossible Cartographies* (2013), was on the cinema of Raúl Ruiz. He has also been doing research on the fringes of popular music focusing on groups, such as The Fall, Throbbing Gristle and Laibach and culminating in editing two books on noise, *Reverberations* (2012) and *Resonances* (2013). He is currently working on a book on the British post-industrial group Coil and beginning a new research project on genealogies of immersive media and virtuality.

Christopher Hogg is Senior Lecturer in Television Theory at the University of Westminster. His book, *Acting in British Television* (2017, co-authored with Tom Cantrell), is the first book-length study of acting processes in contemporary television drama production. Chris has also co-edited (with Cantrell) a collection, *Exploring Television Acting* (2018), and has published a wide range of chapters and articles in journals such as *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, *Critical Studies in Television*, *Media International Australia* and *Senses of Cinema*.