

The total experience

Lorraine Heggessy



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Knowing what viewers want is to some extent intuitive.

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Two thoughts strike me about television today. The first is that we have been riding a wave for the last few years, a wave of reality and celebrity-based programmes. Many have been immensely successful, and indeed could continue to be: brand leaders like *Big Brother* and *I'm A Celebrity, Get Me Out Of Here*, may well have several further series-worth of life in them. But we can already see the imitators beginning to sink. The laws of television suggest this wave has begun to lose its force. There are a finite number of celebrities you can put in programmes, doing different things in different situations. Before long the wave will beach itself gently on the shores of television history. The smart surfers have let go already; they are paddling way out in the bay, looking for the next big surge.

The second thought is that we are at a point in television where everything is changing. There are more channels than ever before coming on air, creating extraordinary opportunities and unexpected successes. The model is no longer one where executives from the big networks ponder and point the way. Subjects that seemed of niche interest only, can suddenly break through into the mainstream: poker on TV, for example. These are cultural phenomena that kindle and spread across a number of media platforms, so that the interest in poker on TV is fuelled by the interest in poker on the Internet, and vice versa.

So as canny programme-makers and broadcasters, we should be aware that the exciting opportunities now are about how many platforms we can exploit with a single idea. We should be looking to develop fully rounded projects, and thinking of ways to turn our creative idea into not just a programme but a lifestyle, embracing a total experience that can be accessed through television, through broadband, even through the mobile phone.

Big brand television

Will the digital switch-over change viewing? I doubt it. What it *will* mean is that more people will be watching in a multi-channel universe. Therefore although the main channels may well remain the dominant players, there will clearly be greater fragmentation of audiences, and broadcasters will have to compete harder to maintain their share.

So it is perhaps not surprising that over the last few years we have seen the rise of the attention-grabbing mega television event. Increasingly channels are prepared to wipe out the schedule for a night, a whole week, or even a period of weeks to accommodate grand-scale television that gets talked about. *Big Brother* effectively dictates the Channel 4 schedule every day of the week for the time of its run. Even an essentially conservative mainstream broadcaster like ITV will strip events for two weeks. These events have changed the way people view television. Watching a particular series has become a lifestyle, a marker in people's everyday existence.

We are moving towards the idea of making television a total experience. This can be as true of a comedy series like *Little Britain* as it is of an entertainment series like *X Factor*, or a massive reality series like *Big Brother*. These shows are not just a programme you watch once a week; you want to know *more*. They create an appetite for content and today we have a multitude of ways to satisfy that appetite and exploit their success. The coming challenge for the industry is how to capitalise on this trend, building big programme brands, and using different platforms to exploit them.

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This raises some interesting questions over rights. In the short term, we will see a great deal of shuffling and jockeying to determine whether it will be the broadcaster or the independent that should hold onto a particular right. The commercial broadcasters will fight tooth and nail to hold onto as much as they can. As the market fragments and they have fewer viewers, they are likely to lose advertising revenue; one way of clawing it back could be through advertising on the website, or making content available on mobiles.

I firmly believe that television will remain the starting point for big brand programming. It will always command audiences viewing simultaneously greater than those watching video on demand, or programming streamed to the computer or to a mobile. In ten years from now, channel loyalty could even be stronger than it is today. The channel identifies the brand: you trust the BBC or the Channel 4 ‘kite mark’ because they reassure you, suggesting that what’s on offer is for someone like you. In the end, viewers have only so many hours in the day to sample what is on offer. Channel branding helps them discriminate and find programmes to their taste.

Locating the next wave

But how do we identify the next wave, and make sure we are in a position to ride it?

One of the best ways to stimulate ideas is to get programme-makers from different disciplines to brainstorm together. We all feel easiest trundling along the familiar tramlines we have followed for years; but if you can force people who think differently about style and content to collide, then the result is often a creative jolt that opens up exciting new pathways to success. Get an entertainment producer to think about a factual show, or a drama producer to think about an entertainment show; when they come together something entirely

original could emerge. This technique is what informed some of the most successful celebrity-led factual programmes of the last few years.

The same approach could be useful in the quest to explore new forms of drama. To try to devise successful hybrids that cross the boundary between fact and fiction. Many drama-docs have sat uneasily on the screen, but there have been some interesting experiments, notably in the specialist factual genre, with history or science-based stories like *Pompeii* and *Supervolcano* taking a strong factual premise and projecting a dramatic scenario over it. This could be one of the most promising areas to prise open in the future: can we come up with long-running crossover projects that convincingly fuse drama and reality? Eventually somebody will crack the form.

It is often simpler to work in this way within the independent sector. Operating outside a big organisation means you can turn your hand to anything that interests you. There is no rigid hierarchy to dictate you cannot make a drama because you work in a factual department, or because you produce entertainment you cannot be trusted with a documentary. All that matters is coming up with the right idea at the right time. In the middle of my career, I worked for ten years in the independent sector. It helped me to reinvent myself and extend my creative portfolio; at the same time I had the stimulus of working for several different companies. Whether you are a TV executive, a director, an assistant producer or a researcher, my belief is that it is important periodically to jolt yourself out of your comfort zone. There is no better way for exposing yourself to new creative influences.

You should also be prepared to poke your nose out of our cosy little television world. It is easy to become insular and forget there is a real world of real people beyond. How often do you get to the theatre? To a concert? What books are you reading? Do you ever speak to people who *don't* work in television? We have to push ourselves outside our narrow box and think about entertainment in its broadest sense.

Anyone can have a good idea

When I was a commissioning broadcaster, producers were always pointing to a successful idea on another channel and complaining they had pitched exactly the same concept to me a year before. It is easy to see in someone else’s successful programme the germ of the idea you once had, and imagine that it is the same thing. But what you might have pitched to the Controller of BBC One - the narrative approach, the key personnel, the way you suggested executing the idea - will almost certainly not have been the same as the successful show that is now running on Channel 4. Commissioners buy ideas from people whom they can trust to carry them through from start to finish, and not only make the show work but give it those extra ingredients that make it a hit.

Anyone can have a good idea. Not everyone can make it work. At the heart of every successful big brand series, as well as a good idea there is a strong creative *team*. Successful television, contrary to what some people seem to think, is not made by the lone genius. A lone genius may come up with a brilliant one-line concept, but he or she needs to work with a talented team to translate the initial thought into powerful television.

Just as good programmes are always made by good teamwork, research alone is not enough to guarantee success. The television industry has in recent years made a shibboleth of research and development, but research can never tell you which programme to make to have a runaway success. There are probably as many concepts that researched favourably and subsequently bombed, as there are concepts that researched dubiously yet went on to success.

Now I find myself in the opposite role, pitching rather than buying, and it is an immensely stimulating experience. A new generation of young commissioners are in place since the last time I worked in the independent sector a dozen years ago. They are full of ideas and enthusiasm, and have their own take on the business, and I feel I am learning from them. In a young industry like ours, you can never afford to get complacent whatever you have been, whatever you have done, because there is always a rising generation of bright young things with just as much to teach us as we have to teach them.

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But I also believe that as well as style and content, in the future we must also think creatively about how our show is *delivered*, using the different platforms available to us to enhance the total experience for the viewer.

The red button experience

Initially, people have been suspicious of interactivity. But in the run-up to digital switch-over, more and more viewers now have access to the red button. As we see an increasing take-up of services such as Sky Plus, they are becoming used to the extra facilities the button places at their fingertip. They may start off using it cautiously when they watch a

sporting event, to call up a different camera angle, an action replay, or a player’s history. But the next time, when it is available to them on a completely different show, they will be familiar enough with it to give it another go, and their confidence will grow every time they are encouraged to use it. So we should be exploring how we can use interactivity to give them a completely different kind of viewing experience. The programme-maker of the future will have to turn his or her mind to the full gamut of what the viewers might want to take from a programme, not just for the 30 minutes they sit in their armchair watching it on screen; we need to consider how they can actively engage with it during the broadcast, and stay with it after transmission is over.

The best programmes already take you way beyond the screen. Viewers want to live the *Big Brother* life during the run of the series; they want to see all the crazy auditions from *X Factor*, or to monitor how participants are doing in rehearsal. We should think of those who watch as much more than a passive audience; they are becoming active viewing communities.

TV on the move

One of the key access points to television in the future will be the mobile phone. Cynics will point out that small-screen portable television has been possible in the past yet has never taken off. But the point is that the mobile is not just another device you have to lug around. More than portable, it is a multi-function *portal* to a range of services, and therefore it is becoming the only device you need to carry.

Moreover, it will be a two-way portal, both receiving and transmitting. Mobiles have already begun to change the way television operates. To take a recent example, the most dramatic pictures of the tragic London bombings on 7/7 came from mobile phones. Few people carry their video recorder to work but everybody carries a mobile, and many of us can now receive and record visual material on it.

But what might tempt people to spend longer watching via their mobiles? Perhaps, because of the screen size, the attention span is necessarily short, so clips will work best. But that does not mean mobile phones can be dismissed as a platform for mainstream television. We are already used to getting them out whenever we have time to kill, to text someone or play games. Viewing could become just as commonplace as those activities.

Indeed, exploiting mobile viewing could become an essential part of the programme-maker’s toolkit, helping us to create those really big programme brands that punch through in a crowded marketplace. People will increasingly want to be able to view on demand.

You are standing in a queue for a bus, or waiting to meet somebody for a drink; you might not want to wait for *EastEnders* till eight o'clock at night. You can watch the first 15 minutes of it, or a specially tailored taster designed for mobile viewing. Here again, programme-makers must become flexible in making versions of shows for different platforms.

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Yet we should still trust to our instincts, rather than allowing the technology to dictate. Just because it is technically possible does not necessarily mean that the viewer will find it desirable. Knowing what viewers want is to some extent intuitive. Different platforms suggest different approaches; it is all about thinking creatively about how to make your programme live over and over again through different access points, adjusting formats so that they will work on more than one platform.

Global television

Our horizons are expanding. Not only do we have to think across a number of different platforms, we also have to begin to think globally.

Independent production companies have to learn to forge worldwide connections in order to stay in business. talkbackTHAMES is part of a global concern; I meet colleagues who are responsible for programming all over the world, and learn from them what works in other countries. But it is not always the shows you imagine that turn out to win huge international success. Television is the opposite of an industrial process; the excitement is that it is hard to predict what will take off. *How Clean Is Your House*, for example, is a particular hit in France, and doing well all round the world. Likewise, *The Farmer Wants A Wife*, a strong observational documentary series, is one of the top-rated shows in Holland and has been a success in many territories. If you deliberately set out to create a global hit the chances are you will fail; if instead you concentrate on getting it right for your own domestic market, it has a good chance of translating successfully elsewhere.

Thinking globally also gives us the chance to think big. One of the most impressive broadcast events this year bore witness to the ability of television to galvanise people around an idea. *Live 8* tied together people all round the world, through the inspired vision of Bob Geldof,

Richard Curtis and the Make Poverty History campaign. I found it incredibly moving, as Philadelphia waved to Ontario, who waved to Johannesburg, to Berlin, to Paris, to London. People went to the concerts or tuned in for the music, but they were also spurred to take part by the power of the idea behind it. It was a unique moment, when television was used in a political way yet took us beyond politics. Television itself became a superpower that day.

Could we create other global TV events? What other focal points can we devise that transform the way people see their place in the world? Are there ways we could harness the same power in a non-political way?

I find it heartening that the UK is still the television laboratory for the world. My international colleagues look to us to come up with the new formats that will eventually sell worldwide, once they have proved their worth in the UK marketplace. I believe it is because our broadcasters are more willing to be experimental. Perhaps because public service broadcasting is so strong here, channels are still prepared to take a risk commissioning original content that has not yet been tested and proven. It is what gives us an edge in the global marketplace, and long may it continue. On the producer side we must all keep supporting and nurturing talent while staying open minded and receptive to the new. That way great ideas will continue to flourish and Britain will maintain its reputation for coming up with strong original programming.