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Business on Television: Continuity, Change and Risk in the Development of Television's 'Business Entertainment Format'

Abstract: This article traces the evolution of what has become known as the business entertainment format on British television. Drawing on interviews with channel controllers, commissioners and producers from across the BBC, Channel 4 and the independent sector this research highlights a number of key individuals who have shaped the development of the business entertainment format and investigates some of the tensions that arise from combining entertainment values with more journalistic or educational approaches to factual television. While much work has looked at docusoaps and reality programming, this area of television output has remained largely unexamined by television scholars. The research argues that as the television industry has itself developed into a business, programme-makers have come to view themselves as [creative] entrepreneurs thus raising the issue of whether the development off-screen of a more commercial, competitive and entrepreneurial TV marketplace has impacted on the way the medium frames its onscreen engagement with business, entrepreneurship, risk and wealth creation.

Keywords: BBC; Channel 4; television industry; factual entertainment; documentary; public service broadcasting, *The Apprentice*

Word count: 8647

Business people [on television] were either dry boring people in suits, or shifty characters up to no good. Sir John Harvey-Jones was a rare individual who could make that leap. He was a high powered industry figure who could make business accessible. The language of business when it was being discussed in the papers or in the news, it was discussed in a jargon that kept people out. There was a great mystery about business. Sir John Harvey-Jones went into businesses and humanized it, by focusing on the people behind the business.

TV producer Michele Kurland discussing the BBC series *Troubleshooter*
(Interview with authors, 11 January 2007).

So many things in TV production are around individual talent [as much as] sociological change. So a person in a position of power can change and shape programming. At the BBC, Robert Thirkell [producer of Troubleshooter] had a dynamic and skillful way of filmmaking.

Danny Cohen, Head of Factual Entertainment at Channel 4, 2006-2007.
(Interview with authors, 7 March 2007)

Introduction

The aim of this article is to trace the historical development of the depiction of business on British television and explain the relatively recent shift that has seen business issues not only informing television news journalism and current affairs but also being incorporated into the realms of more entertainment-led factual programming. In doing so, it acknowledges that the television industry has itself developed into a business during this time, with the result being that rather than operating primarily within creative terms, broadcasters and programme-makers have come to view themselves as [creative] entrepreneurs. As the television writer, director and independent producer Michael Darlow (2004, 541) argues, ‘By 1993, most independent producers as much as broadcasters, saw themselves as businesses which made programmes, not as they had a decade earlier, as programme makers who also ran businesses’. Since the 1990s, these two shifts have run parallel to one another and it raises the issue of whether the development off-screen of a more commercial, competitive and entrepreneurial TV marketplace has impacted on the way the medium frames its onscreen engagement with business, entrepreneurship, risk and wealth creation.

Central to these developments within business programming is the increasing importance of television formatting within the industry and the way in which public service broadcasters, such as the BBC and Channel 4, have moved away from the notion of business-related content as supposedly dry and inaccessible to what can be described as the more relevant and engaging ‘business entertainment format’ epitomised by programmes such as *Property Ladder* (Channel 4, 2001-), *Ramsay’s Kitchen Nightmares* (Channel 4, 2002-), *Dragons’ Den* (BBC2, 2004-) and *The Apprentice* (BBC2, 2005-6; BBC1, 2007-). Drawing on interviews with channel controllers, commissioners and producers from across the BBC, Channel 4 and the independent sector,¹ this research seeks to call attention to a number of key individuals involved in this process whilst also examining some of the tensions that arise from combining entertainment values with more journalistic or educational approaches to factual programming.

Significantly, there has been a lack of research carried out on in this area by both television scholars and those within the field of media and communications. While a number of articles have taken a specific interest in both the US and UK

versions of *The Apprentice* (Couldry and Littler 2008; McGuigan 2008), work on factual television has instead tended to focus on the move from current affairs and serious analytical documentary to docusoaps, lifestyle and reality TV (Bruzzi 2000; Brunsdon et al. 2001; Kilborn et al. 2001; Corner 2002; Biressi and Nunn 2005; Hill 2007). This means that the development of business entertainment programming (a related but distinct genre) has remained a largely hidden and unexamined area of television history.

In an attempt to begin to address this situation, this article first outlines the representation of business on British television and in particular its problematic status within the BBC. It then examines the key personnel involved in the production of BBC2's *Troubleshooter* (1990-1995) before outlining how the series established a template for future generations of UK-originated business programming by placing an emphasis on drama, risk and the casting of an accessible business expert. We also focus on the evolving nature of public service broadcasting, particularly in relation to Channel 4's adaptation of the business format for its own viewers through an initial combination of lifestyle, property, entrepreneurialism and expert opinion. The final section moves on to outline the rise of the global entertainment format and considers both its importance to an increasingly competitive and entrepreneurial television marketplace and the way in which certain international business formats have been successfully adapted by the BBC for a public service audience. Throughout the article there is an awareness of the changes that have occurred within the industry and how this has impacted on what is understood by factual programming. However, there is also an emphasis on aspects of continuity that run throughout television with regards to personnel, networks, production companies and the updating and reworking of particular formats. This continuity not only results in programming that continually references aspects of television history but it also seeks to reduce risk in what has become an ever more competitive and precarious multichannel landscape.

Engaging with Business in the Factual Arena: The Problem of the BBC

Prior to the 1990s, British factual television's engagement with the world of business, finance and enterprise tended to be restricted to news journalism and current affairs. While the latter is typified by the long-running BBC2 series *The Money Programme* (1966-), it is significant that with regards to its news output the BBC did not have a Business Editor until 2001 when journalist Jeff Randall was appointed to the role.

Broadcasting institutions have historically been comprised of dedicated departments commissioning news, documentary and drama programming, alongside arts, science and history-related content. However this has not extended to the realm of business, meaning that the types of formats and range of representations on offer within factual television have been limited. Fictional programming, on the other hand, has regularly featured businessmen (and it has traditionally been men) in key roles. Yet, as a number of academic studies (Lichter et al. 1994; Williams 2004) have revealed, portrayals have tended to be negative with popular drama and comedy presenting businessmen and entrepreneurs as ‘suspect, untrustworthy or figures of fun’ (Boyle and Magor 2008, 126). A report by the Washington-based Media Institute (Theberge 1981) refers to such characters as ‘crooks, conmen and clowns’ and indeed these fictional types are exemplified in a range of successful programming from the 1980s, e.g., the crooked J.R Ewing in the US prime-time soap *Dallas* (CBS; BBC1, 1978-1991), conman Arthur Daley of comedy-drama *Minder* (ITV, 1979-1994) and Delboy Trotter, the lovable clown from sitcom *Only Fools and Horses* (BBC1, 1981-2003). These representations have changed however with the development of reality television from the 1990s onwards. As Hendershot (2009, 244) has noted, ‘reality TV is a genre obsessively focused on labour’ and this focus has opened up a wider range of business representations onscreen, allowing the traditional dichotomy displayed in fictional programming between comedy/foolishness and drama/criminality to dissipate.

Despite the capacity of business to provide fictional programming with both dramatic and comedic characters and scenarios, commissioners and producers within the factual arena have been slow to recognise its potential as a subject area. In part, this lack of engagement is bound up with wider British attitudes to wealth and materialist values (Williams 2004) and the way in which up until the 1970s, a dominant corporate culture consisting of large, paternalistic organisations meant that the image of the loyal ‘company man’ was instilled in the public consciousness while the risk-taking entrepreneur remained largely absent from the public’s imagination (Sampson 1998). Such cultural attitudes began to change however in the 1980s as the role of enterprise in shaping economic development and wealth generation became increasingly part of mainstream political discourse.

Nevertheless, this was not immediately reflected within television programming and, as a public service broadcaster, the continued absence of business

and enterprise-related issues from the BBC's factual agenda has been particularly problematic. As explained by producer Robert Thirkell (interview with authors, 13 March 2009), who initially worked for the BBC's Science Department before going on to revolutionise business programming with the creation of more entertainment-led formats in the 1990s, the Science Department was the only place within the BBC making business-related content throughout the 1980s. Yet, he suggests that even then, the department

really wasn't interested in making business programmes and didn't think they mattered . . . nor was anybody else at the BBC . . . I actually feel people in the BBC at the time hated money. It was that old British thing that had always been there, that it wasn't classy or intellectual to have anything to do with business or money. Whereas I was always really intrigued by it because it creates so much of what we see, it creates so much politically, it affects us so much.

Thirkell's perception of the BBC is one that continues to find echoes among a number of key individuals working within the television industry today.

For example, Luke Johnson (interview with authors, 20 March 2009), the successful British entrepreneur and Chairman of Channel 4 from 2004 to 2010, argues that the BBC's attitude to business is bound up with its status as a publicly-funded institution. This differentiates the corporation's decision-makers from independent producers who run their own companies and therefore have 'some sort of understanding of what it is like to be in business and to meet a payroll'. Furthermore, due to the organisation's left-of-centre sensibilities, Johnson also believes that BBC employees are 'sceptical about capitalism and suspicious of the whole profit motive and so therefore their empathy with, and their understanding of what drives invention and entrepreneurship is limited'. The BBC's former Business Editor Jeff Randall (interview with authors, 11 January 2007) espouses a similar opinion, stating that prior to his arrival,

the BBC was culturally and structurally biased against business. The evidence was that it had no business editor, never had one. It kidded itself that it did business because it had an economics editor. I had to convince people there that business sits on the crossroads of commerce and finance, and that economics sits on the crossroads of politics and economics.

It was not until the appointment of Greg Dyke as Director-General of the corporation in 2000 that a sustained effort was made to reverse the BBC's traditional antipathy towards business, an approach that gained the full support of the former banker and economist Gavyn Davies when he accepted the position of BBC Chairman a year later.

On joining the BBC, Dyke, who had spent many years running profit and loss companies and was thus used to operating within a different culture and ethos to that of the BBC (Dyke 2004, 140), delivered an attack on the corporation's track record of covering business issues by stating that mainstream news and current affairs programmes had 'ignored or failed to understand the real business agenda' and that the corporation must 'understand what profits are for' (Teather 2000). As well as the appointment of Randall, he installed Thirkell as creative director of the newly formed Business Unit, tasked with producing business features and reinventing the current affairs series *The Money Programme*. Transforming the latter from a traditional magazine format to a single-subject documentary series that continues to perform well within the multichannel television environment, it is nevertheless Thirkell's feature documentary work both within the Business Unit and prior to its formation that can be recognised as having a substantial influence in shaping the rise of the business entertainment format and transforming the BBC's relationship with business content.

The Troubleshooter Template: Drama, Risk and Expert Opinion

Business is not, as commonly believed, about numbers and endless computer calculations. It is about people and their interactions and dealings with others.
(Harvey-Jones 1990, 10)

Thirkell's status as the man who revolutionised business programming was acquired somewhat by accident rather than design when an opportunity presented itself in 1987. While at the BBC's Science Department, Thirkell worked on *The Business Series* as a researcher but was planning on leaving the corporation to embark on his own entrepreneurial venture of running a stall on Portobello Market. Around the same time however, the industrialist Sir John Harvey-Jones, the recently retired Chairman of Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI), expressed an interest to the BBC's Director of Television Michael Grade of working within the medium in some capacity. As explained by Thirkell (interview with authors, 13 March 2009), Grade's subsequent proposal to make a programme focusing on the challenges facing British

manufacturing was met with considerable internal resistance, with the BBC's Documentary Department turning it down on the grounds that 'businessmen were boring and programmes on business were dreary' and therefore not suitable television material.

Due to his previous involvement with *The Business Series*, the project was passed to Thirkell, who became the eventual producer and director of *Troubleshooter*. However, Thirkell himself suggests that this was 'presumably on the basis that it would never work' given his limited experience and imminent plans for departure. Having never made a television feature before and coming from a family of novelists, his interests were literary based leading him to focus on narrative and character:

When I got that first *Troubleshooter*, which was my first film, I just couldn't do anything but make it a story, because that is all I could see, that is the only way I could see of making it. I didn't understand how people made films. I only understood stories. So therefore I tried always to tell stories, which I still do.

It was this injection of narrative and focus on larger than life characters that transformed *Troubleshooter* from a supposedly dry and dreary prospect into a BAFTA-award winning series on its broadcast in 1990. Sir John Harvey-Jones (1990, 10) emphasizes that he was 'certainly not interested in doing a propaganda job for industry' but rather his drive was to use television to reveal to the public the drama and excitement which he saw as integral to running a business. His other passions were manufacturing and the role that small businesses play in the economic wellbeing of the country, thus it was these types of companies that became the focus of the original series while the second installment in 1992 also examined public sector organizations, including an NHS hospital trust and the South Yorkshire Police force. Harvey-Jones was sent in to assess the organizational problems of each business and offer advice on how management could turn things around. This lightly formatted series very clearly placed itself in the observational documentary mode, as Harvey-Jones (1990, 15) was keen to point out: 'There were no 'set ups' and everything that happened was filmed or recorded [and] shown as it happened'. What the series offered was a dramatic narrative and characters viewers could empathize with through its focus on real people, the risks involved in running a business and the impact of this on their everyday lives.

As such, *Troubleshooter* worked to bring business to life for a wider audience than those historically attracted to current affairs. Producer Michele Kurland (interview with authors, 11 January 2007), who went on to work with Thirkell on a number of his later formats, explains how the casting of Harvey-Jones was central to the show's success, as he was able to make the leap from the business world to mainstream television by humanizing the characters involved and making business accessible in the process. It was this combination of securing a suitable personality with relevant expertise alongside Thirkell's ability to craft a 'story' around a particular business issue that led to *Troubleshooter* not only securing another BAFTA for its second series but also acting as a template for future generations of business entertainment programming on both the BBC and Channel 4. Ironically both Thirkell and Harvey-Jones themselves felt that by series three they were 'disinclined to continue with that particular approach to business programmes. We felt that the programmes were beginning to follow a formula and we wanted to take a different, more elastic approach' (Harvey-Jones 1996, 3). This meant that *Troubleshooter Returns* (1995) took a more expansive look at the world of business and how aspects of British national life had changed through retracing some of the key influences that had shaped Sir John's life.

The Development of Docusoaps and Personality-Driven Factual Programming

Thirkell went on to develop a number of other business formats throughout the 1990s that continued to be broadcast on BBC2 to a relatively niche minority audience. Amongst these were the docussoap *Back to the Floor* (1997-2002) and the documentary series *Trouble at the Top* (1997-2004) and *Blood on the Carpet* (1999-2001), which focused on troubled bosses and business battles respectively. In this sense, it is important to note that Thirkell's formats were not developed in isolation from the wider television industry at this time but instead reworked many existing techniques within a business context. For example, *Back to the Floor*, which featured company bosses returning to the shop floor for a week to gain a different perspective on their business, consisted of thirty-minute episodes in the docussoap style that came to prominence on the BBC in the mid-1990s and which signaled a move away from documentary as a 'discourse of sobriety' (Nichols 1991) towards a lighter type of public service programming that prioritized entertainment over social commentary (Bruzzi 2000). This format has since been revisited in hour-long form with the

Channel 4 programmes *Undercover Boss* and *I'm Running Sainsbury's*, both broadcast in 2009 and both adding a twist to the format in that the former keeps the identity of the boss secret while the latter allows *employees* to implement changes within the Sainsbury's supermarket chain.

It is notable that series four of *Back to the Floor* featured the aforementioned Luke Johnson, then Chairman of the restaurant group Belgo, as he returned to work in the company's flagship Covent Garden restaurant after being away from the customer-facing end of the business for fifteen years. This was followed by an episode focusing on the Chairman of Millwall Football Club at the time Theo Paphitis, who has since gone on to become a 'Dragon' in BBC2's business entertainment series *Dragons' Den*. Thirkell's documentary series *Trouble at the Top* and *Blood on the Carpet*, which drew on the more traditional fly-on-the-wall and interactive documentary modes (Nichols 1991) but with added voiceover narration, likewise brought to television screens for the first time businessmen and women who would go on to contribute to future business entertainment formats in a number of ways. This is indicative of the mutually beneficial relationship that can develop between broadcasters and businesspeople, as programme-makers are able to utilize specialist expertise while professionals raise their media profile and boost their business brands in the process.

The first episode of *Blood on the Carpet* in 1999 produced a slightly different outcome however. Documenting the hostile takeover by Granada of the catering and hotel business Trusthouse Forte, it featured the Granada Chief Executive at the time Gerry Robinson outlining the key tactics used to secure the deal. Following his subsequent departure from Granada, Robinson was approached by Thirkell's Business Unit and asked to reprise the Harvey-Jones troubleshooter role in a reworked format entitled *I'll Show Them Who's Boss* (BBC2, 2003-04) focusing on family-run businesses. Executive produced by Michele Kurland, the focus was again on drama, characters and a well-chosen business expert that viewers could engage with. Kurland (interview with authors, 11 January 2007) explains that the key to bringing special interest content such as business to a wider audience is to emphasize the human aspect: 'Business is about people and something I learned from Gerry Robinson is that there is no secret or mystery to business . . . he demystifies it, strips it back to a number of core issues, one of which is listening to people'. Robinson's ability to pinpoint the core issues of struggling businesses allowed him to again follow Harvey-

Jones's lead by tackling the bureaucratic National Health Service in the Open University series *Can Gerry Robinson Fix the NHS?* (BBC2, 2007). This time, however, the reference to Robinson in the title, as well as within later programmes *Gerry's Big Decision* (Channel 4, 2009) and *Can Gerry Robinson Fix Dementia Care Homes?* (BBC2, 2010), indicates the importance that was now placed on providing viewers with a reliable expert to guide them through the business world and who was also, more importantly, able to function as an appealing television personality.

This strategy of creating personality-driven factual programming based on the troubleshooter template has since been continued by both the BBC and Channel 4 with *Mary Queen of Shops* (BBC2, 2007-), in which retail expert Mary Portas attempts to turn around struggling fashion boutiques in the face of stiff competition from high-profile retail chains, and *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares* (Channel 4, 2004-), which follows Michelin-starred chef Gordon Ramsay as he tries to transform the fortunes of failing restaurants around the country. By actively incorporating the name of the business expert in the title of each series, the result has been that Ramsay, Portas and Robinson have become recognizable 'faces' for their respective channels by appearing across a range of lifestyle, current affairs and business entertainment programming; although Robinson's long-standing relationship with BBC2 was complicated with his appearance on Channel 4's *Gerry's Big Decision*, in which he sought to invest up to £1 million of his own money in worthwhile businesses. While this focus is bound up with the increasing importance placed on celebrity within both television programming and British society in general, it has also enabled the format to diversify using a variety of means, most notably through the use of personal investment and campaigning strategies.² The value of having business experts from specific fields attached to public service broadcasters became particularly evident during the credit crunch and subsequent recession which Britain experienced throughout 2008 and 2009. During this time, Robinson, Portas and Ramsay hosted a series of current affairs programmes dealing precisely with the challenges facing businesses and consumers in an economic downturn. This included special editions of *The Money Programme* in the form of *Gerry Robinson's Car Crash* and *Mary Portas: Save Our Shops* for BBC2, as well as Gordon Ramsay's *Great British Nightmare* on Channel 4, in which the chef campaigned for viewers to support their local restaurants. Longstanding business entertainment formats were also reconfigured to reflect ongoing changes within the economy, resulting in Portas's aforementioned

BBC2 series becoming *Mary Queen of Charity Shops* and Channel 4's *Property Ladder* being renamed *Property Snakes and Ladder*.

What is clear is that business entertainment programming began to attract a wider audience once Channel 4 recognized its potential and embarked on a commissioning process at the end of the 1990s to produce similar types of programming to BBC2. For Andrew Mackenzie (interview with authors, 20 March 2009), Head of Factual Entertainment at Channel 4 from 2007 to 2010, business has remained attractive to factual commissioners in recent years because it has 'natural jeopardy . . . business is entertaining, it is full of jeopardy, and those are two things you need in a popular factual format'. This statement demonstrates how far the industry's understanding of business programming has come since the late 1980s when Grade, Harvey-Jones and Thirkell struggled to get *Troubleshooter* made. With entertainment producers now looking at business from a variety of perspectives, such as focusing on characters, emotions and the dramatic nature of the risks involved, business-related factual content has become an integral element of the television schedule.

Channel 4's 'Wall of Leisure' and the Evolving Nature of Public Service Broadcasting

In her account of the birth and development of Channel 4, Maggie Brown (2007) outlines how under the stewardship of Chief Executive Michael Jackson and Director of Programmes Tim Gardam, the channel moved away from its original mission to provide innovative and experimental programming towards a more predictable schedule populated by lifestyle-oriented formats, or rather the 'wall of leisure' that dominated from the end of the 1990s. Channel 4 was not alone in adapting its public service remit to meet the demands of an audience increasingly accustomed to entertainment-driven multichannel content and whose aspirational desires chimed with the New Labour rhetoric of the time. As previously mentioned in relation to docusoaps and indeed Thirkell's style of business programming, the BBC had been at the forefront of this trend for a number of years.

Dovey (2000, 134) explains that although the BBC was initially surprised by the success in 1996 of docusoaps such as *Airport* and *Vet School*, it soon became apparent that it was 'not just the novelty of the format that appealed [but] rather the way it met network requirements; it was an idea who's time had come'. In essence,

this type of light, factual entertainment responded to changing market conditions by being more economical to produce than drama, comedy or serious documentary and proving popular with a desirable audience. For Born (2004, 431), the BBC's Documentary Department can in this instance be praised for its attempts to diversify the genre by developing new styles of programming. While docusoaps tended to deal with the workplace and institutions, other lifestyle formats also developed around cookery, gardening and the home. Two key producers of this type of programming for BBC2 were Peter Bazalgette, whose independent production company Bazal made the long-running trio *Ready Steady Cook* (1994-), *Changing Rooms* (1996-2004), and *Ground Force* (1997-2005), and Daisy Goodwin, who devised the early hit *Home Front* (1994-1998) and whom Brown (2007, 249) credits with possessing the 'knack of effortlessly thinking up new programmes as [easily as] others bake cakes'. Both went on to be involved in some of Channel 4's core successes with Bazalgette popularising the *Big Brother* (2000-) reality format in the UK and Goodwin developing *Grand Designs* (1999-), *Property Ladder* (2001-) and *Jamie's Kitchen* (2002) following her move to the independent company Talkback Thames. Brown (2007, 249) argues that with the BBC facing criticism by the end of the decade for its reliance on factual entertainment and BBC2 in particular being 'under pressure to move back to more serious fare, such as history, [this left] the yuppie lifestyle field open for others to exploit, at a time when incomes were rising and advertisers and sponsors were detecting a mood of change'.

While Channel Five made an attempt at this with the Talkback-produced *House Doctor* (1999-), it was Channel 4 that really seized the opportunity to employ the 'wall as leisure' as part of a range of responses designed to entice and hold on to viewers in the face of fierce competition. Through a clever combination of lifestyle, property, expert opinion and entrepreneurialism, Channel 4 was able to offer viewers what former Head of Factual Programming Andrew Mackenzie (interview with authors, 20 March 2009) describes as 'a connective point' in its programming, or rather something or someone they can relate to. For example, following the success of *Property Ladder*, which followed ordinary people as they tried to make it as property developers, the channel produced a series of formatted programmes documenting various couples, families and friends as they attempted to ditch the 9 to 5 urban existence for a new, more exciting lifestyle abroad. In *No Going Back* (2002-2004), *A Place in France – Indian Summer* (2004) and *Chaos at the Chateau* (2007),

participants searched for a property abroad that would also function as a business, such as a ski resort in the Pyrennes, an Indian restaurant in the Ardeche and a luxury boutique hotel in Slovakia. In addition to the emotional turmoil of moving to a new country and the tensions inherent in living and working together, there were also problems around trying to conduct a business in a foreign language and, more significantly, securing finance for each project. The result was a highly-dramatic and, in the case of the latter two, often comedic process in which the cameras captured the real-life ups and downs involved in starting a new life abroad.

Referring to a later production, *Willie's Wonky Chocolate Factory* (2008), in which chocolate producer Willie Harcourt attempts to launch the produce from his Venezuelan plantation in the British market, Mackenzie makes an interesting point that can be applied to many of the participants of these shows: 'I don't think you think of him as an entrepreneur. You think of him as an idealistic man who is following his pipe dream'. Thus, although entrepreneurialism tends to be at the heart of such programmes, within this particular strand of lifestyle-oriented entertainment it is often disguised in a way that makes it more accessible to a wider audience.

Perhaps more so than the BBC, Channel 4 was also able to benefit from its relationship with independent television producers during this time, many more of which had sprung up in recent years following the shift towards a deregulated, market-led industry first instigated by the Thatcher government (see Murdock 1994; Sparks 1994; Ursell 2000 and Darlow 2004). Echoing Luke Johnson's argument about how having to meet the demands of a payroll impacts on the programme-making decisions taken by independent producers, Bazalgette (2005, 42) explains that with regards to the development of new forms of factual and reality-based programming, it was to be 'entertainment producers, with no loyalty to the documentary tradition, [who] would prove the most groundbreaking'. As advertising revenues began to be squeezed at the end of the 1990s due to the development of digital television and new media, Channel 4 had to find ways of maintaining its audience and advertising share with light factual entertainment that was economical to produce and easy to promote. In addition to the aforementioned lifestyle and property shows, independent producer Stephen Lambert of RDF Media created a new strand of formatted reality documentaries with *Faking It* (2000-), which Potter (2008, 240) describes as 'a variant on "fish-out-of-water" series like [the BBC's] *In at the Deep End* from the 1980s' and *Wife Swap* (2003-09), a long-running success for Channel 4 that went on

to sell around the world. Brown (2007, 255) explains the attractiveness of such programming by describing how these durable and more commercial strands ‘started to elbow out the old style fly-on-the-wall documentaries which, while they chronicled life in all its awkwardness did not necessarily produce a neat resolution or large audiences’. Moreover, such programming satisfied the growing need to find entertaining ways to present factual content to viewers, something which Danny Cohen (interview with authors, 7 March 2007), Mackenzie’s predecessor as Head of Factual Entertainment at Channel 4 points out:

One of the challenges for programme makers today is that you have to make everything entertainment because there is such choice out there. So you have to make interesting subjects entertaining and dynamic because otherwise people might go elsewhere.

This challenge continues to exist in an era that has seen the development of global entertainment formats become a key strategy within the television industry. Unlike the previous business programmes discussed, both *The Apprentice* and *Dragons’ Den* have been adapted by the BBC from existing shows in foreign territories and, as such, are indicative of the importance placed on global entertainment formats within an increasingly competitive and entrepreneurial television industry.

The Rise of the Global Entertainment Format: *The Apprentice* and *Dragons’ Den*

First broadcast by the American network NBC in 2004, *The Apprentice* revolves around a job interview that is presented in the form of a series-long challenge that sees the supposedly weakest candidate being fired in each episode. In this sense, it has much in common with the reality gameshow *Big Brother*, although instead of contestants facing a public vote their fate is decided by the entrepreneur Donald Trump, whose company provides the prize of the much sought-after apprenticeship. The link with *Big Brother* is unsurprising, given that the creator of *The Apprentice*, Mark Burnett, was also involved in the US version of *Survivor* (CBS, 2000-), an earlier reality format developed by British producer Charlie Parsons who unsuccessfully sued *Big Brother* producers Endemol for ‘theft of copyright’ due to the similarities between the two programmes (Waisbord 2004, 366). This incident is indicative of a changing business model which saw the increasing importance around the world of ‘vertically integrated transnational television companies with huge

inventories of game shows and reality TV formats' (McMurria 2008, 183). As Steemers (2004, 173-4) explains,

In the more competitive and fragmented broadcasting environment that emerged in Europe in the 1990s, the use of entertainment formats has a clear commercial logic. Faced with an expansion of transmission time and the loss to pay television of key sporting events, entertainment formats provide a more cost-effective way of filling schedules with local productions than locally originated drama.

Although there is not one agreed definition of formatted TV in use, Bodycombe (cited in Altmppen, Lantzsich and Will 2007, 95) puts forward a useful description in which he explains that 'a format sale is a product sale. The product in this instance is a recipe for re-producing a successful television programme, in another territory, as a local programme'. The term 'recipe' is particularly significant here as it highlights that rather than exist as a stand-alone, 'canned' product, what is traded in these instances are actually '(successfully tested) concepts for producing entertainment content' (ibid).

Along with the aforementioned commercial logic and the political benefits related to the fact that by acquiring the rights to a television format and adapting it within a specific country it is then classified as a domestic production (Moran 1998), many scholars have placed an emphasis on the fact that one of the key advantages of this type of production is the way in which it is seen to reduce risk and promote predictability due to the fact that it has been 'successfully tested' elsewhere:

Besides lower costs, imported formats offer some measure of predictability based on their past performances in numerous countries. The constant and increasing pressures for turning profits means that there is little, if any, time for innovating or trying new ideas. All incentives are to reach out for proven ideas that can help diminish uncertainty. Formats, then, are the ultimate risk-minimizing programme strategy . . . Formats are a form of McTelevision. Shorthand for the McDonald's fast-food chain, the prefix *Mc* stands for a business model characterized by efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control that caters products to specific local requirements, usually informed by cultural factors (Waisbord 2004, 365; 378).

With regards to business entertainment formats, which draw on the 'natural jeopardy' of the business world to provide drama and tension, it is interesting that this new television business model works to eliminate risk as much as possible. Of course, this

being a creative industry in which there are no certainties with regards to which programming will be successful in differing national contexts, nothing is ever guaranteed. Thus, for every successful global format, there are many that have failed to sell or attract sufficient audiences in certain countries.

There are also different issues at stake within varying types of formats. For example, David Frank (cited in Rouse 2003) of RDF Media explains how the reality programming that his company specializes in, such as *Faking It* and *Wife Swap*, requires very different skills to produce a successful adaptation than those needed when reproducing a game show. While the latter is about replicating a studio-based format, the skill in the former lies in the casting, filming and editing process. The British gameshow *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* (ITV, 1998-), which is owned by Celador, became the first format to offer not just a license to other broadcasters but a complete package incorporating production expertise and technical know-how such as computers, set, music, software graphics, titles and lighting (Steemers 2004). This allowed buyers in different countries to replicate the style of the series using home-grown presenters and members of the public acting as both participants and audience. This is different from the process that the BBC embarked on in adapting both the American version of *The Apprentice* and the Japanese business entertainment format *Money no Tora* (Nippon, 2001-2004), which was to become *Dragons' Den*.

The Problems of Adapting International Formats for a Public Service Audience

According to Waisbord (2004, 368), the emphasis placed on extreme challenges and weekly elimination pioneered by early reality formats such as *Survivor*, means that such programming 'can be read as the global projection of capitalism, naked individualism, and competition'. This is a criticism that can similarly be ascribed to *The Apprentice*, in which participants take part in weekly challenges but this time with the objective of securing a six-figure appointment with one of Trump's companies. First broadcast during an economic boom, these aspects of *The Apprentice* posed a challenge for the public service ethos of the BBC when the corporation purchased the format from FreemantleMedia to broadcast on British television. As explained by Roly Keating (interview with authors, 13 March 2009), the controller of BBC2 from 2004 to 2008,

The Apprentice was a classic, extravagant exaggeration of American entrepreneurship, and we had big debates about could this possibly translate into the British landscape. Aren't we too sceptical for that? Do we really admire business people in the way that Americans seem to? Could we really take such an American format and then convert it into something that worked on a public service channel in the UK? And I think it could have gone very badly wrong, but we were lucky to have an exceptional team at Talkback who engineered a British version of the programme which is utterly different from the American in all sort of key elements – not least because it very actively added onto the original Donald Trump format, a British documentary tone of voice, observational tone of voice – not far from what Robert Thirkell was doing in the 1990s.

This statement highlights some of the problems related to adapting TV formats for both a different broadcasting system and a particular national audience. In this instance, however, *The Apprentice* was not only able to reference Thirkell's programmes but it also presented a very timely opportunity for BBC2 as Keating's predecessor Jane Root had recently 'identified the role and impact of enterprise and entrepreneurship on British life as something she wanted reflected in the channel's output' (Boyle 2008, 419).

Root's vision for the channel had much in common with New Labour rhetoric of the time emphasizing the need for a more enterprise-oriented culture, and indeed Born (2004, 172) explains how from the late nineties onwards 'BBC production departments strove to become intensely entrepreneurial'. Fairclough (2000, 33-34) outlines how a number of commentators have accused New Labour of being 'fascinated with the glamour of business' and highlights some of the problems surrounding this type of government discourse:

Calling industry or business "enterprise" is sort of a semantic engineering, engineering of meaning – it seeks to attach the values of "being enterprising" (taking initiative, being creative, etc) to a process that also has a less rosy aspect. There is also an attempt to re-value "entrepreneur" – to encourage its use in such positive senses.

For the BBC, *The Apprentice* offered an opportunity to both reverse the traditional antipathy displayed by the corporation towards business, wealth and profits while at the same time capitalizing on the 'glamour of business' through a reality gameshow framework and the figure of Sir Alan Sugar; a supposed East-end barrow boy made good enough to secure first a knighthood and then a peerage following his appointment by Prime Minister Gordon Brown in 2009 as the government's

‘Enterprise Czar’. As explained by Jane Lush (BBC Press Release 2004), the BBC’s Entertainment Commissioner at the time of its initial production, *The Apprentice* was a ‘breath-taking and original way of using entertainment to bring business to people who might not have thought it was for them’. And indeed the project was extremely successful at attracting a wide demographic, transferring to BBC1 after its first two series.

Dragons’ Den was a slightly different proposition having originated in Japan as a low-budget, late-night show targeting a cult, niche audience. Eschewing both the reality-gameshow format and the traditional troubleshooter approach, the premise of the programme involves aspiring entrepreneurs pitching for funding from wealthy investors, or rather the ‘Dragons’ of the title. Essentially, it is based on existing ‘business angels’ initiatives that seek to facilitate investment into early stage businesses (Rees-Mogg 2008). Notably, given the emphasis placed on risk, jeopardy and drama in business entertainment programming, the term ‘angels’ is replaced with ‘dragons’, thus introducing a more ruthless, and some would say cruel, streak to proceedings (in this sense, the programme can be understood as being similar to reality TV). While the Japanese series took place in the boardroom of the television company in order to minimize costs, the BBC adaptation turned an empty warehouse into the ‘den’, stripping five multi-millionaires of all their trappings as each decide whether to invest their own money into any of the companies on offer.

Dominic Bird (interview with authors, 27 March 2009), executive producer of the show, admits that for the first two series, the BBC adaptation was also something of a cult. However, since then, it has become the definitive version which has sold around the world. Explaining how Japanese company Sony own the format and act as guardian of the brand, Bird states that,

[Sony], as far as I understand it, used the BBC programme as their template, and . . . I am not even sure whether the people around the world would even look at the Nippon version. I think it is the BBC show that people use. I mean some of them, word for word, will use our Evan [Davis – presenter] script at the intro of the show.

While Sony, then, recoup the rewards of the success of overseas adaptations, the BBC have sought to diversify the format by launching an online version in 2009. With the television programme being broadcast for only eight weeks per year, Bird points out that this is not enough time to deal with the thousands of applications the BBC receive

for each series. Thus, the online version not only increases the scale of the programme but it also satisfies the growing demand within the broadcasting industry to produce 360 degree content that operates across platforms (e.g., broadcast, web and mobile technology).

Conclusion

The move into online content only adds to the success of both *The Apprentice* and *Dragons' Den* in securing a wide demographic for the BBC. Furthermore, these adaptations have managed to combine the entertainment focus of the original formats with an educational or learning aspect that takes much of the mystery out of business while revealing the process of pitching for investment and the challenges of being an entrepreneur. As Down (2010, 185-186) argues, “‘Reality’ shows such as *Dragons' Den* . . . are essentially etiquette guides, about how to be and behave in particular social contexts. *Dragons' Den* shows people - both participant and viewer - what, and what not, to do in order to be a successful entrepreneur’. This makes the business entertainment format particularly attractive to public service broadcasters and although commissioners and producers are quick to point out that these programmes are most definitely grounded in entertainment, Roly Keating (interview with authors, 13 March 2009) also suggests that,

Dragon's Den and *The Apprentice* are not unlike Robert [Thirkell's] generation of business programmes. They are commissioned for entertainment but I think the penny has dropped that they are actually extremely potent tools to draw people, probably beyond the screen, into quite detailed information about how to set up a business or management techniques and so on. I think part of the attraction of *Dragon's Den* for the BBC is that it does have enormous potency beyond the screen as an idea that captures people's imagination, a frame through which they can think about questions of business ideas or how to pitch ideas and find out other things. But the programme itself doesn't pretend to be a documentary depiction of reality and never has. It is clearly an artifice that nonetheless accurately reflects a particular part of the value chain.

This statement reflects on the trajectory of business-related content on television as it has moved from the more straightforward journalistic arena of news and current affairs towards documentary, lifestyle and finally factual entertainment programming. When, in 2010, the BBC Director-General Mark Thompson (cited in Beckett 2010) attempted to define the Corporation's role in the digital age, his vision of the BBC

was one that connected with aspects of its particular history and relationship with its public. He argued,

People want guaranteed access to a reliable source of trustworthy news; quality drama and comedy; programming in the areas of culture and knowledge...which [tells us] what it is to live in this country, to be British. It was like that in the 50s and 60s. The challenge is, what do you have to do now, given the way media is changing, to meet that public expectation?

Thus the rise in programmes around business related content can be seen as part of this attempt to reflect on broader patterns of social change.

As Hill's (2007) audience research indicates there is a strong correlation between reality TV-type formats being popular but not valued by the audience, while more traditional documentary forms are highly valued but not perceived as popular. The mobilization by both the BBC and Channel 4 of various popular formats using business-related content (in some cases more explicitly than others) signals a step change in public service approaches to reach out to audiences in the digital age through increasingly popular forms, but remaining inflected with distinctive content. Indeed we argue that this begins to explain how public service broadcasters such as the BBC and Channel 4 began to reformulate their strategies toward factual content in order to attract and maintain audiences in a multichannel age. It is of course worth reiterating that these shifting television representations of business are not ideologically neutral, and may be indicative of the ways that particular notions of the role of the individual and their relationship to risk and business have become normalized in mainstream television over the last few decades, but that is another argument.

What is clear is that a mapping of the development of these types of programmes offers an insight into wider television industry shifts as producers (both independent and in-house) have moved from addressing a fairly captive analogue audience towards engaging with a more restless viewership in the digital age. We also argue that while wider structural factors remain central in shaping the trajectory of television as both an industry and cultural form, television also remains shaped by key individuals working in particular genres at central moments in an organization's history. The legacy of Thirkell's *Troubleshooter* and his continued role as a respected television producer almost two decades on is indicative of the manner through which the history of television is continually recycled with themes such as business being

presented for different audiences using a variety of styles over a sustained period. Thus we contend that by combining historical analysis, in-depth interviews with industry professionals and a wider examination of the changing television marketplace, the development of a previously overlooked television format can be traced, revealing that rather than simply being a subsidiary of reality programming, the business entertainment format has a distinct history. It also illuminates the shifting conventions of popular factual television in contemporary British society and changes the way in which business, entrepreneurship, risk and wealth creation has become represented on mainstream television.

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² Since his departure from the BBC, Robert Thirkell has also been involved in a number of programmes for Channel 4 in which the celebrity chef and successful entrepreneur Jamie Oliver has worked to spearhead various public campaigns and engage in social enterprise initiatives. These include *Jamie's School Dinners* (2005), *Jamie's Chef* (2007) and *Jamie's Ministry of Food* (2008); programming that again features the business expert's name in the title.