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TELEVISION AND CULTURE

Was there ever a golden age?

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There is much glib and casual talk these days about television that boils down to a focus on two concepts that are now rooted in the discourse about the state of television and media as they are today. The concept of "the golden age" and the concept of "dumbing down". They go together in the sense that if you believe that the first describes any part of television's history, you probably also believe that latter has taken over in the last decade. You will probably also be over 50 years of age, of the male gender and have recently left the higher realms of television employment, and feel the youngsters are getting "it" wrong. Whatever "it" is. I intend to examine both concepts and to put them into some sort of historical perspective.

The Golden Age – as a phrase – derives from the Greek and Roman poets who, imagining the beginning of things, conjured this idea of a utopian time, a Golden Age when all was harmony and man lived in peace with himself and nature. That was clearly a fiction. But the term lives on because what it says is meaningful for people. Why is that so?

First, The Golden Age always describes the past: it is never now. Rarely do people say "we're living in a Golden Age", although we may well be – a golden age of supermarkets, for example, almost certainly a golden age of cheap flights – but somehow we don't acknowledge that yet. It always take time to view things in perspective.

Some examples: The Golden age of Jazz was in the 1930s and 40s; of English poetry in the late 16th century; of the novel in the mid 19th century; of Impressionism in the late 19th century; Russian poetry the 1820s; American photography in 1940s. You get the idea.

So, Golden Ages were always in the past. They usually describe an activity that was relatively new, and when people were experimenting with a new form. In the case of cheap flights that process would be mass marketing. In consequence, many of the dominant players exhibited characteristics later seen to be "amateurish". The Golden Age came and went because the process was evolving at a rapid rate and the swift evolution of its practice either leads to new things, or gets stuck in familiar modes. Think Elizabethan poetry, for example – a major surging breakthrough that slowed down the decades into the

metaphysical poets. Then, as time went by, "The Golden Age" is recalled and referred to, often to disparage what came later. Something of the excitement, it was felt, had been lost.

In 1825 when Samuel Coleridge was working on his treatise, 'The Use of a University' (which was never published), he describes what he calls his new 'clerisy', the members of his National Church. They are to be:

"distributed throughout the country so as not to leave the smallest integral part or division without a resident guide, guardian and instructor; the object and final intention of the whole order being these : to preserve the stores and to guard the treasures of past civilizations, and thus to bind the present with the past; to perfect and to add to the same and thus to connect the present with the future; but especially to diffuse through the whole community and to every native entitled to its laws and rights, that quantity and quality of knowledge which was indispensable both for the understanding of these rights and for the performance of the duties correspondent."

That was Coleridge's vision of the intelligentsia and it was the shadow of that concept that stood behind the idea of public service broadcasting as Lord Reith conceived it, and as generations schooled in his BBC sought to follow. That's why, in 1970 when Nicholas Garnham and I interviewed all the main players in British television as it was then, and used them to illustrate our portrait of television at that time, we called our book *The New Priesthood*. We conceived of television at that time as having the role within the culture that Coleridge defined. No one would assign to it that role today. (The book, long out of print, captures the mood of the movers and shakers in television at that time, who saw it as their role to make the best programmes they could conceive, and to spread them as widely as possible among everyone.)

This, then, was the supposed "Golden Age" of Television and its characteristics were appropriately those of a newly arrived technology. To us today it appears clumsy, awkward, amateurish. It was also black & white and changing rapidly. Only in 1955 had there been any challenge to the monopoly in the BBC. BBC2 arrived in 1963, the year before I was signed up to join one of its most adventurous running shows: 'Late Night Line Up'. Line Up had a small but very significant place in television history.

Our programme brief was to talk about television itself. We began, quite humbly, as an early-evening, 15-minute programme carrying trailers for what was coming on BBC2 throughout the evening. In those days BBC2 only began transmitting at 7pm. Our trailers – interviews with producers, writers, star actors and such – proved so successful that we were moved to the end of the channel, around 11.15pm each evening, to discuss and review the night's programmes and to talk about what was coming up the following day. We were on air, 364 days a year, no summer breaks and no weekends off. We were there as consistently as the daily news. Not surprisingly, we built up a following. Television was the focus.

But it was also our subject matter that drew the audience. People wanted to see programmes talked about and within hours of their being transmitted. Sometimes the star from a television play, which may have gone out live, would come into our studio still in costume to talk about the role. We talked about sport, about comedy, about drama, about the daring new documentaries – like 'Man Alive' – and about the many new current affairs programmes. In the 1960s there might be as many as six current affairs programmes each week. The BBC had 'Panorama', 'Gallery', 'Tonight', '24 Hours'. ITV had 'This Week' and 'World in Action' as well as the many regional programmes the different ITV companies were each obliged to transmit. There was a lot for Line Up to discuss and to criticise. Television itself was the hot topic of the day.

The primacy of current affairs in the television schedules was at its peak in the 60s and 70s. In a series of BBC4 programmes in March of this year, Steven Barnett – Professor of Communications at the University of Westminster – examined television’s programme schedules over four decades. He discovered that current affairs are now at their lowest peak-time level since 1955. Since then, too, the entire scheduling of programming has changed. In 1955, 10% of BBC programmes were arts & culture and 25% were children’s; only 1% soaps. By 1995, soaps had risen to 4% and by 2005 are nearly 20%. If we are measuring a golden age by the place in the schedules for high culture and serious programmes, then the peak for drama, current affairs, arts and science was certainly in the 60s and 70s. Incidentally, News has remained steady over four decades at around 12-13%.

But there were other considerations. Television at that time also provided a ‘cultural glue’. It united people who might otherwise have nothing in common but a love of ‘Coronation Street’, or an eagerness to see the latest exploration into the lives of people different from themselves, or the animal kingdom only then being opened up by the pioneering and enduring genius of David Attenborough. There were no VCRs or DVDs in those days, so the entire audience watched the programmes simultaneously. On Line Up we discussed the very programmes they would be discussing next day in the office, the factory, the school, the neighbourhood – what today we call the ‘water-cooler effect’. Television was seen as important, a way of learning more about the world, of catching up on a neglected education, of being in touch with places and people previously unknown.

Television was an important player in the cultural landscape, which at that time was extending the horizons of everyone. It helped to create the culture we have today. Today we take it for granted: in the 60s and 70s it was still a dazzling miracle and a challenge to radical young programme makers who wanted to open up debates on every conceivable subject. Many of those debates happened on ‘Late Night Line Up’. In 1968, revolution swept the campuses of Europe, the workers and students of Paris took to the streets and threatened to bring down the French government. ‘Late Night Line Up’ invited all the ringleaders to come to London; we handed our studio over to them and invited them to explain their intentions. A cartoon in the popular press at the time shows two gendarmes in a Paris street, one saying to the other “It’s quiet tonight”, to which the other replies, “Yes they’re all over in London on ‘Late Night Line Up’.”.

Many writers, artists, directors, musicians wanted to be heard on this new medium. Line up opened its doors. In our tiny cramped studio (originally meant for weather forecasting) we brought together the latest emerging groups – The Bee Gees, the Kinks, Elton John, Fleetwood Mac, Janis Joplin and Jimmie Hendrix; classical musicians such as Lucio Berio, Arthur Bliss, Stockhausen, John Cage; jazzmen such as Buddy Rich, Duke Ellington; folk legends such as Arlo Guthrie. We pioneered the mixing of genres, convinced that the existing barriers between so-called popular art and high art needed to come down. So we would mix poetry with politics, fashion with philosophy: Allen Ginsberg, Martha Gellhorn, Roger McGough, James Baldwin. There was always an excuse somewhere in the television schedules to enlarge on such diverse subjects. I focus on Line Up because first, it’s what I know, and also because it represents a microcosm of the times and the attitudes of the times, which are so different from today.

There was another sense in which looking back now those days is touched with a nostalgia for a Golden Age. The programme makers knew where they were, literally. They were either in the BBC’s Television Centre, or at Lime Grove Studios, or one of the major regional BBC headquarters, or they were at one of the major regional ITV companies’ headquarters – Granada in Manchester, Yorkshire in Leeds, Scottish Television in Glasgow, Westward in Plymouth and so on. There was a convergence, each morning, on these major television factories. Through their gates flocked the many disciplines it takes to get television

programmes on the air: make-up girls, costume and set designers, set builders, actors, presenters, dancers, lighting men and cameramen, writers, producers, editors. They were almost always in the same building, making television. There were obviously also planners and schedulers, controllers and finance executives, but they didn't set the tone, the mood of the building. In that sense, it felt as if the creative forces were in power, and for us indeed, in that sense, it was a golden age.

In 1982 along came Channel 4, created to give greater choice to the public. It was the result of consultation and lobbying among the very people who had led the creativity of the 1970s. People like Roger Graef, creator of the fly-on-the-wall documentary style; Tony Smith, editor of '24 Hours' and creator of 'Nationwide'. Channel 4 was to be a second public service broadcaster. It was the deliberate policy of Jeremy Isaacs, its first director, to schedule programmes for minority groups: actually seeking out those whose tastes might lie beyond what was not yet referred to as "the mass market". Television was not yet commodified. It remained in the aspirations of those who were making it an arena for ideas – a place where the audience could learn and engage with all that was going on, and share in the diversity of the country's theatre, music, comedy, sport and current affairs.

Coleridge would have approved.

In the 1980s and 90s all that changed. Changes fuelled by two things: technology and management. In the 1980s with the arrival of John Birt, the new management system he put in place at the BBC closed down the design and scenery departments, make-up went, the costume department, too. Even the celebrated radiophonic workshop, which famously created the signature tune for 'Dr Who', was abolished. Such restructuring was no doubt at the behest of the management consultants brought in by John Birt at an estimated cost to the BBC of £22 million a year. The role of management as the crucial determinant of how institutions should function – the new and prevailing ethos of the 1980s – was taking shape in the BBC, as it was doing in all other aspects of life in Britain. As I am sure you will know, it has done the same in those illustrious and historic centres of learning called universities. Programme makers themselves were required to be managers. Management experts would have you believe that before the management revolution, all was careless, slipshod, unfocussed, financially out of control. Well they would say that wouldn't they? I am not here to argue the merits of management systems, but their way of thinking certainly shifts and governs the philosophy of institutions. The fact is that for all the disparagement now heaped on the old BBC in the name of management efficiency, it certainly worked, it operated within the licence fee, it delivered on its remit.

So, in those early days we had novelty, cohesion, enthusiasm and something else. We had permission. This was a question of leadership, and with the arrival of Hugh Carlton-Greene as Director-General of the BBC in the early 1960s, the spirit of enquiry and disrespect was given free rein, and was to puncture for ever the hide-bound hierarchy of good manners that had inhibited creativity. As a consequence, we had 'That was the Week that Was', the programme that began the entire dismantling of the culture of deference and led on to the whole swathe of satire and comedy shows that have their current expression in 'Little Britain' and 'Bremner Fortune and Bird'. Carlton-Greene's philosophy was that the BBC should lead with innovative and original programmes, the public could never dream of, but would enjoy and support. He would have scoffed at focus groups, as being uninformed about what was possible and unimaginative about the creative process. Ask the public what television they want and they will only answer – they only can answer – in terms of what they know. What focus group could have conceived of 'Monty Python' or 'Fawlty Towers'? I understand 'The Office' played badly to focus groups.

Another inspirational figure of the time was a young drama producer from Scotland, a short stocky ebullient man, who had been made a producer – and given great freedom to follow

his own taste – under Sydney Newman, the charismatic Canadian who revolutionised BBC television drama when he took over as its Head in the 1960s. This Scotsman was James MacTaggart, the mastermind behind the 'Wednesday Play', a man deeply committed to traditional values, with an eye for talent and ideas. His story editors included the young Tony Garnett and Ken Loach. In January 1965 he began delivering a series of single plays by writers such as Simon Raven, John Hopkins, Hugh Whitemore, Michael Hastings, David Mercer, Troy Kennedy Martin and Christopher Logue: a roll call of the best writers of the day. The list also included Nell Dunn's 'Up the Junction' and Dennis Potter's 'Stand up, Nigel Barton' and 'Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton'. There were some 32 single plays in all, and – this is what seems so amazing today – they were all made within just one year and transmitted in a prime time slot on BBC1. That has to count as some kind of Golden Age.

Today the single play is all but dead as a *genre*. By the 1980s the best writers were already writing series: fine series such as, in 1981 Alan Bleasdale's 'Boys from the Black Stuff'; 1985 Troy Kennedy Martin's 'Edge of Darkness'; and in 1986 Potter's 'Singing Detective'. Today they are creating series like 'Shameless', 'Bodies', and 'Outlaws' – series that, on the whole, live and die by the ratings. 'Shameless' is the exception: it got poor ratings at the start but Channel 4 stuck with it. In MacTaggart's day, even when a play had low ratings (which some of them did), the single play was guaranteed its slot at the heart of the television culture. James' legacy has been to give his name to the annual MacTaggart lectures at Edinburgh's Television Festival where the corporate world of broadcasters and the eager world of independent producers come together to argue creative, but also management, matters of contemporary television. It would break James MacTaggart's heart.

For us then, the programme makers, the 60s and 70s had indeed been golden: and for the public we produced vibrant and original programmes that constantly challenged and often outraged them. It was where the debate about the kind of society we lived in was taking place and we set the agenda. No one worried us about ratings; no one talked about programme costs. The existing BBC structure was such that others took care of such matters, and we, the creative people, were allowed to get on with what we were good at, which was making programmes. Today there is no one in any creative programme making team who is not aware of financial constraints or the need to achieve audience figures. That is in the parlance "the name of the game". Having said that, the BBC of the 60s knew that Line Up was cheap to put on the air and so kept it going for some eight years, between 1964 and 1972.

Now we come to the downside, and there was a down side – a not-so-golden-age. The technology was very rudimentary then. Line Up had a very small studio, three cumbersome cameras, three chairs and a coffee table, not much more. Captions were made by sticking letters of the alphabet onto cards which were then mounted in sequence on a music stand, and changed by hand as the camera focused on them. Line Up was black & white at the start, only later pioneering the BBC's first colour cameras. There was little scope for visual interest. The focus was on the talk, the ideas, the person. Production values were nil, camera angles hardly changed, the style of interview was respectful and unassertive. Until Robin Day and John Freeman came along and changed the way interviewers talked, to interrupt an interviewee who was speaking was considered bad form. Something of that tradition endured in arts and general programmes such as Line Up.

As an example of our work on Line Up, a copy of my interview with the artist Marcel Duchamp, the father of conceptual art talking at length – the only such record – is in Tate Modern. This interview was done in an afternoon and transmitted with minimal editing later that night. No effort was made to contextualise who my guest is or his work, there were no external points of reference, no alternative views, or comments. The piece is stark, traditional and old fashioned. But it did one thing supremely well, something we scarcely

counted at the time, and to which little regard has been paid since: it focused on the human face, it listened to one individual, gave them time, allowing them space for their mannerisms, personality and idioms to emerge. Today there would be so much cutting and styling of the content that its identity would be that of the film-maker, rather than the subject. For all its crudeness, that was its value then and its value now.

It is also interesting to note the other cultural differences from today. My accent, which was a good deal more 'cut-glass' in those days, because the Queen's English was expected of broadcasters, and the fact that Duchamp is smoking. In fact we all smoked, even the presenters, during the programmes.

The very basic form in the Duchamp interview quickly developed in all sorts of ways as the technology advanced. A short while later, an interview with the French novelist, Georges Simenon, demonstrates two great leaps forward. We were outside the studio, a move of major significance in the plays of the time, which lost the fustiness of studio sets and moved freely into the contemporary landscape. Also the interview was made on film, not tape, a great advance in the subtlety and beauty of the image. We took two cameras and had plenty of time to edit. The film-maker was interested in the aesthetic of film and also in a post-modern examination of the medium, We filmed for three whole days, two cameras running all the time, with magazines of film running 10 minutes at a time and costing £120 each – a lot of money in those days. There was no portable monitor to check as we filmed and the film had to be developed when we got back to London. That could take an age, but we had the time. Abundant resources resulted in a film way ahead of its time in style and approach.

The claims we make – that something of value about television in the 60s and 70s has been lost – concern ideas, freedoms, leadership and originality. Strangely enough, those concerns are endorsed by, of all people, John Birt, architect of the massive overhaul of the BBC that changed so much. Giving this year's McTaggart Lecture he had this to say:

"Though much in the public service is blooming there are areas of programming in need of visionaries. And the overall balance needs to shift towards more art, more authorship, more scholarship, more substance – in short some of the schedules are a bit barren. We need more truth and we need more beauty..."

and he goes on:

"let us not tabloidise our intellectual life."

So how has it happened? And, indeed, what is John Birt's responsibility for the direction television has taken? I speak primarily of the BBC in this discussion because it is by far and away the embodiment of public service broadcasting which has, in the popular mind at least, prime responsibility for "keeping up standards".

So it time to turn now to the concept of "dumbing down" – a phrase that pollutes the discourse with its implied elitist condescension and class snobbery. It is always an insult and as such has, as a phrase, no place in an examination of exactly what has happened.

I prefer to explore how technology and management have had an impact on ideas and on the way our society talks to and sees itself.

But politics come into this too. Mrs Thatcher had no love for the BBC. In 1984 the Panorama programme, 'Maggie's Militant Tendency', looked into the alleged extreme-right wing connections of certain MPs. Neil Hamilton and Gerald Howarth sued. By 1986, the year when the case came to court, Norman Tebbit had become Chairman of the Conservative Party and was intent on getting tough with the BBC. This ran parallel with the emergence of independent programme-making companies, which the Tories felt should, in accordance with their own philosophy, be given a chance in the market place. In the

autumn of 1986, Tebbit attacked Kate Adie's reporting from Libya. In September, Douglas Hurd named Marmaduke Hussey as the Tory choice to be Chairman of the BBC. Hussey moved quickly to settle the Panorama case out of court and all in the Current Affairs department were suddenly aware they were under attack. The Tory press joined battle and ran a sustained campaign, vilifying the BBC and suggesting that the BBC was in a state of collapse. The truth was that it was making serious programmes the government didn't like. 'Real Lives', a programme that attempted to give a balanced look at the situation in Northern Ireland, was denounced as being uncritical, precipitating a rare strike among the BBC's journalists. I was one of them. Then a first World War One drama series, 'The Monocled Mutineer', which a BBC press release described as being factual, turned out to be a *dramatised version* by Alan Bleasdale, based on a true story. The nuance mattered. The anti-BBC press was up in arms. In February 1987 Special Branch raided BBC Glasgow and seized material intended for a programme about Britain's Secret Society. Within six months of his arrival, Hussey sacked the BBC's Director General, Alasdair Milne and brought in John Birt from LWT as deputy Director-General, in charge of BBC Journalism. Things were about to change. For me they certainly changed: ten days after a momentous meeting, when John Birt confronted the entire News & Current Affairs department with his changes, I was sacked. Coverage of the arts had no place in current affairs and was one of the areas where savings could be made.

What was at stake was the BBC's licence fee. The BBC depends on it. Today it amounts to £2,940 Million – raised annually from the viewing public. If the Thatcher government moved against the licence fee in the then pending negotiations about its renewal, the BBC would be pole-axed. John Birt set about safeguarding the licence fee and he did that with a major management revolution. It was in tune with the times; it matched his own temperament. He had after all trained as an engineer and it was his aim to transform the BBC into a well-oiled, precisely functioning machine – and thus ensure the future of the licence fee. He pulled it off. This and the BBC website are his greatest achievements.

You will notice I haven't spoken about programme style and content for quite a while. That's appropriate, because systems and structures became the overriding concern of BBC management and filtered down into the ethos of the department heads and executive producers. The world Mrs Thatcher was creating – highly individualistic, self-interested, centred on the free market – arrived at the BBC.

The world of television was substantially overhauled by the Broadcasting Act of 1990, which opened the ITV franchises to competitive bidding and let Channel 4 sell its own advertising. The BBC was now required by law to buy at least 25% of its programming from independent producers. Two years later John Birt became Director-General and in 1996 split the BBC into Production and Broadcast. Now BBC staff producers had to bid for commissions from their own colleagues, the BBC Controllers, in competition with the now fiercely-competitive ITV and the burgeoning independent market. Competition was fast and furious. At the same time Birt ordered cuts. The BBC *Production Handbook* at the time declared that it would have to win commissions by "efficient working and competitive pricing", continuing, "the major effort will have to be in the programme-making process, if we are to bridge our funding gap. The time spent on set-up, the shooting and recording of programmes and the length of time in post-production is where the key savings will be made.". The producers had become salesmen of their own wares, to the programme controllers who wanted to beat the opposition at any cost. The BBC accounts department was expanded to deal with all the administration.

Where are the programmes in all this? Several interesting ideas developed at that time and suited the new imperatives: programmes about ordinary people were cheap to make, often fascinating and popular with the public. There had been a fine tradition of observational

documentaries from the time of 'Man Alive' in the 60s. Now the idea was pushed further, giving us ever more intrusive keyhole pictures of individual lives. The docu-soap was born. Among the heroes of the genre were the airport courier, Jeremy and Maureen and her driving school exploits, both of whom became nationally famous, got themselves agents and took off round the country, making public appearances. The public picked up on this and saw there was a good living to be made, a whole lot more exciting than many routine jobs, if only you could feature on a television programme. Their craving for self-exposure was to play well with the populist regime that came in when Greg Dyke succeeded John Birt in 2000. Where one series had succeeded, others followed: popular and entertaining programmes about ordinary people living their lives. The success of the *genre* was not in doubt. But what happened under the financial and competitive constraints of the time was that the idea was copied and over and over. In the end, it seemed they were just too many. That's when people began to notice and speak critically of the lack of new ideas: the phrase "dumbing down" was suddenly on everyone's lips.

Greg Dyke's arrival put many of John Birt's changes into reverse. He changed the mood, the attitude: he put a lot more money into programmes. Posters declaring "One BBC" went up round BBC offices. One of them read: "Cut the Crap". Not the most elegant of phrases – Lord Reith would have winced – but it was one that struck home. People knew exactly what it meant. Morale recovered. But Dyke is a highly competitive man, with a string of triumphs at LWT he was every bit a populist. He set out to beat ITV and he succeeded. He did it with a massive increase in money for programmes and the promotion of popular taste. Thus, a programme series on Impressionism was presented by Rolf Harris and a series on geology was presented by Alan Titchmarsh.

The notion of dumbing down, of falling standards, comes into play when serious programming is relegated to off-peak times of day – to liberate peak hours for popular and competitive scheduling. Thus under Greg Dyke, 'Panorama' was moved to late on a Sunday, often referred to as the graveyard slot but where I had for years earned a healthy audience for 'The Heart of the Matter'. Highly popular programmes were now stripped across five days a week by BBC, ITV and Channel 4 – 'The Weakest Link', 'East Enders', 'Big Brother' – the art of scheduling had fallen to the claims of ratings.

'Heart of the Matter' had already suffered in the 1990s when there was much concern with audience share – that percentage of the total audience that each programme commands. We were told our target share was 21%: that's very high for an issues-based documentary, albeit a popular one like ours. We already had 19%, we pushed it to 20% and were deemed to have failed. We were subsequently moved later, where we could get a larger share of the, by then – 11pm – dwindling audience. We reached our 21% target, but with fewer actual viewers. This was deemed a success. If you care about ratings it is indeed a success; if you care about public service broadcasting, it was a betrayal of what it stands for. Ratings as a prime criterion will regularly be in conflict with the other values that public service broadcasting implies.

Sometimes but not always. Thatcherism – throughout the 80s and 90s fuelled a huge consumer boom and a shameless pleasure in spending money on ourselves. It represented a new freedom for ordinary people, and they wanted to see programmes about renewing their homes, buying and selling houses, decorating, gardening, improving their way of life. Far from being "dumbing down", this seems to me to express an aspirational wish we all have to make life better. And it perfectly reflects what has happened in the broader culture. In the 60s and 70s, the broader public was only beginning to explore the possibilities of the consumer society; Harold Macmillan's phrase from the 1960s – so mocked at the time – "you've never had it so good", was about to come true. In the 80s and 90s national measurements of poverty and need began to rate a television set as a necessity of life;

people expected to have a car, families began to have two, foreign travel filtered down from the upper class and wealthy to virtually anyone who could get a few hundred pounds together. This social revolution bred an interest in how to spend and in how to enjoy all these new commodities.

Along with the economic revolution went a personal one. Given more leisure, but also more pressure, given the fragmentation of working life, of the work/home balance as women entered the workplace, there were many crises in personal and family life. Television has come to reflect these. 'Wife Swap' is a deliberately saucy title with a shamelessly populist appeal. In fact, the programmes offer, in the most entertaining form, an insight into the nature of marriage, its tensions and rewards, revealing with considerable accuracy the subtle ways men and women interact, and in the interest of the bond they have, modulate and adjust their behaviour. Or not. Similarly programmes about child care and nannies actually teach us skills about child care which we might assume we knew already, and didn't. Likewise cookery! Cooking has become a national obsession, with innumerable and copycat programmes featuring different cooks. But the format was transcended by the arrival of Jamie Oliver and his campaign against obesity in schools and the unhealthy nature of school meals. Is this dumbing down? I don't think so. It was the essence of what public service broadcasting should do and is now working its way into the government's health initiatives.

And then came 'Big Brother' – a stroke of brilliance to take its title from the ever-looming figure who spies on all our lives in George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*. It transformed the television landscape. It took over the summer schedules in 2000 and has dominated them ever since. It was joined by 'Celebrity Big Brother' in 2003, also is repeated every year. Television was rocked by its impact, its popularity, and by the tabloid response – which was to embrace it totally, making celebrities of its characters and prompting a chance for everyone to become somebody. It is the ultimate democratisation of the television technology. As a programme, it is well conceived, thoughtfully constructed, finely contexted – and absolute 'schlock'. It commands the biggest audiences, the biggest advertising, the daily news agenda. It is indeed dumbing down, but it makes the BBC green with envy, as one BBC executive put it to me: "We should have thought of that!".

What do people mean when they express concern about falling standards, citing 'Big Brother'? They certainly mean the bad language, overt sex and general bad behaviour. In terms of both the old moral ways and, indeed, contemporary ways of behaving, 'Big Brother's' standards are low. But it is an entertainment; its contributors are volunteers; its place in the schedules is prime time, but not in any way prolonged or dominant over the year. I hate it: but it is part of the cultural landscape, a landscape shaped by other technological considerations.

As well as the five terrestrial channels, there are now 38 shopping channels, 22 children's channels, 26 for sport, 29 for music, 30 for pornography, 86 for lifestyle – and dozens of film, news, religion and ethnic minority channels – and that's only the beginning. When the analogue spectrum is closed down in 2012, it will be possible to have hundreds more. We are looking at millions of books in the biggest library in the universe. Amid all this, at present, the five terrestrial channels still hold their own in the overall viewing picture in the UK, and at the heart of the five nestles the cherished and seemingly threatened concept of public service broadcasting, supposed upholder of so-called standards in this great new sci-fi world of television broadcasting.

But see it from the audience point of view, and there is even more. If the broadcasters have many channels, digi-cameras, slick editing facilities and simultaneous transmission – so do the public. They can now make and edit their own films on camera, on their mobile phones. They not only have VCR and DVD to record programmes, they have computer games, the web, and a constant supply of films from organisations such as Screen Direct, who keep me

supplied with around, on average two films a week. The choices extend into the future like a hall of mirrors, replicating ever more into the greater distances that lie ahead. How could it not be that, in all this cacophony of options, the issues of the moment would be competition and ratings, of which 'Big Brother' is a prime example.

In 2002, The Communications Act brought in Ofcom as the regulatory body. This together with the producers' association PACT, nudged the BBC into offering far more of its programmes to independent producers. Soon some 50% of its programmes could be made by non-BBC organisations. With the renewal of the licence once again in the offing, the talk is now of how to sustain public service broadcasting, that is programmes created for the benefit of the public, over and above concerns about ratings and competition. Ofcom have issued a Broadcasting Review which proposes a new concept, that of Public Service Publishing, a channel committed to public service to which independents bid for space. There is talk too of the BBC's licence being top-sliced to support that other public service channel, Channel 4. All this must be debated and fought for. Now is the time.

As for programmes – my lecture tonight has been looking back, not forward. I believe the BBC has over the years, despite the buffeting of ratings wars and the stringencies of Birt budgeting, a record of marvellous and creative achievements. ITV has often set the pace: 'The Jewel in the Crown', 'Brideshead Revisited', 'Cracker', 'Prime Suspect' were all theirs. With digital channels came BBC4, devoted every evening to the arts and a huge success; BBC3, where such wild successes as 'Little Britain' and 'Nighty Night' began, sets the pace for adventurous and outrageous comedy. Scattered across the channels, not always easy to run down, are plenty of fine programmes. You will have your own list: 'The Blue Planet', 'Coast', 'The Power of Nightmares', '7 up' - recently '49 up', 'The History of Britain', 'Dead Ringers', 'Waking the Dead'. Quality is proliferating rather than in decline. The BBC's Natural History Unit, legendary for the many programmes it made with David Attenborough, is currently producing more programmes than ever. This country's television – often despite its confusing and conflicted organisation – has wonderful programme makers. They are world class – at the front line of standards. As we move towards the ending of analogue in 2012, the system must be created that can best sustain them.

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