

The new kid on the block

Liz Warner



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Men in suits are being replaced by dominatrix women in aprons and cartoon rubber gloves, large-spectacled arts commentators replaced by a group of weird misfits locked in the *Big Brother* house in Hertfordshire, and Delia's how to cook lectures replaced by a bully-boy chef shouting at people trying to run a restaurant.

Where have all the serious documentaries, political commentaries and earnest late-night shows gone? Where are the prime-time arts programmes? Or rather where have the audiences for these shows gone?

The truth is - the old broadcasting elite has been rumbled.

Audiences are demanding programmes about their lives. No longer content with being told how to see the world, what to think or what perspective to take, they want to make their own mind up and see more people like themselves on television. A smaller-minded, vainer world maybe - but a more relevant prime-time TV.

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In their place, increasingly audiences are demanding and getting programmes on the mainstream channels that speak to them about their houses, their parenting skills, their relationships, their aspirations to leave the UK, their badly behaved teenagers, their spending habits, their husbands and their friends. Before our eyes, slowly at first but now ever more regularly, broadcasters have begun to respond to this as they construct a schedule increasingly driven by share - and we have witnessed the birth of a whole new genre: the birth, emergence and onward march of factual entertainment (next stop the USofA).

This is programming that meets the needs of a mass audience to be both entertained and informed about things which connect with their daily lives. Not just facts, not just entertainment, but a new cross-breed that meets the needs of an audience who don't expect or want the television to tell them but to show them through others' experiences. Democratisation of TV.

Factual entertainment is in a boom period. It raids any territory, taking subject matters usually confined to current affairs, social affairs or magazine programmes and creating lively programmes that are palatable for the broad marketplace. Subjects that would have been dry (such as investigative programmes), history or looked at in a straightforward way (such as presenter-led magazine items) are made much more entertaining to view. So people will watch programmes that they would never have approached before and information is delivered by stealth.

Within the factual entertainment genre there are specific strands of interest that replicate the social trends of our time. We are in a property boom and are obsessed with home ownership, so the growth in the factual entertainment property programmes has been phenomenal - starting at Channel 4 with *Grand Designs*, followed by *Location Location Location*, then *Relocation* and finally *How Clean is Your House* - taking property and domesticity and making them popular - now every channel has followed with *Dream Homes*, *Escape to the Country* - too many to mention. Following on from property and domesticity is the lifestyle-property trend like *A Place in the Sun*, *Get A New Life* and many others.

Another developing social trend in factual entertainment is parenting. Not long ago it was generally thought that children make really unappealing television - the last thing you need when you get home is another crying child. But that's been blown apart by *Supernanny* and *Bad Behaviour* on Channel 4 and *Little Angels* on BBC and will be followed by a new parenting factual entertainment series on ITV.

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To work, this new breed of shows must have an incredibly clear and simple format proposition, for example 'man goes in, turns restaurant round' or 'woman goes in, sorts out misbehaving children'. Another important element is jeopardy - will they/won't they be able to turn around the horrible food/children? - followed by resolution. Added to these are clear parameters. For each individual programme there needs to be a 'narrative journey' to make the programme hang together as a story. And finally - crucially - broad appeal, common denominator subject-matters.

They are clear brands - the title tells all: *Wife Swap*, *Faking It*, *What not to Wear*, *Bad Lads' Army*. It is an area where clear brands have evolved and in this there is a lesson for other genres. Clear brands like Bush rather than complex brands like Kerry.

Most factual entertainment shows have a personality of their own. There are a few where the personality is a brand in itself, such as 'young casual bloke who can cook and be my mate' Jamie Oliver. But there still needs to be a format coming with the personality: 'man with pan' is no longer enough; thus his new series is about turning around the quality of school dinners, which will have a purpose as did *Jamie's Kitchen*. Nigella's last series didn't hit it because it was old-style cookery and had no other proposition or narrative journey.

Factual entertainment follows a pattern of genre development. These programmes work well in the 8-9pm slots. The new genre starts on Channel 4 and moves across to BBC and then onto ITV. This shows massive growth potential. Channel 4 has captured the market to date, The BBC is now hot on its heels, Five are nibbling and ITV has yet to exploit fully but they have started and are on the trail.

The secret of success is to find a format that mines an obvious aspect of the way we live now, but it has to have broad appeal. A good example is *You Are What You Eat* - everybody eats, just as everyone lives somewhere, and the broader the appeal, the bigger the audience share. *Grand Designs* is now getting four to five million; its audience share has grown as has the brand, as the property interest has grown. *Supernanny* came in at four to five million, taking over the area which used to be more staid but is now palatable. Most people go on holiday - ITV's *Holiday Showdown* is the first factual entertainment travel programme to deliver ratings since *The Real Holiday Show*.

We are all fascinated by either doing up our properties or doing something revolutionary to change our lives, and the format of a troubleshooting expert who turns around a problem such as *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares*, or American hit *Apprentice*, makes strong programming.

Seemingly dry disciplines such as history can also apply the factual entertainment treatment too and bring better audiences to modern history - *The 1940s House* was a forerunner followed by *That'll Teach 'Em*. So it is not exclusive to lifestyle subject-matters.

The growth of factual entertainment has affected other areas of the schedule. It has colonised the spaces where entertainment shows would have existed previously. Late-night chat shows and entertainment shows appear dated when compared to the fresh approach of new factual entertainment replacing old-style entertainment shows at a much cheaper price per episode, with real people cheaper than backing singers, dancers, studio rigs and elaborate set designs.

The growth of the genre has developed a new type of producer to make these programmes. Some are entertainment trained; as the big entertainment shows like Saturday night shows have died, so the entertainment producers have collaborated with the factual producers and have evolved skills into a new cross-breed of programme-makers. *Big Brother* and *Brat Camp* have combi-teams of documentary-makers and entertainment casting. *Wife Swap* came from Stephen Lambert at RDF and Hilary Bell at Channel 4 - both respected documentary-makers with incredibly popular tastes - it is *Jerry Springer* casting meets Paul Watson's classic documentary *The Family*.

Not surprisingly the genesis of this was not from the broadcasters themselves, too concerned with the schedule or the talent's demands or the churn of characters on their soap.

The first to develop these were some of Channel 4's independent pioneers such as makers of *The Real Holiday Show* and *Moviewatch...* popular programme-makers who put real people at the heart of a factual prime-time show. These shows came from commissioners and programme-makers born out of less rigid or constrictive disciplines - they were born out of daytime shows like *This Morning* or popular current affairs like *The Big Story* or very popular documentaries such as *Modern Times*. The key was being unafraid of being popular.

The broadcaster dinosaurs have been slow to respond. But in the wake of the pioneers have rushed in a new breed of indies - hot behind came RDF, IWS, Endemol, Ricochet and soon Betty.

Now in the factual entertainment gold rush there are hundreds of people targeting the same territory at the same time, and you would be a fool to think that you are the only one. What you have to do is bring unique talent - be it directing/producing talent or presenting talent, but the main thing is to find a clear proposition, a clear challenge/agenda to mine a seam of the territory with strong narrative.

Producers need to understand broadcasters' tastes and needs very quickly and have a high turnover of ideas, because if you hang on to one idea for too long then Talkback Thames, RDF and Endemol are going to be pitching it as well. You might be growing an idea behind the scenes, which is a complete waste of time if the rival indie has already pitched it and had it rejected.

Factual entertainment needs no growth hormones. Its vast plains extend on some channels from 3pm to 11pm midweek. One UK terrestrial channel already now has 11 commissioning staff in this patch alone. But why not? It is responsible for the lion's share of the schedule and (aside from drama and soaps) the lion's share of viewing figures.

Factual entertainment stands out as one of the liveliest, most inventive and least inhibited creative areas of TV. Less uptight about heritage, snobbery and rules, it perhaps reflects society more accurately than journalistically authored documentary or studio-bound light entertainment or old-fashioned harpy magazine shows that refuse to recognise a new cross-breed in their midst - facts and entertainment can combine - with broad appeal. It is very and unashamedly popular. It has threatened old-school types and those who like clear demarcation.

As the market continues to fragment, the big programme brands will continue to grow, but there will be polarisation between the big programmes with broad appeal and lots of smaller ideas that won't work any more on mainstream channels. Many of the ideas that might have survived on a mainstream channel five years ago will - with fragmentation and the rise of new cross-breeds - be relegated to the many new niche channels.

'For those depressed by a TV landscape reflecting an airport self-help bookshelf - sorry, this programming isn't going away. We have enough foibles, social failings and constructed realities to keep this prime-time hit factory in business for at least the next 5-10 years. And enough real people wanting to be filmed too.'

Just as the programming sector will be polarised, so the independent production sector will change. The large independent companies such as Endemol and RDF are to the broadcasters what Heinz and Rank Hovis McDougall are to supermarkets. In the next ten years expect to see a proliferation of smaller independent producers - a re-growth of small independent production companies made up of brave creatives. These new producers will start by making niche programmes, as being a specialist will be the only way to survive. We will see them making children's programmes for Nickelodeon or CBBC education for 4Learning or contemporary arts for BBC Four.

The middle ground will die back. There isn't room for the medium-size companies. The economics dictate that you are either big and successful, or you are small, niche and specialist. The delis and specialist suppliers alongside the Heinz and Rank Hovis McDougall. Occasionally the niche producer who captures the moment or has a transforming commission will take their independent company into the big league. At the same time there may be confederations of small indies to form a super-indie, (like a co-op) in order to reduce overheads and survive. A key element to any growth will be finding the right talent - and avoiding becoming so big that as a super-indie you mimic the motivations, creative staleness and automatism of the in-house production teams of the major broadcasters.

When you are a mega-indie you can become profit-driven rather than idea-driven and you lose sight of caring about the programmes - it becomes a sausage factory and you can lose your inspirational and creative talent, as they become removed from the production team.

The key is to keep the creative and inspirational close to the production team and leave the business people to do the business. The company can lose its spirit and creative energy when profit is at the centre.

With the profit from future format sales am I about to buy an apron, rush home, clean the house and pour my stressed partner a drink as I become a Stepford Wife to fit into the utopian and ordered society created by a swathe of corrective and perfection seeking formats?

As factual entertainment whips parents into shape or sends us to the naughty stair, as it brings in dog trainers and gay men to re-educate husbands, converts delinquent teenagers into articulate caring beings or finds partners for the socially inept - won't we soon be seeking to rebel and seek out bad behaviour?

For those depressed by a TV landscape reflecting an airport self-help bookshelf - sorry, this programming isn't going away. We have enough foibles, social failings and constructed realities to keep this prime-time hit factory in business for at least the next 5-10 years. And enough real people wanting to be filmed too.

Risk, intellectual debate, foreign news, music and depravity will be found elsewhere - press Kerrang, News 24 or watch a DVD or FilmFour, turn on the radio or go to the cinema.

Variety and richness will come in a schedule of our own making - I will find the Leigh Bowery documentary on BBC Four and *Little Britain* on BBC Three, add in a good radio news programme and a phone-in, and relax by watching other people quitting Britain to live in the Dordogne without a word of French. Must sign off, the furniture van and crew have arrived and we have to finish the move in one jeopardy-filled, gripping narrative episode.