

## Contextualising Quality US Television Programmes for the UK: The *Guardian's* Media and Television Blogs and the Role of Critics

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In this chapter I explore the way British newspapers' digital strategies are impacting on the popular and critical discourse they produce around quality American television programmes; a discourse which plays an important role in contextualising American programmes for the British viewer. To provide a focus for this work I will be concentrating on the role of newspaper-based blogs. As I do this I will explore three main questions: firstly, what form of critical and popular coverage is appearing with these new means of writing about television; secondly, what is the resulting discourse on American quality television programmes? And lastly, what role is there for the television critic in this new phase of newspaper television coverage? As I explore these questions I will, using work by Pierre Bourdieu, also reflect on issues relating to the symbolic struggle occurring around American television, the (re-)emergence of new television taste groups, the work of cultural intermediaries and how the appreciation of American television plays a role cultural distinction.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as Bourdieu argues, tastes, values and forms of cultural distinction are not static; there is a continual process of struggle occurring over these,<sup>2</sup> something we need to understand at this time of huge digital and cultural changes. To undertake this analysis I will look at one of the most influential and trusted newspaper websites in the UK, [www.guardian.com](http://www.guardian.com), which belongs to the *Guardian*.<sup>3</sup> This is not to suggest that the *Guardian's* coverage dominates and shapes the discourse around television in Britain but that the nature of its digital strategy is indicative of the changes happening in the media and the changing nature of television coverage provided by the main national newspapers.

### The *Guardian's* digital strategy

The *Guardian* was one of the first papers to develop a digital strategy, soon followed by other British newspapers.<sup>4</sup> One of its main objectives was to view its digital web-based activities as an integral part of how the *Guardian* would operate in the future, and not as some add-on to the normal production of the newspaper.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it was the first paper to announce, in June 2006, that it 'would publish stories first to the

web ... indicating a new phase in UK Journalism.<sup>6</sup> For some these developments are leading to a fundamental shift in journalism, from writing and delivering news to providing more opinion and comment.<sup>7</sup> As part of this strategy the *Guardian* began to experiment with and develop new forms of coverage and interaction, such as using embedded videos and audio in its webpages as well as allowing the public the ability to comment on almost all of its output.<sup>8</sup> The aim has been to create a form of coverage more conducive to what it thinks its readers and users, who are often well educated, young and technologically savvy, might want from an online newspaper site.<sup>9</sup>

As part of these developments the *Guardian* started to experiment with blogs, which have now become an important part of its provision.<sup>10</sup> These divide into two main types, live blogs focusing on ongoing events usually with a temporary life span, such as covering the November 2015 shootings in Paris,<sup>11</sup> and others of a more permanent and ongoing nature, focusing on such areas as education, politics, arts, and culture.<sup>12</sup> The blogs are made up of regular posts, many of which are quite short, and are usually more informal compared to traditional forms of journalism. Within these blog posts hyperlinks are provided connecting the post to news sources and stories either on the *Guardian* site or elsewhere on the web, helping to deliver a more innovative news experience, and one that moves from just presenting 'knowledge about events'<sup>13</sup> to one where readers are guided 'along paths of exploration'<sup>14</sup> to engage with the actual information sources. The majority of the permanent *Guardian* blogs are either linked to a particular journalist, such as George Monbiot and his blog on environmental issues,<sup>15</sup> or are the output of various contributors. Both forms allow the public to share blog posts on social media sites and to leave comments. A number of these permanent blogs focus on television and other media industries, such as the *Guardian's* Media blog which encompasses a large range of different areas, e.g. radio, television, PR, film and the like.<sup>16</sup> *The Guardian* also has a further blog which focuses purely on television and radio,<sup>17</sup> whose coverage of American television I will now explore in more detail.

### **The *Guardian's* Television and Radio blog**

The *Guardian's* Television and Radio blog has been going since 2006 and had, according to the search function on its website, over 7,240 posts by 2 September 2016. This would be an average of around 700 per year, or around two a day. As the

blog cannot be searched separately from the rest of the *Guardian's* coverage, for this analysis I have had to use a different approach for finding relevant posts. To do this I looked at all the headings of the 7,000 plus posts appearing on the blog and have read all those relating to American TV programmes or American television. For the public interactions I have looked at one month's worth per year for the last ten years, focusing on the number of times posts have been shared and the comments appearing on a selection of these posts.

I have divided up the following analysis of the blog's coverage of quality American programmes in a number of ways. Firstly, the main division will be into two parts, with the first focusing on the actual blogposts by contributors relating to American programmes and, the second part exploring the public engagement with posts. For the analysis of the contributors' blogposts I initially looked at the meta level, at titles and content of the posts, and used this to identify three main tensions or issues, which I explore below: firstly, the nature and form of the posts, whether they are short or long, celebratory or critical; secondly, the discourse appearing around the quality American drama programmes concerned; and, lastly, the different touchstones of excellence which are drawn on to position specific texts as 'quality' US TV. After exploring the posts I then move on to look at the public's interaction with the Television and Radio blog, considering which posts they shared, how many times, whether readers made comments, and the resulting discussions which occurred.

### **Blog Posts and American television programmes**

While this blog might be viewed, as other blogs, as part of the democratisation of the media and mediated debates, it also works to shape and limit access and resulting discussion. For example, for the TV and Radio blog only *Guardian* contributors can publish posts, including the *Guardian's* TV critics, reviewers or previewers, though occasionally an outsider will also be allowed to contribute, such as the author Jane Bussmann.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it is their professional, taste-making views which will tend to shape the issues being raised on the blog, along with any subsequent reader debates. Such critics therefore act, as Bourdieu and others argue, as cultural intermediaries, selecting, filtering and positioning cultural artefacts for the reader.<sup>19</sup> The blog has also been structured and designed to work for the strategic needs of the *Guardian*.<sup>20</sup> For example, while many of the posts have embedded hyperlinks,

many aim at other parts of the *Guardian* and thus help to keep the reader on their website. The blog, therefore, is designed to work for the *Guardian* while offering an innovative and interactive experience for the types of readers who make up much of its particular readership demographic, which is younger and more educated than most other British newspapers.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the blog form, with its ability to offer in-depth coverage of a specific topic or issue, presented in an interactive form, is able to offer a novel form of journalism, comment and discussion – what might in fact be thought of as a form of *broadsheet newspaper narrowcasting*. Therefore the blog is able to present coverage of relatively specialised topics like American television dramas, and serve/refract these emergent British taste cultures on a scale and with a scope that traditional UK broadsheet newspapers have not been able to offer in the past.

### **From news to fan-like opinion: the form and nature of blog posts**

From an initial look at the posts it is obvious that many of them have a fan-like feel to them, perhaps reflecting the more informal nature of blogs. Looking at those focusing on American television, it seems that many of the blog writers concentrate on American programmes which mean something to them, rather than, as a traditional critic might do, critiquing a programme that has been broadcast and around which there is public debate or interest, and which they thus feel a necessity or an obligation to write about.<sup>22</sup> For example, Vicky Frost writes about being obsessed with *CSI* (2000-15), noting that ‘FiveUS has become a default setting on my telly (and yes, I am probably the only person who has ever uttered those words), and I am some kind of crime-drama zombie with eyes only for Gil Grissom.’<sup>23</sup> There is often little attempt to present a critical argument about the programme or to approach it in some neutral or objective way, instead the *Guardian*’s TV bloggers write subjectively about why they like or ‘love’ the programme. One point emerging in many of these posts relates to how protective bloggers are of ‘their’ US programme, discussing how badly treated it has been by its UK broadcaster; perhaps with it being moved around the schedule or being shown in an unpopular slot or on a little-watched channel, thus stopping the programme concerned from building the substantial audience and recognition they think it deserves. Blog writers seem to feel they have a right to criticise the UK’s broadcasters and distributors for this, in a practice that is very similar to how Henry Jenkins views fans as acting to protect their

'common cultural property'.<sup>24</sup> For example, Owen Van Spall complains that a series he likes, *Breaking Bad* (2008-13), compared to series like *Mad Men* (2007-15), 'has been unfairly denied the limelight. It has been aired in the UK only on FX so far, and a region two box-set of the first season isn't due until December.'<sup>25</sup> Given the number of *Guardian* posts on this issue relating to American programmes it would seem that US TV dramas are, perhaps, more prone to this problem of inaccessibility than broadly comparable British ones, which are usually commissioned by and broadcast on the main UK channels.

However, while many of these blog posts are informal, some take a more serious approach and are penned from within an established critical tradition, often critiquing a particular American programme or related topic. For example, Mark Lawson's pieces about the problem of British television in the face of the American industry's success stories.<sup>26</sup> These more serious or critical posts are, in some ways, more like traditional pieces about television written by a TV critic rather than by a fan or advocate. They explore a particular issue, often in some depth, supported by evidence and reasoned argument framed by dominant cultural values; it would seem that such writers, utilising their cultural capital, are writing the post in such a way that it will be positioned within the accepted cultural hierarchy as a piece of serious criticism.<sup>27</sup> Two main reasons might explain the appearance of these forms on the blog: that the pieces were originally written as articles or reviews which have then been posted onto the blog, or that the writer wished to convince the reader of their views using an accepted, persuasive way of writing about television.

One of the most dominant form of posts on the *Guardian* blog, especially in later years, has been the episodic guide. These blog posts provide weekly updates on a particular series, helping viewers to keep up to date with what is happening, which is especially useful for long complex series, with many story arcs, and to allow room for discussion between its fans and viewers. Many programmes, both on radio and TV, now have these episodic guides but the American programmes, because of the number of episodes, which are normally greater than British series, and perhaps because many attract glowing plaudits, tend to be dominant, e.g. *The Wire* (2002-8), *Battlestar Galatica* (2004-9), and *Game of Thrones* (2011-). One of the first episodic guides for an American series on the blog was written by Steve Busfield about *The Wire*, which he started in 2008 when season five was being broadcast on FX.<sup>28</sup> Busfield begins his post by discussing why he is starting an episodic guide, noting

that because access to *The Wire* in Britain has been through so many different means - DVDs, downloads and now FX - rather than through regular scheduled broadcasts, it has been hard to share watercooler moments when UK viewers can discuss it together. He goes on, 'I'd like to make this a forum for those who are watching it at the same time: during its British TV premiere on FX on Monday nights. If you are one of those people, please read on and share the debate....' Such guides provide an important and regular presence for American television on the blog. In many ways, they help in the creation of a feeling of community around the programme, generating a *Guardian*-oriented and yet US quality TV fanbase of sorts.<sup>29</sup> It is here you can go to discuss or read about 'your' American show; it is as if an American programme which attracts a niche UK audience can now also have a related 'niche' area of criticism and discussion on the *Guardian* blog, a space tailored just for it, though one still connected to television's wider transatlantic discursive spaces.

### **US quality TV? An uncontested discourse on 'the greatest TV shows'**

From my analysis of the blog posts it would seem that where American programmes constitute the main part of a post, they are covered almost invariably in a favourable way. However, it is interesting to note that when discussing the standing of these programmes most of the posts rarely use the more formal sounding and much-debated term 'quality',<sup>30</sup> tending instead to use more informal and reader friendly ways of writing about the selected US TV shows. For example, Sarah Hughes refers to *Lost* as 'groundbreaking television',<sup>31</sup> and Ben Marshall on the 17 January 2007 calls *24* 'bloody good television',<sup>32</sup> whereas Jon Wilde writes of *The Wire*, *The Shield* (2002-8) and *Deadwood* (2004-6) as being 'some of today's greatest TV shows', though he wonders why three of the greatest-ever TV series are virtually unheard of among British viewers.<sup>33</sup> Such discussions are framed much more in the language of a fan or advocate than that of a traditional critic, who would usually attempt to appear more balanced in their critique, perhaps utilising the term quality as a more measured reference to the critical standing of a programme rather than deploying informal phrases such as 'great' or 'fantastic' US TV drama.

Yet, there were some posts which took issue with these sentiments. For example, Steven Wells criticised the American remake of *The Office* (2005-13), seeing it as a 'shadow of the original'<sup>34</sup> and Stuart Heritage in 2010 wrote about his

disappointment with the series *FlashForward* (2009-10): 'The whole thing's a knotted mess of unresolved strands and irrational new strands, performed by a set of characters who are impossible to root for, in a format that's been stripped of all dramatic tension.'<sup>35</sup> However, looking through all the posts on this blog which relate to American programmes, only a few, in their entirety, are overtly critical. The overwhelming number of posts on the blog either ignore American programmes, focusing on British and, increasingly, European programmes, or express positive views about the US TV that is focused upon. Perhaps the dominance of supportive posts amongst those on American television can be put down to writers tending to write about what they like, about programmes that fit their tastes, and programmes they are prepared to track down in a multi-channel UK environment.<sup>36</sup> Where posts are more critical of American television and its impact on British culture then these tend to focus less on individual programmes, instead taking issue with the general discourse of excellence that surrounds American television and the view that it produces programmes that are much better than their British counterparts. For example, Ben Myers laments the demise of British drama and its replacement with fashionable, lauded American drama, a form that he argues can in reality only tell us about '... life in America. [O]nly the British can truly comment on Britain.'<sup>37</sup> In some ways, these two opposing views – being supportive of American 'quality' programmes, or being critical of their newfound influence over the British industry – have come to dominate much of the UK debate and discussion around American television dramas over the last decade or so, at least on the *Guardian's* TV and Radio blog, although views in favour of US TV have dominated. Such discursive interactions signal, what Bourdieu would call, a symbolic struggle as different groups try to (re)-position American and British television programmes within the dominant cultural hierarchy.<sup>38</sup> Though this is now complicated with the arrival of recent European programmes, led by those from Scandinavia, which, for some, offer a new form of quality television.<sup>39</sup>

### **Touchstones of excellence (and mediocrity)**

Within the 'quality US TV drama' discourse found on the blog, comparisons are regularly made between new American programmes and other more established programmes which I will call, 'touchstones of excellence.' Interestingly, the neo-canonical touchstones invariably used, for American programmes, are other

American programmes rather than British shows. One argument why this happens is that the two television industries and systems remain sufficiently different that it is easier to use programmes which have the same characteristics to make comparisons. For example, in a blogpost by Jim Shelley, he explores the standing of *The Wire* by using two other American programmes as reference points: 'The Wire, The Sopranos' HBO stable-mate, which finished its fourth series on FX last night, has for nearly four years been so dark, complex and involving, it's made David Chase's mob family look as simplistic and all-American as a modern-day Waltons.'<sup>40</sup> In turn, British programmes are mostly compared to other British programmes, partly as they share similar histories and have similar characteristics that are likely to be known to most British viewers and also perhaps because American 'quality' TV programmes are less watched/known by the majority of British viewers.<sup>41</sup>

However, some posts do attempt to compare better-known American programmes with British examples, often within a wider discussion comparing the state of the two systems. An example of this can be seen where Tim Lusher raises the question of why the American system produces *The Wire* whereas the British system generates and sustains TV dramas like *Casualty* (1986-).<sup>42</sup> As he argues, '[t]he only way to produce sophisticated, rich, long-running drama like *The Wire* or even *ER* is to use a team of writers who collaborate under a showrunner, a system the US studios has cracked'.<sup>43</sup> There seems to be a division in the discourse found in these posts around how American and British television and their respective programmes are written about; reflecting, in some ways, the different television tastes and cultural dispositions of the contributors and, perhaps, readers.<sup>44</sup> Certain versions of 'mainstream'/popular British TV drama, such as BBC1's long-running Saturday night medical drama *Casualty*, are devalued and othered in relation to celebrated US 'quality' TV, working as touchstones of mediocrity rather than televisual excellence. As noted earlier, blogs are able to create discursive spaces for specific readers to discuss and valorise the cultural forms they enjoy, such as particular American TV dramas.

### ***Interacting with the Guardian's TV and Radio blog***

Given the relative ease with which anyone can create their own blog, or contribute to a social media site, these communication forms have become seen as a sign of a new equality between media producers and consumers.<sup>45</sup> As Bar-Ilan argues, '[i]n



most blogs readers can comment on the postings, thus [they can] engage in active discussion and become part of the blogspace ... .<sup>46</sup> No longer does the user just consume what they are presented with. Now, if they want, they can create their own blog content; they can act as prosumers.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, in relation to television, the public no longer has to quietly accept a mediated public debate shaped and dominated by professional television critics. They now have the ability to create content, to write their own reviews, stories and ideas, and to publish these in places where other members of the public can read and engage with them.<sup>48</sup> For blogs, this function tends to operate in three main ways: the public can post on their own blogs or on those where they are allowed to do so, they can share a post if they want, and if the Comments function is enabled, they can write comments on a blog engaging in discussion with the writer and other contributors. However, on the *Guardian* TV and Radio blog the public's interaction is limited to sharing and commenting on the post as only *Guardian* endorsed contributors can post. I now want to explore how such interactions on the blog act as part of a UK-oriented discourse around quality American TV dramas. Firstly, I will look at the way the *Guardian* blogs are shared and then, secondly, I'll analyse the comments and discussions of blog readers.

### **Sharing: Creating information clusters or a brand-specific niche**

The TV and Radio blogposts can be easily shared on social media and through email via buttons provided on the top left hand side of the page for Facebook, twitter, email, LinkedIn and google+. By clicking these links the user is taken to the corresponding site where additional information can be added before they can be shared on that platform. The restricted number of links included on the page does not limit the user, who can copy the piece and post it where they want, but it does signify the social media which the *Guardian* currently views as being important. By sharing the piece the user helps link the *Guardian* site to a wider cluster of information, news and television websites, helping to promote the *Guardian*, raising its profile and perhaps attracting more web users to its site, whilst also helping to circulate the television discourse found on the blog.

Looking at a sample of posts, a month's worth of around thirty posts each year since 2006, it is evident that most posts had been shared infrequently, if at all. The reasons for this in the first couple of years, 2006 through to 2008, could very

likely be because the *Guardian* site was still relatively new at the time, and user numbers were still growing. This is supported by the fact that many posts also had few comments in this period.<sup>49</sup> For example, Jenny Colgan's post on *24* (2001-10) only has three comments and no shares.<sup>50</sup> However, in relation to American programmes, the limited number of shares in this period could also be linked to a less visible debate about American programmes on the blog at this point in time, along with the limited ability of people, including contributors, to gain access to the TV programmes mentioned, some of which were often only available through DVDs, subscription channels or downloads.<sup>51</sup> As more posts on American programmes start to appear after 2009, helping the discourse around American programmes to become more visible, so the number of shares increases slightly. For example, a post by Sarah Hughes on *Masters of Sex* (2013-) was shared twenty four times in 2013.<sup>52</sup> Overall, the number of shares for posts about American programmes on the whole of the blog is small in number per blogpost. This compares unfavourably to British drama programmes which, overall, had far more shares, including one of the highest number, which was for a post in 2013 on David Suchet's final *Poirot* (1989-2013) episode, shared 1,944 times.<sup>53</sup> However, many current posts, whether about British or American programmes, still receive 10 shares or less. Perhaps, for American programmes, this might be linked to the still relatively small and niche-like audience they attract in Britain, and the continual problem of gaining access to them.<sup>54</sup> This has meant that the blog, through its limited number of shares, is not that linked-in to a wider cluster of social media sites on the web, and therefore it acts more as a single information node, a one-stop branded space where a reader can discuss particular niche areas like American 'quality' programming.

### **Engaging the public: celebratory and comparative comments**

Looking over the 7000 or so posts on this *Guardian* blog there is a notable divergence between the large number which received ten comments or under and the relatively few that have gained hundreds. On the first main page of the blog's history, covering the period 24 October to 7 November 2006, there are thirty posts, of which nineteen received comments with the highest number of comments being ten while the lowest was zero.<sup>55</sup> It would seem that this early on in the life of the blog few readers wanted to engage with posts, though this might be linked to the limited number of early adopters attracted online to the *Guardian's* website.<sup>56</sup> However, of

the thirty posts appearing in April 2011, all received between ten and 183 comments.<sup>57</sup> For the period July to September 2016, by contrast, all the thirty five posts had comments, ranging between one and 1,012.<sup>58</sup> While many of those with comments were on posts about British programmes, such as *Top Gear* (1977-) with 1,012,<sup>59</sup> American programmes, such as *Preacher*, also received a considerable number of comments with 749.<sup>60</sup> Over time, it would seem that readers have started to engage with the blog in far greater numbers, though the number of comments, even with more popular posts, are still relatively small when compared to the *Guardian's* official number of unique online users: this had hit twenty six million by 2016.<sup>61</sup> Also there is a question of how many readers will lurk on such pages reading the posts and comments but not engaging.<sup>62</sup>

While there are a wide range of comments on a diverse series of posts about American programmes, a few observations can be made. Most of the comments about American programmes are positive, with much of the debate being about the comparative standing of the programme being discussed. For example, engaging in a debate about *The Shield* one reader commented that '[t]his season of The Shield has been riveting, intense, exciting and powerful',<sup>63</sup> while another wrote, 'I have no doubt that the final episode of this fantastic show is going to be one of the best pieces of television ever.'<sup>64</sup> Many of the comments are short – supporting or, in a few cases, opposing the view of the original post – or longer, further exploring the ideas raised by the initial post, such as the comments from pandemoniana<sup>65</sup> who, in some depth, argued that *The Wire* was a better programme than *The Shield*. These views were, however, opposed by those supporting the *Guardian* journalist's position, who suggested that such a comparison with *The Wire* should stop being used.<sup>66</sup> Interestingly though, as noted earlier, there is no attempt to compare *The Shield* with British programmes; American programmes, as noted, are the 'quality' touchstone which all the contributors seem to understand and share. Some of the comments appear more as a dialogue between members of the public, rather than as a critical engagement with starting debates or with the *Guardian* contributors, giving the impression that this interaction is between members of a community of sorts, one defined by their interest in "the best... ever" American programmes. And while there is some overlap and commonality shared across the public comments on the post, no one clear view or opinion emerges. This might relate to the lack of any key mediator being in place to engage with the comments, and to bring out any shared

points or elements in order to create a consensus which could then be brought back into wider public discussion. Instead, the reader of these somewhat fragmentary comments is left, in many ways, to read through and decide for themselves the significance of the debate.

The blog is structured in such a way that the original poster – usually a professional journalist – is placed in a position of power. They are able to present their views, in some depth if they wish, and it is their topic which sets the focus for any ensuing readership debate. Acting as a cultural intermediary they help to, “construct value, by framing how others ... engage with goods, affecting and effecting others’ orientation towards those goods as legitimate.”<sup>67</sup> The public are left to react to such postings and their comments, often short in length, are hidden at the bottom of the page, even requiring a click of a link to bring them up. Therefore, such blogs do not somehow democratically allow the voices of the public/readers to replace those of the critics, but instead allow established TV journalists and neo-critics, those who now write regularly (in fan-like ways) about television for online media, to play an important role in continuing to shape the public TV debate emanating from the *Guardian* newspaper through its online presence.

### **Conclusion: A divided national television discourse?**

I have analysed the *Guardian's* TV and Radio blog, delineating and exploring its form and its discourse surrounding quality American TV dramas. Through this examination I have shown that the form taken by the blogposts, and their related discourse, is dominated by an informal approach, indeed one that is almost fan-like in places. Posts on American programmes tend to be written by contributors who like them, and who often write subjectively, trying to persuade readers to watch these shows, or engaging with those that are already doing so. The dominant discourse is typically framed in terms of these programmes’ undisputed excellence, of their success and their quality, backed up by illustrations and examples of the complexity of storyline arcs, the quality of scripts, the high production values, and realistic characters. In supporting such views many of the posts use other American TV programmes as examples, drawing on them as uncontested touchstones of excellence. For many of those posting on the blog about American programmes, these are the best things on television, even if they have only attracted very small niche audiences in the UK context.<sup>68</sup> There are few dissenting views that engage

critically with these assessments, though many posts ignore American programmes altogether and focus purely on British/European programmes. It is as if there is a taste-cultural divide in this national television discourse between those who are positively and selectively interested in the “greatest” American programmes, and those who are more interested solely in domestic British TV output, although some *Guardian* contributors and readers move between these two discernible interpretive positions. The blog offers a place where readers who enjoy US programmes, and often watch them in different ways at different times, can come together as a community to gain regular information, share views and join discussions with like-minded people, helped by the regular posts of episodic guides. Such sites or online spaces provides a place where similar views and values can be exchanged, where existing cultural dispositions can be refined, where new taste groups can emerge or becoming self-knowing, or existing ones seek a new position in the cultural hierarchy.<sup>69</sup>

Overall, the presence of posts about American programmes and television on the blog remains relatively high, comprising around thirty percent of all posts,<sup>70</sup> with most being supportive in tone. Public interactions with posts are more limited in character; the number of shares to other social sites is mostly still fairly few in number, though the number of comments has increased over the years, and contemporary posts regarding flagship British shows, e.g. *Top Gear*, *Poirot* or *Sherlock*, can typically receive 1000+ comments. Most of the comments on the posts relating to American programmes occur between readers that like the programme or American TV drama in general. The debate is less about whether American programmes are excellent – this seems often to be unquestionably accepted – and more about whether a specific programme being discussed is up to the same level of quality as other canonised US TV programmes. The discourse around American programmes, at least on the relevant posts on this blog, is still dominated by professional critics and writers, who are the only ones able to post. It would seem that, unlike their forebears writing between the 1950s-80s,<sup>71</sup> American programmes now seem more suited to TV critics’ tastes, perhaps more so than is the case for the majority of the British public who still mostly watch domestic programmes, as seen by their domination of top-thirty viewing charts.<sup>72</sup> In some ways, *Guardian* contributors are, on the one hand, writing for a taste culture of readers who enjoy and watch ‘quality’ American programmes: a relatively small niche in the UK, who

need a place to gather. As such, *Guardian* writers, and the discourse they help to shape, contextualise such programmes for this group, constituting it as a discerning and knowledgeable cadre of educated British viewers. On the other hand, however, the *Guardian's* TV and Radio bloggers also present a view of US TV programmes to readers and members of the public who do not watch these American programmes, or are less obsessed by them, yet who are still interested in their presence on British screens and in British culture. Indeed, as Bourdieu points out, newspapers tend to employ critics who share similar values as their readership, rather than hold different ones.<sup>73</sup> Increasingly, critics and neo critics, as the newspaper's online television coverage increases in scale and scope, can focus on niche programmes – that is, programmes they value rather than ones the mainstream viewing public is watching. They play a role in the symbolic struggle around television, seeking to elevate American television to become part of the legitimate dominant culture or at least to act as a cultural marker of their difference to the wider population.<sup>74</sup> This knowing act of distinction fits very well with the strategy of newspapers like the *Guardian*, keen to attract specific audience demographics to its website while also generating and sustaining a brand-specific blog community.

### **Television programmes**

24. Fox. 2001-10.

*BattleStar Galatica*. Sci-Fi Channel. 2004-9.

*Breaking Bad*. AMC. 2008-13.

*Casualty*. BBC. 1986-.

*CSI*. CBS. 2000-15.

*Deadwood*. HBO. 2004-6

*ER*. NBC. 1994-2009.

*FlashForward*. ABC. 2009-10.

*Game of Thrones*. HBO. 2011-.

*Lost*. ABC. 2004-10.

*Mad Men*. AMC. 2007-15.

*Masters of Sex*. Showtime Networks. 2013-.

*Office*. NBC. 2005-13.

*Poirot*. ITV. 1989-2013.

*Preacher*. AMC. 2016.

*The Shield*. FX. 2002-8.

*The Sopranos*. HBO. 1999-2007.

*Top Gear*. BBC. 1977-.

*The Waltons*. CBS. 1971-81.

*The Wire*. HBO. 2002-8.

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu (translated by Richard Nice), *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu, 244-256.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Hall, "Online editions: newspapers and the 'new' news" in *Pulling Newspapers Apart: Analysing Print Journalism*, ed. Bob Franklin (London: Routledge, 2008), 23; *Guardian*, "Cheatsheet," accessed August 5, 2016, <http://advertising.theguardian.com/assets/img/audience/Cheatsheet-August-2016-pdf.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Williams, *Read All About It! A history of the British newspaper* (London: Routledge, 2010), 239-241; Hall, 216.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, 239-241.

<sup>6</sup> Kim Fletcher, "The Web Trail", *Media Guardian*, June 12, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2006/jun/12/news.mondaymediasection..>

<sup>7</sup> Williams, 240-241.

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<sup>45</sup> Judit Bar-Ilan, "Information hub blogs," *Journal of Information Science* 31 (4) (2005): 299.

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<sup>48</sup> John Corner, "'Criticism': Notes on the Circulation of Cultural Judgement," *Journal of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies* (JOMECS), 4 November (2013): 7-8, <https://publications.cardiffuniversitypress.org/index.php/JOMECS/article/view/342/348>.

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- <sup>70</sup> This is based on an analysis of titles of the 7,000 posts and whether they refer to American television in some way.
- <sup>71</sup> Rixon 2011, 135-161.
- <sup>72</sup> See [www.Barb.co.uk](http://www.Barb.co.uk)
- <sup>73</sup> Bourdieu, 240-241.
- <sup>74</sup> Bourdieu, 309-310.