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Scheduling for Christmas: how an ‘Ordinary’ piece of television became extraordinary.

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Abstract

Is Mise Michelle (I am Michelle)(2011) is an hour-long television programme commissioned for BBC Alba, the BBC’s Gaelic language television channel. Filmed in the summer of 2011, the scheduling intentions were very open, as needs must where frequent replays are financially necessary. Unexpectedly, however, the programme was scheduled for the prime 9pm slot on Christmas Day 2011. In the process, the programme is transformed: from ‘ordinary television’, in Bonner’s (2003) concept, to prime television. Conceived originally in Lotz’s (2014) terms as ‘mainstream niche’, the programme had to carry the weight of bringing the mainstream to the niche in this high-value slot. Originally conceived as a story of

ancestry along the lines of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, in its new Christmas clothing, the programme becomes a bearer for a more universal longing for home, for family, for community and for belonging.

This article explores these transformations, and the decision-making that led to them, through interviews with the primary practitioners involved in the production process, from commissioning through to scheduling. In particular, the under-researched role of scheduling in the encoding/decoding transaction (Hall: 1973/1993) gets some much needed attention.

Key words: television, schedule, Christmas, ordinary, niche, Gaelic, transformations.

Introduction

Television is an endless process of transformations: from idea to pitch, pitch to script, script to pilot, pilot to series, as well as broadcast to reception, and endless variations on these as well as internal transformations at each of these stages. Some of these transformations are routine or merely technical, part of the everyday process of making television. Some are a function of careful strategic thinking. Arguably, to understand these transitions, and the transformations involved in them, is to better understand television.

One such transformation involves scheduling. Some time slots are more equal than others. In the world of commercial television, that translates immediately into how much can be charged for advertising. In the world of public service broadcasting,

slots have more symbolic than monetary value, but the principles are not so different. Typically, programmes are designed for particular time slots, often funded accordingly, and carry the symbolic apparatus that identify their place. What is more interesting, however, is what happens when scheduling departs from the plan, or when there is no clear plan, or the schedule disappears: like when a prime time sitcom like *Friends* (1994-2004) becomes filler, or moves into the wee small hours, or when a hit series designed to be viewed one episode a week is viewed back to back as a box set instead. What happens to the narrative, to the meaning of the programme, to its reception?

Is Miso Michelle was an hour-long, factual entertainment programme made for BBC Alba made in the summer of 2011, a good example of what Bonner (2003) calls 'ordinary television'. While for clear budgetary reasons it had no clear destination schedule-wise, none of the programme-makers anticipated that the programme would be broadcast not only in prime time, but prime time on Christmas Day. What was it about this programme that made the schedulers and commissioners at the channel believe it was the right choice for this key festive slot? Filmed over the summer months and with no Christmas content, schedulers nevertheless clearly felt that it had the important ingredients that would make it work at this time: an ordinary programme in an extraordinary timeslot. How was the decision made? How did the audience feature in that decision-making process? And how did the context of broadcast and reception at 9pm Christmas Day actually change how the programme was decoded, and transform elements of the programme in ways that were unanticipated by its creators? This article will use the experience and expertise of time-served professionals in TV production to analyse the scheduling and production

decisions that led to *Is Mise Michelle (IMM)* being shown on BBC Alba at 9pm on Christmas Day, and analyse what happened to the programme in the process of its coronation.

Background

BBC Alba launched in September 2008 when it was transmitted on a satellite channel. It moved to Freeview and Cable in June 2011, making it available much more readily to the Scottish and wider British TV viewing audience. Its primary remit was to serve the 60,000 Gaelic-speaking population (*A' Ghàidhealtachd*) based mostly in the Highlands and Islands of West Scotland. Maggie Taylor describes it as:

Primarily[...]an entertainment channel for the Gaelic audience, at its core[...]80 per cent of them (Gaelic speaking) watch five hours of it every night. (Taylor 2014)

However, after its launch on Freeview it was given a further target: to be watched by half a million people across Scotland for more than fifteen minutes a week.

The audience strategy of BBC Alba TV is to target these two poles: the Gaelic speaking viewers and the wider, 'national' audience across Scotland. They must provide a 'credible relevant service with full linguistic tenor and appropriate cultural distinctiveness' (MG Alba 2016) to existing speakers and learners of Gaelic. They also aim to 'reflect communities and communities of interest across the whole of

Scotland, even those with no obvious connection to the language or culture’ (MG Alba 2016).

There are two main elements within the Commissioning and Funding Policy of BBC Alba. BBC Alba has no ‘production arm’: the channel makes no programmes. Instead it commissions independent production companies or departments of the BBC to make programmes that it believes will appeal to its audience. High volumes of programmes are commissioned at a low cost with the plan that the economies of scale allow the relatively low budget to be used more effectively. They also have a bi-annual commissioning round for programmes made at a higher budget. These commissions are allocated to independent production companies or broadcasters after a competitive bidding process. The more expensive programmes must get an audience and they must serve the two poles of that audience. The keystone of this element is the 9pm slot, a time when, Patsi Mackenzie explained, programmes have to make ‘a reasonable stab at competing with what else is on locally’ (Mackenzie 2014).

The 9pm dual audience objective is increasingly rare in TV scheduling. Amanda Lotz (2014: 27) believes that minority digital/cable channels are often released from the constraints of providing the least objectionable programming for the widest possible demographic and can concentrate on a specific and targeted type of audience. In contrast, the 9pm slot on BBC Alba must find as wide an audience as possible; hence the interest in *IMM*, an hour-long factual entertainment documentary broadcast originally on BBC Alba at 9pm on Christmas Day 2011. The description on BBC Alba’s website reads, ‘Singer and presenter Michelle McManus travels to the Western Isles on a journey of musical discovery’ (BBC 2011). The ‘journey’ it documents is

that of Michelle McManus, winner of the second series of *Pop Idol* (2001-2003) in 2003, and at the time a popular presenter on STV's daily magazine show *The Hour* (2009-2011). *IMM* follows McManus as she examines her family's belief that their forebears had moved to Glasgow from their 'homeland' of the Isle of Barra. (see Fig. 1). During the course of the programme McManus starts to learn Gaelic, visits the Outer Hebridean islands of South Uist and Barra, and talks to genealogy experts about her family roots. The show ends with her performing a song in Gaelic to an invited audience of Gaelic speakers.

Methodology

This article is a case-study based on interviews with key programme executives, producers and, auto-ethnographically, with Paul Tucker as director of the programme. Schön, among others, has described the process of 'reflective practice' as a way of formalising implicit practical knowledge and recording what the professional knows. In light of this work, the main reason for tackling this project in the way we did is because we wanted to ask experienced professionals to reflect on their ways of working and decision-making and to analyse the ways in which they make 'the thoughtful choice' (Schön 1995: 19). We sought to describe 'the artful competence which practitioners sometimes reveal in what they do' (Schön 1995: 19). Maggie Taylor, Head of Scheduling BBC Alba, describes what she does as: 'a dark art. You spend a lot of time looking back at what worked before' (Taylor 2014). This technique has allowed us to shine some light on that darkness.

We have chosen to use an interview based, reflective case-study approach to this work for a number of reasons. Some are pragmatic: Paul Taylor had access to the people in the decision-making hierarchy that commissioned, scheduled and produced

IMM. Although production studies have become more common, this access is still relatively rare in this field, and that is one of the reasons we chose to make use of it. In this case, as a participant in the process, Paul was able to access all the key decision-makers in the process, and had an already established rapport.

Studies that ask media creators about what is happening in the production and broadcast process are rare (Wolfenden 2014). As Beck observes, ‘research into the cultural industries has tended to focus on [...] conditions of consumption and reception’ (Beck 2003: 1). Where programme-makers are included, they are typically reflective about what they do, and are a rich source of data about the cultural products they are creating, and the context within which they create them (Wolfenden 2014).

John Thornton Caldwell argues that while these reflections need complex interpretation, ‘many film/television workers critically analyse and theorize their tasks in provocative and complex ways’ (Caldwell 2008: 2).

The nature of the study means that interviewees could not be anonymous, and it would not be desirable for them to be. Each participant signed a written consent form that included the permission to attribute their comments to them, and to publish those comments in this form.

The key interviewees were:

Patsi Mackenzie, Executive Producer of *IMM* at STV Productions

Mackenzie was involved in the day-to-day production of the programme. As a Gaelic speaker she was the editorial voice in the scriptwriting. She was also the primary decision maker during the latter stages of the edit.

Maggie Taylor, Head of Scheduling at BBC Alba

After the commissioning of the programme, Maggie had final responsibility for the scheduling of the programme. She also had input into the commissioning as it is quite common for the scheduling team to make requests of the commission process if they see a gap or an audience need that is not being met.

Alan Esslemont, Head of Content at BBC Alba

Esslemont works in conjunction with BBC's Head of Service (Margaret Mary Murray). He oversees the work of four commissioners. He commissioned *IMM* and scheduled it in consultation with Taylor. Esslemont was previously Director of Television at Ireland's Gaelic language channel TG4.

Paul Tucker, as the producer/director of the programme, was interviewed by Helen Wolfenden about the production process and content of the programme. He was brought in to direct the programme after its commission, having worked with Mackenzie on three previous Gaelic language programmes. He structured and scripted the programme, directed on location and had input into the edit.

The interviews with Esslemont, Taylor and Mackenzie took place in October and November 2014: Esslemont and Taylor at BBC Scotland, Mackenzie in her production office. They were each forwarded a similar set of up to twenty four questions prior to the 45 minute interview although these question lines were not followed rigidly. The atmosphere was of a semi-formal discussion between work colleagues. In April 2015, after initial work on the article, Paul Tucker was

interviewed by Helen Wolfenden using the same technique and similar questions.

The key questions were:

- Apart from the Gaelic language is there anything else that unifies the audience on BBC Alba?
- What kind of programming are you looking for at the heart of a night's viewing on BBC Alba?
- What do your viewers want on Christmas night?
- Why did you schedule *Is Mise Michelle* at 9pm Christmas Day?
- John Thornton Caldwell suggests that 'the audience is the author' in that 'what the audience wants' is used by channel executives as the reason behind creative decisions. Is that a view you recognise?

The analysis of the interviewees' answers is informed by a range of conceptual and theoretical positions. These are explored below.

Stuart Hall and Encoding/Decoding

Stuart Hall's classic essay, first published in 1973, charts the complex process of message transmission in television as a medium. Rejecting linear sender-transmission-receiver models which view the communication process as fundamentally transparent and unproblematic, Hall explores the process by which messages are inscribed (we might say uploaded) within the context of a dominant ideological environment, and then downloaded under conditions which are also politically and ideologically live. According to Hall, message-senders attempt to achieve closure in the transmission process: that is, to ensure that the message is downloaded in a form which is as close as possible to the intended upload. If this is achieved, the sender is closer to achieving a desired effect in the receiver.

Hall argues that this kind of closure is not possible, or at least not reliably or universally so. Messages are always *polysemic*: they are capable of multiple, if not unlimited, interpretations. For Hall, the key axis in the decoding process is political: decoding may occur from within a *dominant/hegemonic* position, a *negotiated* position, or an *oppositional* position, reflecting the degree to which the receiver accepts (or, alternatively, criticizes and challenges) the frameworks within which content is coded. He is, however, conscious of other dynamics within the encoding/decoding process. He briefly refers, for example, to *professional coding*.

The professional code is 'relatively independent' of the dominant code, in that it applies criteria and transformational operations of its own, especially those of a technico-practical nature (Hall 1973/1993: 101)

For the purposes of this analysis, we are interested precisely in how these professional codes (in this particular instance, the process of scheduling) influence the decoding process. In the case of *IMM*, a programme is made under certain conditions, with a broad expectation of how it might fit into a programming schedule. This scheduling expectation, however loose it might be, is part of the encoding process. In the event, the programme is selected for a slot that was never in the imagination of its producers. In the process, *IMM* becomes a Christmas programme and a range of signifiers which might have meant one thing when broadcast in June mean something different on 25 December, and the programme is decoded differently as a result.

Bonner and Ordinary Television

Factual and factual entertainment broadcast TV like *IMM* is a mainstay of British television. Yet much of the academic work, even in the field of production studies, focuses on high-budget, high-profile broadcast drama and specialist factual television: effectively, on ‘high-end’ television, or what we might call ‘prime television’.

Frances Bonner’s book *Ordinary Television* is distinctive in that it takes seriously this type of television. As she says in her introduction, ‘The critical investigation of television programmes [...] leaves a considerable amount of televisual material unexamined’ (Bonner 2003:1). Although she is reluctant to define it, Bonner includes within the scope of ordinary television, ‘game shows, the lifestyle programmes, the chat shows [...] advice programmes’ (Bonner 2003:1). Edging closer to the essence of Ordinary she says, ‘At the heart of the programmes [...] is their lack of anything special, their very triviality, their ordinariness’ (Bonner 2003: 2). Ordinary television ‘centres on home and family, holidays and relationships and of course, mediated entertainment’ (Bonner 2003: 63). Subsequent work (Burgess 2006; Bell and Hollows 2005) further develops the study of the culture and media of the ordinary and discusses at greater length the various genres of ordinary television.

The contradiction explored by this study is that this ‘ordinary television’ programme was first broadcast on BBC Alba at 9pm on Christmas Day, a timeslot reserved for programmes that have a special appeal for viewers. What was it about this programme that made the schedulers and commissioners at the channel believe it was the right choice for this key festive slot? This article proposes that it was a collection of ‘ordinary’ themes, heightened by the presence of celebrity, that caused the

schedulers to show this programme at the time they did. Furthermore we suggest that this decision transformed the programme itself, elevating it from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from ordinary television to prime.

Niches and the mainstream

If ordinary television (versus prime) establishes one dimension of the analysis, another dimension concerns the relationship between the programme, the schedule and the audience. Amanda Lotz's analysis of the changing landscape of American television explores the concept of 'niche television'. According to Lotz:

The U.S. television audience now can rarely be categorized as a mass audience and is instead more accurately understood as collection of mainstream niches. (2014 :26)

Lotz develops the argument to suggest that the notion of the 'mainstream niche' allows schedulers to commission programmes targeted at a specific population rather than those that are the least objectionable to the largest number of people. Alan Esslemont, Head of Content, BBC Alba, picks up the 'mainstream' in the term as well as the 'niche': 'The core of what we do in BBC Alba is to look for mainstream niches' (Esslemont 2014).

Esslemont's discussion of mainstream niches raises some important issues about the business and editorial policy of BBC Alba. They must sharply focus their scheduling on the Gaelic-speaking audience by finding ways to present mainstream programming such as music, entertainment, drama, but with a specifically Gaelic twist. However,

they must also, in order to justify themselves to their funding bodies, look to make some of these shows appeal to a wider non-Gaelic speaking but mostly Scottish audience. The Gaelic speaking audience is mainstream in that it represents the majority of the population of the Gaelic speaking areas and niche in that it represents a small percentage of Scotland as a whole. The wider, non-Gaelic speaking Scottish audience watching BBC Alba programming is niche in that it represents a small part of the wider Scottish audience and mainstream in that it is part of a larger population: Hence Esslemont's description of the BBC audience as 'mainstream niche'.

While Lotz sees the niche as dividing the American audience and society, Esslemont seems to think it can bring the Scottish audience together. Lotz describes the polarization as contributing to 'cultural fissures' (Lotz 2014 : 26). Esslemont uses the idea of a mainstream niche to define the particular appeal and approach of BBC Alba, arguing that the niche can also provide a bridge between cultural audiences. Certainly, BBC Alba often targets both audiences with the same piece of programming. As Lotz suggests, this has the effect of narrowing the cultural fissure between the two. Thus the scheduling has the effect of transforming the audience: the mainstream non-Gaelic speaking audience becoming niche, and the core audience becoming mainstream.

The really good thing about BBC Alba is that it tells Scottish stories to Scottish people in a way that STV and BBC Scotland don't do nearly half as much as they should do. (Tucker 2015)

This point, supported by both Maggie Taylor and Patsi Mackenzie, is one that resonates clearly with recent calls for a federalised BBC in Scotland and certainly

needs further development and analysis elsewhere. BBC Alba's mandate to serve the whole of Scotland rather than just the *A' Ghàidhealtachd* begins to explain the channel's Christmas commissioning decisions:

Over Christmas BBC Scotland and STV are almost invisible [...] So for us to put out documentaries, music and sport (which are the three drivers for national audiences) in our Christmas schedule that has Scottish resonance for Scottish audiences is a big opportunity.
(Esslemont 2014)

The decision-makers at BBC Alba are using the fact that BBC Scotland and STV are tied to the UK network schedule during Christmas primetime to target a perceived gap in the market for Scottish-themed programming. Given the power of the idea of Scottish distinctiveness, if not independence, there is an argument for television that retains a degree of cultural importance despite not having a mass audience: Lotz (2014:43) calls this 'phenomenal television'. In the case of BBC Alba, where programmes such as *IMM* target the core Gaelic speaking audience and the wider Scottish audience, two differing but overlapping cultures are being served. A high percentage of *A' Ghàidhealtachd* watch a programme that has a high cultural resonance to them, and a smaller percentage of the rest of Scotland watch a programme that they see as much less significant. *IMM* is both mainstream and niche in the same way that it is both ordinary and prime.

The audience

In the conversation about the production, scheduling and broadcast of *IMM*, the audience is routinely invoked as a key determinant of programme production. Caldwell's analysis of big-budget movies suggests that the relationship between 'production' and the audience is difficult to define. Caldwell says that production teams 'regularly invoke models of audience behaviour and competence to justify proposed directions in show creation [...] neither the studios nor the broadcasters are responsible for authoring television – instead, the audience is' (Caldwell 2008: 223).

The concept of audience as author perhaps overstates it: the audience does not put pen to paper, pick up a camera, sit down at an editing booth. The people who will eventually watch a programme may not know of its existence until it appears on their screen. Even when audience research (for example, ratings figures) tells us these things, an audience can only be imagined. But the *idea* of the audience – who it is, what it likes, what it will spend the time to watch – is no less powerful for that. Each of the decision-makers in the production process invokes an imaginary audience for which they are the advocate and spokesperson, even representative (Wolfenden 2014).

I would say that 99% of the time the audience is at the heart of what we commission. (Taylor 2014)

[...] I like to think that I think of the audience from the point that I'm honing the original proposal [for the programme]. (Mackenzie 2014)

These imaginary audiences are live, powerful, even determinant in the process of programme making. Because they are powerful, they are also deeply contested. This is especially complicated in the case of BBC Alba, taking into account the two polar audiences that the channel must serve.

Alan Esslemont is right to talk of the core audience but then you have the danger that that is the drum that the commissioners are continually going to beat – saying that the audience won't understand it. Well you don't know that – if anything it's a trap that commissioners will fall into more than a good instinctive producer will. (Mackenzie 2014)

This is a battle that Mackenzie seems to take on quite regularly:

The commissioner is often saying 'the audience, the audience the audience', so there is this divide. You fight your corner and then one party wins and the only way you're ever going to know is by asking the audience themselves afterwards. (Mackenzie 2014)

Certainly, Esslemont would dispute Caldwell's reductive view of the power of the audience over the programme maker.

If you think back to Henry Ford – if he'd asked his customers what they wanted, they would have said, 'a faster horse'. [...] If you look back over the years what really, really works is innovation.

(Esslemont 2014)

Here we have an argument that has echoes of the original founding ethos of the BBC: a belief that public service broadcasting has a duty or responsibility to look beyond what the public tells the commissioners it wants and to provide something that they cannot ask for because it does not yet exist. For example, the first episode of *The Great British Bake Off* (2010-) was seen by 2 million people (Kranter 2010). In 2015, the final episode of the series was seen by 15 million people and was the most watched programme on BBC television (Campbell 2015). It is a great success but one that wasn't originally commissioned due to huge audience demand for a baking series.

Of course once a programme is made and broadcast, it becomes easier to understand how the audience can be involved in the production of further programming. Esslemont has a view of the audience as being part of the production chain rather than the instigator of production decisions.

And there's actually something interesting in that tension between how the producer sees it because if you like there is a chain – the producer has a vision, we as a channel have a view and we publish it and then the audience have a view and they make it something

totally different. To come back to [Caldwell's theory of potential authorship of the audience] it's only when it gets out into the audience that it takes a life. (Esslemont 2014)

So, for Esslemont, the reaction of the audience transforms the programme. After broadcast, the interaction of an audience with that programme makes it something other than what it was when the producers made it. This is perhaps a more prosaic and understandable application of Caldwell's theory of potential audience as the author. A programme is made, the audience reacts, the producers see that programme in a different light and adapt their approach to the production of further programmes.

The Production Process: Proposal, Pitch, Production

The majority of original television shown in the UK is commissioned by a broadcaster. That is to say: it is ordered and paid for by the channel on which it will be shown, and in this instance, it was BBC Alba commissioning STV. The concept for *IMM* germinated after a chance conversation between Patsi Mackenzie and Michelle McManus in the lunch queue at STV. McManus, knowing that Mackenzie was a Gaelic speaker and specialized in TV production in the Gaelic language, started discussing her fascination with the language and her family's belief that they originated from the Isle of Barra. This led to further conversations from which an idea for a programme emerged.

This conversation was distilled by Mackenzie into a pitching document or proposal (a one-page treatment of the idea sent to the commissioning editors in an attempt to 'sell' the programme). This outlined the programme, stating that: 'as well as tracing what we can of Michelle's lineage, we witness how the challenges, pitfalls and

successes loop through each other as she experiments with the language, and learns the story of a song, and the song itself' (Mackenzie 2011).

At this point the programme did not exist – the idea had yet to be transformed into a reality. No production would have started until the commissioners at BBC Alba had made a firm commitment to transmitting the programme and had agreed the budget.

Many programmes are pitched and developed but very few are commissioned.

Consequently, production teams will not start focused pre-production until the money is agreed. The detailed shaping, structuring and scripting of *IMM* would not have started until the commissioning process was complete.

The production team also did not know what the programme would be and what story it would tell. It was impossible to predict if McManus would learn any Gaelic or discover any details of her family's roots. This is the most practical aspect of a programme's transformation, as what is imagined might happen is replaced in the programme script and structure by what actually happens (see Fig. 2)

Similarly, the production team had no idea of the transmission plans for the show.

They were apprised of the budget and, taken together with editorial and production meetings, that was enough to indicate that this was a show that would probably play in a 9pm slot, possibly at the weekend. Even if the team had known the show was scheduled for Christmas, they would have been discouraged from adding any Christmas content or make any specific reference to Christmas. The plan was to make the show 'everyday', to make it 'ordinary'.

The Production Process: Scheduling

What then, influenced the commissioners when they were making the decision that scheduling *IMM* on Christmas Day would work for the audience? There are strong economic and consequently editorial reasons why a show for BBC Alba cannot contain too much, indeed any, Christmas content:

I don't think we are able to commission at the moment anything that is specifically just for Christmas because of the level of repeat that we have to have in the schedule. We have to be able to show that programme in the summer and at Christmas[...] we can't afford to time stamp a programme. (Taylor 2014)

Given that BBC Alba cannot, for economic reasons, commission specific Christmas shows, what is the station looking for in their Christmas schedule? In 2008 the channel showed *An Ceasnachadh/The Interrogation of a Highland Lass* (2000) at 9pm on Christmas Day. This was a dramatization of the 'liberation' of The Stone of Destiny from Westminster Abbey. In 2009 a cooking show, *Cocaire nan Cocairean* (UNN11)/The Cook of Cooks, (2009-2014) was scheduled for the slot. In 2010 the BBC Alba schedule had an alphabetical journey through the BBC musical archive entitled *An gu U, An Cuala Tu?/A to U, Have You Heard?* (the Gaelic alphabet stops at 'U'). The programmes scheduled by BBC Alba are unchallenging, easy viewing and play to the core interests and values of the Gaelic audience.

BBC Alba was, at the time, narrowcast, that is, only available on a satellite channel. So it is not surprising that this scheduling is solidly niche, focused on the core Gaelic-speaking audience more likely to have gone to the expense of having the requisite equipment installed. However, common themes can be detected here: of domesticity, nostalgia and music – ie. those seen frequently in UK-wide Christmas editions of programmes such as *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015), *Call The Midwife* (2012-) and *Coronation Street* (1960-). After the channel became more available on Freeview, the Christmas day 9pm schedule broadened in scope. *IMM* was shown in 2011; *The Band from Rockall*, a documentary following the making of an album by members of the Gaelic-speaking band Runrig, was shown in 2012; and *SWAGS (Shinty Wives and Girlfriends)*, a documentary, was shown in 2014. Although there are commonalities in the programmes commissioned and scheduled before and after the Freeview broadcasting, those shown after 2011 use subjects with mainstream appeal to facilitate the exploration of Gaelic culture, whereas those shown before 2011 take that exploration of Gaelic culture as their start and end point. The positioning of programmes as ‘mainstream-niche’ is thus clear.

Scheduling and Celebrity

Ordinary television frequently relies on the celebrity of the presenter to make the programme successful; as Bonner says, ‘not only do they attract large followings they can also be used in thoroughgoing publicity’ (2003:84). The choice of a show featuring Michelle McManus as a potential Christmas hit is consistent with Bonner’s suggestion that ‘[...]we feel we know them, and in knowing them our entry into the programme they are associated with is made easier’ (Bonner 2003: 66).

Michelle McManus' status was significant in BBC Alba's decision to schedule the show on Christmas Day.

[...] we knew that Michelle was the darling of the tabloids – especially the Scottish tabloids. We knew that we would get a substantial amount of press in the run up to it. (Taylor 2014)

She is well-known, you have the star element to that for a start. It feels special and 'hurray for Hollywood' in its own little way. Entertainment was almost guaranteed. (Mackenzie 2014)

If we accept Bonner's argument that a TV personality becomes a celebrity only when they move from their usual 'TV home' (in this case STV's *The Hour*) and appear on another programme (Bonner 2003: 83), then Michelle McManus is operating as a celebrity here. Viewers would watch because they were interested in Michelle, in a positive or negative sense, for 'as viewers we get all those data about all those interesting people we love, or love to hate' (Bonner 2003: 84):

Or in Michelle's case, a celebrity, there's no getting away from it [...] you're getting a handle on someone's life you wouldn't otherwise get you're getting to peak behind the curtain. (Mackenzie 2014)

Maybe there was a bit of ‘what’s bloody Michelle McManus doing on our screens at nine o’clock? She can’t speak Gaelic, what’s she doing?’ The core Gaelic speaking audience may have been intrigued or irritated by the choice of Michelle as a presenter and may have watched because of that. (Tucker 2015)

Since the transmission of the programme Michelle McManus has become a recognised adjunct to the Gaelic community, if not part of it, and appears fairly frequently on BBC Alba. The frequency of her appearances however means that the wider newsworthiness of them has reduced. This may mean that McManus’ celebrity is now less likely to be a factor in commissioning and scheduling decisions than it was in the case of *IMM*; she has become a BBC Alba personality rather than a BBC Alba celebrity.

Family

At a time when the audience for traditional TV is fragmenting, when individual family members may choose to watch programming on their own on individual digital devices, Christmas is still a time when families come together. A 2010 YouGov poll suggests that as many as 90 per cent of Britons spent Christmas with family (Thomson 2010). Television is scheduled to reflect that: as Bonner observes, ‘broadcast television is structured around the existence of the family at the level of scheduling which specifies [...] time for families to watch together (Bonner 2003:108).

The programme-makers' view of the behaviour of families and of the rituals of Christmas itself also appears to have influenced the scheduling decision. Christmas broadcasting is important for the broadcasters because it is a time when people watch TV and watch it together. There is therefore an assumption by the schedulers and programme-makers that the programme would be viewed in a traditional family setting, albeit one that is extended and operating in slightly 'special' circumstances over the Christmas period. This 'specific model of the family' (Miller 1993: 171) is both served by television and to some extent constructed by it, as 'watching the television on Christmas Day [...] is without doubt an established ritual' (Connelly 1999: 206):

I think at that time of year nostalgia plays a huge part[...] a time of thinking of people who are possibly not with them and families and roots, so it seemed to hit a lot of buttons. (Taylor 2014)

I think you have to be more aware than ever that the family is watching together at Christmas. And the family in the broadest, biggest sense. They'll be grandmothers who perhaps aren't normally in the family home, kids that are allowed to stay up later than normal, people watching television that don't normally watch television. It's a big, broad family audience. (Tucker 2015)

There is also a sense that the core audience is in itself a type of extended family, what Silverstone refers to as a 'the shared experience, however fragile, momentary and synthetic, of community' (Silverstone 1994:21).

Often when we talk about a community we're not sure what that community is but this is a genuine community, they do tend to know each other [...] they know each other's stories and they like to hear other's stories. I think it's a community that likes a story hence the reason why they want their own TV channel. (Tucker 2015)

This isn't *Brookside*, this isn't *Eastenders* this isn't *Coronation Street*. These are our streets, our beaches, our town. This is Stornaway, Harris Luskentrye, , North Uist and it's Barra. It's to do with identity isn't it? You have to feel that the media is somehow reflecting who you are and where you're from [...] I think we all like seeing where we are from on the telly. (Mackenzie 2014)

The Gaelic speaking audience can be seen both as a collection of individual families but also, Mackenzie is suggesting, as a wider, functioning family.

On Christmas Day then, it would appear that families are not only more likely to be together back in the heart of their communities and sharing of the culture that makes them a community, they are also more likely to want to see that sense of place, culture

and family reflected back to them by the programmes they watch on TV. *IMM* was a show that, through the use of Michelle McManus, a presenter who was known to the audience but seen as an outsider exploring a new environment and searching for new roots, explored that culture in a way that offered a new perspective. It offered a new familiarity.

It was, to be honest, the kind of thing[...]I'm kind of looking for in a Christmas day schedule – a documentary that would be slightly nostalgic and would also take people just to a slightly different place. (Esslemont 2014)

At a broader level, this has deeper connections still. Globally, the foundation of a capitalist economy, and the first of its alienations, is the forced alienation of traditional peoples from their land: both to liberate the land for more efficient extraction of surplus and to liberate its people for the exploitation of their labour (Araghi and Karides 2015). This has a particular poignancy in Scotland, where the Industrial Revolution hit with a force unmatched elsewhere, and where the stories of how ancestors were driven and burnt out from their highland homes in the Clearances are collectively remembered and commonly retold.

The loss of connection to ancestral lands and the sense of rootlessness, of dispossession, of alienation, is therefore not just a question for aboriginal peoples. Often only experienced at the level of vague unease, the question of belonging and loss of an earlier, simpler, more connected life grumbles away almost universally in

the modern psyche (Yang 2015). This story of return to country, to community, to clan, reflects a universal yearning for a simpler, more deeply connected life.

Is this deeper picture in the minds of commissioners as they decide to put up the money for *IMM*; or the thinking of the production team as they put the programme together; or the schedulers as they decide that this piece of ‘ordinary television’ – this summer travelogue – will work on Christmas Day, in the year’s most prime slot? Not directly. But they can hear something in this non-Christmas story that is worth allowing Christmas to work its magic upon.

Christmas Scheduling and Scotland

Linked to the sense of ‘family’ is a sense of the land and the landscape, a feel for ‘home’ and of ‘Scotland’ that plays to the wider Scottish audience. We suggest this is an example of ‘the longing for “feeling on safe ground”, reflecting a need for protection, rather than the desire for a thrill’ that Adorno describes (Adorno 1991: 161). There is a sense that the viewer is exploring from within the home, discovering something new from within a familiar setting. It is also an element of the scheduling that Esslemont believes may divide the two audiences:

The national audience see it as beautiful whereas most Gaelic speakers see it as beautiful but also something that is human and populated and belongs to them and the people that went before. So, I think that’s why, for different reasons, scenery works so well.

[...] it’s a heroic landscape and it’s something that you don’t get in a lot of places and to be able to use that in your documentary is wonderful. (Esslemont 2014)

There is also a view that the winter period in general (particularly in Scotland) is a time when viewers like to see material filmed in the summer. The schedulers appear to have been considering the fact that a documentary shot in summer may bring a reminder of that season to viewers on a winter's evening.

I don't think that it harms that you see a nice sunny beach on a nice sunny day. (Taylor 2014)

It's like looking back at your summer holiday photos isn't it?
There's something there that is lovely for the country as a whole – being a bleak, wet, dark place and there's a short-term nostalgia factor there as well. (Mackenzie 2014)

In the winter in Scotland, even on a TV screen you just want to see a bit of blue sky just to give you hope that all this greyness is going to end at some point. We were really lucky. They say that on a good day Barra is like the Caribbean and we were filming there on a day that it looked like the Caribbean... as far as that programme is concerned, Michelle is always in Barra on a beautiful sunny day.
(Tucker 2015) (see Fig. 3)

UK-wide channels frequently commission special versions of much-loved shows given a Christmas theme with the addition of fairy lights and snow, but BBC Alba tend to avoid this in their schedule. Although this is partly about the need to repeat programmes at any time of the year, commissioners based in the Highlands and Islands are open to thinking that viewers want to see some summer and sunshine on their screens. The scheduling of *IMM* may have been different if the sun hadn't shone during the filming days in Barra, and the film may not have been commissioned if Michelle McManus believed her family to have originated from a less picturesque part of the Gaelic speaking world. However, it is clear that sunshine and scenery helped make the programme what it is and influenced the scheduler's decision-making process.

Conclusion

Is Mise Michelle is an 'ordinary television' programme that was scheduled to be transmitted at 9pm on Christmas Day. The reasons behind that scheduling decision discussed in this article are many and varied. However, they include a desire to serve both poles of the BBC Alba audience: the Gaelic speaking core based mainly in the Highlands and Islands, and the wider Scottish audience. The decision reflected a desire to use the presence of Michelle McManus to maximise publicity for the programme. The programme's themes of family and cultural exploration and the use of scenic shots of Scotland in the summer exploited the audience's desire for the familiar, the comfortable and the known.

Reflecting the work of Lotz, BBC Alba's Head of Content, Alan Esslemont, talks of the channel's need to service 'mainstream niches'; that is, to provide programmes that have a popular audience appeal, tell broad stories but still offer an alternative to

the programming of the main terrestrial channels. The programme was scheduled by Esslemont and his team because they believed it would appeal to the majority of the Gaelic speaking core audience and as many as possible of the national, non-Gaelic speaking Scottish audience. It appeals to the former because (amongst other reasons) it is in Gaelic, it appeals to the latter despite being in Gaelic.

The qualities of the programme that made it suitable for Christmas Day can best be defined as a heightened ordinariness: it was an ordinary TV programme with extra 'ordinary'. Even the everyday routine of sitting down and watching the TV becomes something special on Christmas Day. The TV that is scheduled to be watched at that time, that on any other day would be defined by the characteristics of 'ordinary television', also becomes special by heightening the elements that would normally make it 'ordinary': family, nostalgia, celebrity and a sense of a shared culture. In the process, the programme is transformed. A story about roots, coloured and spiced a little by music, becomes a paradigm of the ritualised annual return to family, to hearth and home: it becomes universal.

This return to the Islands, regardless of whether it was where McManus' origins lie, is a return for all of us. In the satisfaction of her sense for home, there is hope for us all. Parallel to her journey, as we all go home for Christmas, there is the hope of reclaiming a sense of home and belonging we had as children: or, perhaps, never had. In the process, this piece of ordinary television becomes extraordinary, and what was niche becomes universal.

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List of Television Programmes

An Ceasnachadh / The Interrogation of a Highland Lass (2000, UK: BBC)

The Band from Rockall (2012, UK: BBC Alba)

Call The Midwife (2012-, UK: BBC)

Cocaire nan Cocairean/.The Cook of Cooks (2009-2014, UK: BBC ALBA)

Coronation Street (1960-, UK: ITV)

Downton Abbey (2010-2015, UK: ITV)

Friends (1994-2004, US: NBC)

The Hour (2009-2011, UK: STV)

Is Mise Michelle (2011, UK: BBC Alba)

Pop Idol (2001-2003, UK: ITV)

SWAGS (Shinty Wives and Girlfriends) (2014, UK: BBC Alba)

Who Do You Think You Are? (2010-, UK: BBC)

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