MEDIA CULTURE & SOCIETY

Scheduling: the last creative act in television?

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1. The nature of scheduling

If programmes are the building blocks of television, then the schedule is its architecture, defining the edifice that gives meaning to each programme-block. For those who labour in the brickfields of broadcasting, the schedule looks like the last really creative act, the point of decision from which will flow all the basic parameters for the manufacture of a particular programme. Yet scheduling has scarcely been studied academically, nor is it widely understood by those working in television itself. The schedule has been the great taken-for-granted of TV, perhaps because it just came about as a function of television's temporal continuity and co-presence.[1]

Scheduling is nothing other than editing on an Olympian scale. Instead of combining shots and sounds into a sequence and sequences into a programme, as an editor does, the scheduler combines whole programme units into an evening's flow, whole evenings into a week, whole weeks into a season, and whole seasons into a year. The principles involved are broadly similar to those of narrative construction. The schedulers try to combine variety and connection, repetition and originality into harmonious and mutually supporting arrangements. Just as editing involves a formidable activity of selection that is fundamental to the construction of any programme, scheduling defines the basic choices which define a broadcast television service.

Originally, schedules 'just grew' by trial and error, providing people with the programmes when they were perceived as wanting or needing them, without much thought to the fact that they might want different kinds of programmes to those on offer. A basic principle of variety ruled, leavened with beliefs about the home life of listeners and viewers. Beyond

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that, no set pattern of clock time or slots was used: programmes simply had their 'natural length'.

Even when the grid pattern of 30-minute slots became commonplace by the early 1980s, scheduling was a matter of 'fitting in' the programmes that were being provided by the programme makers. Jeremy Isaacs adopted such an approach in constructing the original Channel 4, by allowing commissioning editors to think about (and even contract for) programmes in all different shapes, sizes and aspirations, and only after some time producing a programming grid at a meeting and asking 'How are we going to fit all this stuff in?' (Ellis, 1981). The key place of scheduling only became clear with the increase in the availability of TV with 24-hour services and the greater number of competing channels (Sky, cable, terrestrial Channel 5, digital services, etc.) which came rather later to the UK than they did to most of Europe.[2]

The television industry in Britain was still referring to scheduling as 'the black art' as recently as 10 years ago; and the mechanisms of programme specification by the schedulers have become transparent within the BBC only in the last three years. Academic work similarly tends to neglect the issue. One of the few to deal with it in any depth is Todd Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time* (1983). Look in the index of a book like Ien Ang's *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (1991), which is centrally concerned with the broadcasters' obsession with demographics, and the word 'schedule' does not appear.[3] There is also significant work on the division of time and the assumptions of viewing habits among the audience, but again, this is not applied directly to an understanding of the process of scheduling (Caughie, 1990; Scannell, 1996; Silverstone, 1995). There are good reasons, both polemical and academic, why this is the case. Yet such neglect is not completely justifiable. The schedule is the locus of power in television, the mechanism whereby demographic speculations are turned into a viewing experience. And it is more than that as well, for any schedule contains the distillation of the past history of a channel, of national broadcasting as a whole, and of the particular habits of national life.

At its simplest, a schedule is a grid, dividing the broadcasting day into slots of 30 minutes' duration. Each slot is attributed a programme, ignoring the surrounding material of adverts, trailers, continuity announcements and the rest which are fitted merely by making each programme shorter than its slot length.[4] The grid contains fixed points, programmes or genres that don't move, because they contain:

(a) inscribed assumptions about everyday life, about school hours, working hours, mealtimes, family togetherness and apartness, bedtimes for children, (see, for instance, Hagen, 1992). As many commentators have pointed out, the rhythm of the evening schedule mimics the rhythm of the evening in an imaginary average household. As the early evening is

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full of distractions and comings and goings, it provides magazine shows; as things settle down in the mid-evening, longer form programmes with more sustained storytelling are introduced; and the post-10.00 p.m. period 'fringe zones' are an area of more experimentation leading into the fragmentation of the late-night viewership;

(b) the annual pattern of seasons, events and special occasions: the autumn season beginning with September; the spring season after Christmas; the fixed points of public holidays and celebrations; and the arranged dates for major sporting events, the Eurovision Song Contest or special telethons;

(c) traditional slots, which are required by the regulators or are simply habitual. Such arrangements have a great solidity. When ITV wanted to move its *News at Ten* news bulletin, the process required two major bouts of public controversy. As the ITV Network Director of Programmes put it: 'The schedule is as it is because we've had *The Street* for 37 years and *News [At Ten]* for going on 30. That's served us well, so if we're to make changes we won't do it in 100 days' (Liddiment, 1998). In fact, it took him three times that long. Besides the major news slots, the traditional slots include established soap slots; the sites of proven successes (like BBC1's *Casualty* and ITV's *Blind Date* on Saturday evenings) or key 'zones' like the post-9.00 p.m. series of comedy programmes currently (1997–8) scheduled by both Channel 4 and BBC2;

(d) assumptions about what the competition do and might do. This extends beyond simple competition to forms of complementarity, which is a strategy of providing alternatives.

Each actual grid pattern has a number of virtual grids bearing down on it: the other grids relating to the week, the month, the season, the year; the grid of every other channel that is perceived as a competitor; and the pattern of competing domestic and non-domestic pursuits. This introduces a considerable level of complexity. Like all architecture, these are huge constructions, better lived in than expressed on paper. So how does scheduling work?

2. From statistics to narratives

First, there is always already a schedule. When a scheduler begins to plan a future season, there is already a schedule that is to be changed, moulded and adapted. It consists of these fixed features, which require a major policy debate to change, but otherwise simply of slots which have been filled in particular ways in the past, and need to be filled in the future. The performance of these current or recently past schedules can be assessed, and this is the principal guide to their possible future uses.

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The assessment of the performance of each slot or programme takes place using, principally, demographic data derived from the BARB audience surveys in the UK or the Neilsen ratings in the USA. Ratings have long since ceased to be a simple matter of numbers of viewers. They are highly sophisticated, claiming to provide details of the performance of particular programmes in particular slots on the grid. Numbers still matter in that they provide the bench-mark for the performance of the channel as a whole.[5] But overall audience numbers can only be increased by a subtle strategy of targeting particular sections of the audience on competing channels and providing something that will appeal to or satisfy them more (appealing and satisfying being, in television at least, two different things). With the size of sample and techniques now used for audience measurement, audiences can be specified according to age, class, gender, region, pattern of viewing and even by their degree of appreciation of the programme.

BARB (Broadcasters' Audience Research Bureau) works jointly for the broadcasters and the advertising industry. It costs 'well over £10m a year to run'.[6] It is based on a panel of nearly 4500 homes, selected from an annual 'large-scale random probability survey of 40,000 homes – the annual Establishment Survey – which is conducted to supplement population details available from the Census'. Using a device similar to a remote control, each person aged 4 or more in each panel home registers when he or she is in the room with the set switched on, so the record includes information on the viewing of roughly 11,500 individuals as well as on the use of sets. Provision is made for both time-shift videos and viewing by visitors. This information is retrieved silently by phone-link at the dead of night and initially processed in time to provide 'overnights' at 10.0 a.m. Even this large demographic effort is beginning to break down: cable channels like the Parliament Channel don't register, and there is doubt about the entire sampling methodology for satellite/cable homes. But the system still works better than the American Neilsen which was slower because it used a keypad system. In radio, the equivalent JICTAR has broken down completely, faced with the medium's flexibility of use and its proliferation of channels. It now provides nowhere near the level of detail that BARB provides for TV. However, the writing is on the wall for BARB as well. BARB's current contract runs to 2001; by that date, fundamental reform will have to be devised if even this system, regarded as statistically robust, is to retain its relevance. BARB's figures are open, shared by both advertisers and broadcasters.[7] BARB figures may be flawed even now, as BARB itself realizes. But it is acknowledged throughout the industry as having a basic validity, providing a reasonable picture of audience composition on a 15-minute-by-15-minute basis. Even its sceptics use the statistics, which give them a formidable legitimacy.

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With such a level of detailed 'knowledge' about the audience, the old adage 'television delivers audiences to advertisers', which was always simplistic, has to be rewritten. At its very least, scheduling delivers programmes to audiences when they are most likely to want to watch them; and audiences to advertisers in the composition that makes their advertising most likely to be effective. Across the day, the evening, the week and the month, the level of detail provided by BARB is extraordinary and even perhaps counterproductive. So how do the schedulers deal with it?

Faced with BARB's plethora of detail, the schedulers first construct a narrative of the audience for themselves. Using the overnights, they tell a story replete with the jargon of the trade, rather as a football fan will recount the story of a match. Channel controllers and schedulers see 'pre-echoes' and 'echoes' (audiences brought in before and staying after top-rating shows) which they hope will provide an inheritance, and perhaps even maintain an audience across the 'junction points', the main evening breaks (e.g. 9.00 p.m.) where all channels end programmes and shift in gear. Junction points provide the opportunity to find new recruits as well. They have 'tent pole' programmes, the 'bankers' which provide a dependable lift to the graph of audience share. The schedulers identify the predominant demographics of the mass audience rating successes of their competitors and aim to make 'strategic hits' by providing programming that will appeal to and thus 'peel away' particular audience groupings. Where a synergy between channels exists (BBC1 and BBC2) they can indulge in 'complementary scheduling', a courtesy that was once also extended to protect elements of public service programming on competing channels, and to take advantage of audiences 'at a loose end'. For instance, the BBC now looks back with regret at the loss of its 'nursery' for new sitcoms: on Mondays at 8.30 p.m., when ITV used to show its current affairs flagship *World in Action*. But now competition is more fierce, such practices have been abandoned, and the channels, like rampant stags, 'go head to head'. In such an atmosphere, like Britain in the mid-1990s, the received wisdom is that 'there are no safe areas in the schedule any more'.

So a narrative is constructed about the ebbs and flows of audiences for each evening's viewing. The figures are scanned for the successes and failures. A new show on Channel 4 at 8.00 p.m. might have successfully reduced the pre-echo effect of BBC2's *Food and Drink*, for instance, and made a useful demographic hit amongst the key ELVs (Elusive Light Viewers) who may then be tempted to switch their TV back on to watch *Secret History* at 9.00 p.m. Strategies are assessed, continued or abandoned. In 1998, Peter Salmon at BBC1 decided to start a strong documentary serial *The Cruise* on Tuesday 20 January at 8.00 p.m. followed by the second episode on Wednesday at 8.00 p.m. The calculation was simple: the series had a strong core of storytelling and compelling characters which would tempt viewers back. And ITV's Wednesday night

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followed the 'banker' soap *Coronation Street* with *Des O'Connor Tonight*, described in the listings as 'an hour of music and chat, featuring top names and promising newcomers to the entertainment world'. Salmon and his team suspected that there was an audience for stories, for soap-like series, which could be tempted across from ITV to watch *The Cruise*. They interpreted the overnight figures on the morning of Thursday 22 January as proving that such an audience movement did take place, so *The Cruise* stayed in the schedule on Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 8.00 p.m.[8]

Once a story has been read from the figures, it is fed into the activity of future scheduling. The level of demographic detail provided by BARB enables schedulers to define slots according to the expected composition of their audience. Further, they can specify kinds of audiences that they would desire. In this, of course, they receive a crucial input from the advertising industry, which also has desirable demographics.

3. The Beeb takes on *The Bill*

To see how this works in practice, we can take BBC1's perennial problem with ITV's early evening strengths. These are the long-running soap *Coronation Street* (see, for instance, Dyer, 1981 and Geraghty, 1991) and the police series *The Bill*, which centred on Sun Hill police station in London, dealing with one crime in each half-hour episode and tracing the development of Sun Hill station and its core characters for months at a time.[9] During 1995, BBC1 tried two different strategies to combat the drawing power of *The Bill* in ITV's schedules, strategies which depended upon different analyses of the source of the attraction of *The Bill* to its audiences, as well as a healthy dose of accident.

Both *The Bill* and *Coronation Street* have strong audience loyalties; they are the 'bankers' of the ITV early evening. On Friday evenings, uniquely, they are scheduled together. For several years, ITV's Friday evening has shown *Coronation Street* at 7.30, followed by *The Bill* at 8.00: a 'killer combination'. The echo and pre-echo effect of *The Bill*, preceded by the Friday episode of *Coronation Street*, meant that BBC1's entire Friday evening audience was less than the channel controllers felt they should attain. These consistently out-rated what BBC1 had to offer, and for years ITV 'won' Friday evening. For some years, the best strategy that BBC1 controllers could offer was to repeat much-loved sitcoms like *Only Fools and Horses* or *Porridge* in the 8.00 p.m. slot.

In 1995, a fresh strategy was tried to 'peel off' audience sectors from this massive audience, targeting *The Bill* not because it was necessarily more 'vulnerable' but simply because it came second and so could create an inheritance for the following 8.30 show. Against *Coronation Street* BBC1 has, variously, gone 'head to head' with an edition of its soap

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Eastenders, and 'gone niche' by putting *Top of the Pops* at 7.30. Neither strategy has been a conspicuous success. On Easter Friday, 14 April 1995, Alan Yentob, then controller of BBC1, tested out the 'factual entertainment' series *999 Lifesavers*, which reconstructs medical emergencies, in the BBC1 8.00 p.m. Friday slot. It had been performing well in an 8.00 p.m. Monday slot against the episode of *The Bill* on ITV that evening. Although both programmes were based around the emergency services, *The Bill*'s audience demographic profile, Yentob had been told, showed it to be weighted towards a middle-aged audience. *999 Lifesavers* and other such factually-based entertainments performed better, perhaps surprisingly, than did the sitcoms which BBC1 had initially pitched against *The Bill*. Infotainment has a younger demographic profile. The results of this cautious Good Friday test looked auspicious.

So on 15 September 1995 the effective *Bill* competitor *999 Lifesavers* moved to compete against it on Friday evening, which it did for a total of nine weeks until 17 November. However, the programme did noticeably less well on Fridays against *The Bill* than it had done on Mondays. *999 Lifesavers* did not reappear in the 8.00 p.m. slot after the *Children in Need* telethon of 24 November 1995, and was played in the spring 1996 season at 9.30 on Fridays. At the time, the exercise seemed to prove the power of the schedule sequence to build and maintain audiences. However, with hindsight, it might have to do with many other factors, including the nature of the Friday night audience, the variations in quality or audience appeal of the *999 Lifesavers* series concerned, or even the degree of promotion given to the programmes. Perhaps it was simply that the similarities of subject matter between the two series were becoming more pronounced. The in-trade generic definition of 'flashing blue light programming' was becoming widely used by television listings publications around this time. But, so far as the BBC scheduling culture is concerned, the example of the Friday stand-off between *The Bill* and *999 Lifesavers* has entered the professional discourse as an example of the power of ITV's scheduling and of 'inheritance' in particular.[10] However, the strategy was tried again two years later by Michael Jackson, during his brief tenure as controller of BBC1. From 17 October 1997 to 19 December 1997, *999 Lifesavers* ran against *The Bill* with more success: it returned in the same slot after the interruption of the *Children in Need* telethon of 21 November 1997. By that time, 'flashing blue lights' had become a less predominant feature of television's output as a whole. Another attempt by the BBC to combat the power of *The Bill*, this time on Thursday evenings, had been crucially responsible for this.

In this first example, BBC1's schedulers had assumed that *The Bill*'s success hinged upon its nature as a police drama. But on Thursday evening, a different analysis of the power of *The Bill* was being played with, and this is where the BBC's schedulers had a greater degree of

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success. According to David Docherty, then Head of BBC TV Planning and Strategy:

> We analysed the demographics of *The Bill* and discovered that it was much closer to a soap than we had imagined. . . . Our stroke of luck was *Animal Hospital*. For almost serendipitous reasons, it was played against *The Bill* where it was extremely successful.

Animal Hospital was commissioned to fill the 8.00 p.m. slot, and did 'considerable damage' to ITV (Docherty, 1995).

Initially, *Animal Hospital Week* was a week-long 'stripped' special event, following the work of a vet's practice, fronted by Rolf Harris, by then an over-the-hill children's presenter. Showing in the last week of August 1994, it had played at 6.10 on the Bank Holiday Monday, and thereafter at 8.00 p.m. Tuesday to Friday. It was the quintessence of popular public service broadcasting as the BBC conceive it. Recommissioned as a weekly half-hour for Thursdays at 8.00 from 12 January 1995 (again, against *The Bill*), it had more pronounced soap aspects. It developed regular characters, plenty of chat and speculation and week-to-week cliff-hanger suspense about 'how the animals will do'. Against *The Bill*, its demographic was markedly younger and more female, because of its furry animal subject. Its dramatic form was fairly close to the soap aspects of *The Bill*, and, if anything, intensified them. It provided more of a cliff-hanger between episodes, as *The Bill* was organized into a separate story of a single case per episode dealt with by a regular cast of police characters. As the *Radio Times* of 4–10 March 1995 announced, *Animal Hospital* was successful enough in this slot to be extended.

Wildlife documentaries, like *Wildlife on One* or *Nature Detectives*, had long been a mainstay of the BBC1 Thursday schedule at 8.00 p.m. But *Animal Hospital* was something new. It was as much a soap as a factual programme, and it seemed to appeal to that part of the audience which responded to the soap aspects of *The Bill* without having a wholehearted enthusiasm for the 'flashing blue light' subject. So the chance performance of *Animal Hospital* against it created the specification of a programme to run against it in the forthcoming season: a factual, soap-structured, feminine-subject specification. As Docherty says, 'this, coupled with a stream of successful factual programmes, has been our great success' (Docherty, 1995) In other words, we can date the beginnings of the current (1996–9) glut of 'docu-tainment' with strong soap narrative habits from this moment. A scheduling process, interpreting demographic data, produced the demand for a docu-tainment series. Further demographic data about its subsequent performance was interpreted as proving correct the scheduler's analysis that *The Bill* was providing only partial satisfaction to a significant part of its audience. This in turn provoked the ordering of further 'fly on the wall' documentary series with strong soap aspects as a

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new element in peak time scheduling in the late 1990s. *Animal Hospital* was followed by *Vets in Practice*, *Animals in Uniform*, *Pet Rescue*, and then in the summer of 1997 *Driving School* (with an audience of up to 12 million) which created a minor celebrity in the catastrophic Maureen Rees, followed by *Hotel*, *Cruise*, etc. Perhaps, had *999 Lifesavers* performed as well as *Animal Hospital* against *The Bill*, peak time would now be filled by reconstructions of gruesome events: but it was not to be. Instead, the new (and inexpensive) sub-genre of docu-tainment was so successful that by the beginning of 1998, the first signs of an industry backlash were beginning to appear.[11] It will probably be another temporary fashion, like the glut of chat shows in the 1980s (*Wogan*, *Jonathan Ross*, *Clive Anderson*, etc.).

Cycles of generic oversupply do seem to be characteristic of contemporary television. Indeed the very existence of this tendency is a testament to the central place of scheduling in television's creative process. Scheduling creates the demand for programmes. The schedule will identify a target audience size for each slot, and consequently will specify a particular demographic profile. The target is not simply a matter of numbers but also of their expected composition. This then provides the mechanism through which a number of consequent key decisions are made.

4. Schedules order programmes

First, the schedule provides for the balance between genres. It finds the 'best slot' for already known programmes, or ones that have been more successful (demographically as well as in overall figures) than their slot would seem to justify. These are the elusive successes that have 'out-performed their slot'. Then, overall numbers and the demographic will determine what the slot is worth in terms of programme budget. So the schedule is the planning mechanism that determines the balance between genres and levels of cost across the channel as a whole. This is particularly important in a television system like Britain's, where the generic range offered by the core channels is very wide indeed, encompassing major drama and specialist documentaries, infotainment and feature films, sketch comedy and soaps, chat shows and news all in prime time. The 'palette' of programming available to schedulers is therefore very wide, and unexpected successes like that of *Animal Hospital* can result. With generic and thematic decisions made at this level of management, the schedule therefore drives the planning of output. It used to put programmes in order. Now, in the American phrase, it 'orders programmes' from the producers.

Nowadays, this planning process uses data gathered from beyond the basic BARB statistics. ITV and the BBC have begun to test pilots for new programmes, or even – in the case of ITV – the concepts for new programmes, with focus groups. This is a new practice in British television,

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reflecting a greater degree of perceived competition within the system. Routinely now, pilots are made for new formats, which are shown to focus groups first to assess their reaction as a sample audience (much like a Hollywood preview of a feature film) and then to gauge their overall opinions through discussions of a more or less directed nature. These help the further development of the format. Drama series present a more difficult case, as it is almost impossible to produce a pilot to assess their *mise-en-scène*, and, as they depend upon their *mise-en-scène* so crucially, concept-based research would yield little of interest. However, dramas are often shown to focus groups after their completion. Such viewings serve two purposes: they guide the marketing strategy for the series, and, inevitably perhaps, yield 'tips for a second series'.[12]

Focus groups are constructed to reflect the target demographic. They are probed not only about the desirability for them of the pilots they are shown, but also about their own domestic viewing habits. Questions might include: 'Would you watch this at 7.00 or at 8.00 or at 9.00?'; 'What programme is this closest to for you?'; 'Would you watch it in preference to . . .?'; and might even extend to the perceived appeal of the show, 'Would your granny like it?' or 'Would your mum be appalled?' The attempt here is to delve behind demographics into the practical habits of living and the 'personal schedules' that everyone carries with them (the 'familiarity factor', see Hargrave, 1995).

For although there is much quantitative information involved in the process of scheduling, it is still riddled with uncertainty. Any one schedule is the result of choices conceived in an atmosphere of competition and uncertainty. Any one schedule is being 'attacked' from a number of sides:

(a) the direct competitor channels: BBC1 and ITV or BBC2, Channel 4 and Channel 5;
(b) the emerging competitors, available in some homes but not all: satellite channels, cable, digital services, which bring with them new styles of television use;
(c) the minority channels: those seeking to 'peel off' particular demographics, as the practice of BBC2 and Channel 4 of showing youth-oriented shows when BBC1 and ITV are showing their early evening news around 6.0 p.m.;
(d) the universe of TV in general: the competition for the total TV viewing time of individuals which sometimes leads to the perception that there are 'just too many things on tonight';
(e) the household's living and viewing patterns (personality clashes, power, conflicting demands on sets, etc.);
(f) demands on leisure time in general.[13]

Scheduling attempts to 'deal with' all the aspects of competition, while not knowing what most will be. So it is a rolling planning process, in

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which all plans are adjusted as more intelligence comes in, particularly about the probable strategies of the opposition, as Docherty outlines in his essay (Docherty, 1995). Scheduling is about managing the ever present nature of television. It uses the immediate past as its most powerful referent in attempting to define the immediate future, and so to order the output for that future.

However, there is a basic problem with the whole process: as Ien Ang (1991) points out, it is self-enclosed. The analytic tools being used – the BARB survey – are self-validating. The success or failure of a particular scheduling strategy is measured by the same methodology that suggested it in the first place. A problem with the audience size or composition produced by a particular programming policy is identified through using the BARB figures. This leads to changes in that policy, whose success is measured by using the same BARB data. So any systematic discrepancy between the system of measurement (the statistics produced by BARB) and what is measured (the behaviour of real audiences) will remain undetected.

There seem to be just two external moderators on this inward looking system. Both of them are essentially unsystematic. The first is the amount and character of the coverage given to a programme (or a performer) by the press. This coverage can be interpreted in a number of ways. Favourable coverage in particular publications (mainly those with an ELV or youth demographic slant) can be interpreted as indicating that the series is a 'sleeper': one that will increase in popularity as it goes on. *Absolutely Fabulous*, initially aired on BBC2, was a classic example of this tendency in Britain, as was *Hill Street Blues* (see Gitlin, 1983) in the USA. Coverage in the broadsheet press or in upmarket weekly magazines can be seen as a mark of prestige, which might well accord with the corporate aims of a public service broadcaster or the commercial aims of a channel aiming to generate advertising revenue through addressing an upmarket demographic.

The press is a relatively public form of moderation of the statistics-led approach to scheduling. The other is more capricious, consisting of anecdotal evidence gathered by senior broadcasters themselves. Parodied as 'my driver told me . . .', it is much more likely to take the form of 'my nanny says her friends think that . . .'. In highly compartmentalized societies, such a random factor can gain a disproportionate influence, and, indeed, the more general questions addressed to focus groups are intended to open up such information more systematically. Such insights are used randomly. On an everyday basis, scheduling seeks to prove its effectivity by reference almost exclusively to the work of BARB, by building narratives of audience behaviour out of the demographic data.

Scheduling is the point where the activity of the past and the hopes of the present become the strategy for the future. It will continue to occupy a central position in the creative process of the core generalist channels because it intersects with a major line in television's future evolution:

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channel brand identity. Every channel has an identity, diffuse though it may currently be for some generalist terrestrial broadcasters.[14] Public service broadcasters everywhere are now discovering that some of their basic values are vital and valuable 'brands' in an increasingly competitive market. After years of self-deprecation in the face of commercial onslaughts of various kinds, they now discover that their record and their history actually count for something important. Their brand identity lies in the overall character of programmes, their placing in a recognized pattern incarnating both viewing habits and judgements of 'fitness for [audience] purpose'. The brand of all generalist channels, in other words, lies in the schedule and how that schedule is known by their client audiences.[15]

The sum total of schedules, locked in their competitive struggle, defines the character of a national television economy, or, to be more accurate, the character of a particular broadcasting market. From this perspective, the character of the national scheduling battle constitutes a formidable site of resistance and resilience in the face of any globalizing tendencies that might bear down upon it. For television is always specific, however much it may be amenable to generalizations. In every television system, national or international, there are audience interests that are worse or better served, and individuals who find that they do or do not want to use television. Any imported show is inserted into this context of scheduling and its cultural identity is significantly altered as a result. However, the factors that make every nation's television specific are very difficult to grasp because they are so extensive. They are not to do with individual quirks, like a taste for on-screen continuity announcers or for variety shows, so much as with the architecture of the entire output. As such, they are not easily amenable to the traditional forms of content analysis which privilege the systems of particular texts. Instead, they are produced and reproduced within the dynamic process of scheduling.

Notes

1. I discuss the changing nature of television and situate the importance of scheduling within it in Ellis (1999).

2. The gap between Britain and the USA is even greater: the USA had breakfast TV in the late 1940s, a novelty that Britain introduced only in 1983.

3. Ang's concern is not with the way that the institutions of television operate so much as with the ways that audiences use what television offers. Hence her more recent statement: 'We must come to the conclusion that any attempt to construct positive knowledges about the "real consumer" will always be provisional, partial, fictional. This is not to postulate the total freedom of television viewers. Far from it. It is, however, to foreground and dramatise the continuing dialectic between the technologised strategies of the industry and the fleeting and dispersed tactics by which consumers, while confined by the offerings provided by the industry,

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surreptitiously seize moments to transform these offerings into "opportunities" of their own' (Ang, 1996: 64). The aim of this paper is not to argue with this perspective, but to examine the area covered by the phrase 'while confined by the offerings provided by the industry'.

4. For the BBC, programme-makers are instructed to deduct a minute per programme of whatever length; for commercial channels in the UK 9¼ minutes per hour, and for US TV at least 12 minutes per hour.

5. For instance, ITV has recently (early 1998) set itself target figures for its audience share for the future in response to a decline in its overall audience figures.

6. All quotations in this account are taken from a highly informative article by the ITC's Director of Research, Bob Towler in *Spectrum* magazine (the now defunct quarterly of the ITC), Towler (1996: 12–13).

7. However, the broadcasters have commissioned a further series of data from BARB, the Appreciation Index (AI), which are for their eyes only, and not shared with the advertising industry. Using a diary system, panel members rate their enjoyment of programmes on a scale of 1 to 10. The vast majority of television output seems to achieve a rating around 8, indicating reasonable pleasure but nothing exciting. I once produced a programme for Channel 4, *The Holy Family Album*, written by Angela Carter and transmitted just before Christmas 1991. It received an AI of 5, the lowest that Channel 4 had ever achieved, for its darkly surrealist view of religious iconography.

8. Peter Salmon addressing the Independent Commissioning Department's Open Day, BBC TV Centre, 9 February 1998.

9. At the end of 1998, ITV changed the format of *The Bill* to a one-hour slot, partly in response to the BBC's eventual success against it, but also because of a general tendency towards longer form narrative as a central factor in its brand identity and its competition against satellite and cable services.

10. My source is a speech to independent producers by Alan Yentob in January 1996.

11. In the trade paper *Broadcast*, Ian Lewis of Zenith Media was quoted as saying: 'with all this fly on the wall stuff, we are in danger of being swamped . . . there is a new popular factual programme every week. Soon we are going to have some disasters. I hope they are BBC disasters and not ITV disasters' (*Broadcast*, 16 Jan. 1998: 5).

12. Tessa Ross, comments on Kay Mellor's *Playing the Field*, BBC Independents Commissioning Meeting, 9 Jan. 1998.

13. For example, on Saturday 7 June 1997, the audience for the National Lottery draw on BBC1 'collapsed' from a normal 11–13 million to a little over 6 million. The demise of the Lottery as a national obsession was widely predicted. However, the reason was entirely different: it was the first good day of weekend weather for almost a month, after an unusully cold and wet May; an England v. France football match was being broadcast at the same time as the draw; and the afternoon's sport had included the Derby and a Test Match. Sure enough, the next week's Lottery Live audience was back above 11 million.

14. What is ITV's identity compared to that of a focused cable channel like Discovery? ITV is not even sure of its brand name, having flirted with rebranding as 'Channel 3'. A BBC exercise in brand definition in 1995 could at least come up with the concepts 'Our BBC1' and 'My BBC2' which encapsulated the concept of public proprietorship combined with shared or more individual interests. However, even this early exercise in brand definition had its problems. For example, it omits the more experimental nature of some BBC2 output (which normally gets attributed

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to Channel 4 anyway), concentrating on the 'specialist interest' aspect: preferring Jeremy Clarkson over Armando lanucci.

15. As *Variety* recently remarked: 'Broadcasters are becoming niche-casters, and when they don't serve their niche, they suffer. The most drastic example this season is the CBS Friday line-up, an attempt to steal ABC's TGIF audience of young moms and kids. While CBS has lowered its median age on the night by four years, its largest Friday night audience remains the over 50 year olds', *Variety*, 20 Oct. 1997.

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