From Networks to Netflix

A Guide to Changing Channels

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BBC Three

Youth Television and Platform Neutral Public Service Broadcasting

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In the post-midnight hours of Tuesday, February 16, 2016, the British Broadcasting Corporation's youth-focused digital channel BBC Three went off the air for the last time.[1] Its final evening showcased some of the channel's biggest hits, from factual entertainment show *Don't Tell the Bride* (BBC Three/BBC One/Sky One, 2007–) to family sitcom *Gavin & Stacey* (BBC Three/BBC Two/BBC1 2007–2010). The next day BBC Three was reborn as an online-only channel delivered primarily through BBC iPlayer, the corporation's streaming on-demand platform. "Channel" could seem an inappropriate descriptor for this new BBC Three, as rather than a linear flow delivered over the air it now exists as a navigational database of on-demand streaming content (Bennett 2011, 1). With a fifth of its £30 million programming budget allocated to digital and short-form content, the online-only BBC Three spreads beyond the boundaries of iPlayer, across the BBC website, and onto global social media platforms as a "platform neutral" youth brand (Gannagé-Stewart 2016e). The reorientation of BBC Three as an online-only channel illustrates television's current transitional moment, as it spans linear and on-demand delivery systems and works through the continuities and change presented by the digital media sphere. Moreover, BBC Three's status as a British, youth-focused, public-owned channel highlights the role of nation and public service broadcasting (PSB) within the global, commercial flows of digital media. Its move online extended preexisting tensions at the heart of BBC Three's brand, between British youth television's PSB function and its value as commercial product. As BBC Three becomes a multiplatform youth brand, its challenge is to balance an embrace of powerful international media platforms with the retention of its British PSB identity.

BBC Three's transition to a wholly on-demand channel drew on its role as a vanguard for several of the BBC's strategic developments in digital delivery, as well as its foundational status in British youth television. As I argue elsewhere, British youth television is built on tensions between the national and international, drawing on US

teen TV but also pushing against it, offering nationally specific voices and storytelling (Woods 2016). BBC Three drew on these qualities in its online transition, offering a reworked channel identity that asserted its PSB value through prestige markers and nationally distinct youth voices, all supported by digital media's spreadability and storytelling possibilities.

Since its launch in 2003, BBC Three has held a unique status among the UK's niche, youth-focused television channels due to the position of the BBC in the national television market. The BBC is publicly owned and independent from the government, although successive governments have attempted to exert control and influence over the corporation.

It is a public service broadcaster funded by the license fee, which citizens must pay in order to watch and record live television (£145.50 a year per household in 2017). In 2016 the license fee was extended to cover both live and on-demand viewing on iPlayer. The license fee funds not only traditional television content and the infrastructure that carries it, but also covers a broad range of channels, radio stations, services, and technologies, including the BBC's streaming video on demand platform iPlayer. The latter is the UK's most widely used streaming video on demand (SVOD) platform, with 31% of adults having accessed the service in 2015 (Farber 2015). iPlayer would play a central role in delivering the online-only BBC Three.

BBC Three's status as a publicly owned and license-fee funded youth channel distinguishes it from its primary competitors, the free-to-air digital youth channels ITV2 and E4. The former is the sister channel of the UK's largest commercial broadcaster ITV, and the latter the sister channel of the UK's other public service broadcaster Channel 4. Like the BBC, Channel 4 is publicly owned, but it is funded by advertising, and its public service remit pertains only to the main channel, not to E4. As I have argued elsewhere (Woods 2016), over the first decades of the twenty-first century, British digital youth channels and BBC Three in particular have been spaces that have foregrounded tensions surrounding the role and value of PSB. This is in part because the provision of programming for young audiences is asserted as a key component of PSB ("Public Purposes" 2015; "Communications" 2003); yet the 16-to-34 demographic is also the most prized demographic across the commercial television market. As a result, British youth television embodies ideological tensions between television as a public service and as a commercial product.

BBC Three's public service status has meant it has long struggled with a taint of responsibility at odds with its youth address, suggesting that "a channel emblazoned with the BBC logo—however it is animated—will never quite be cool" (Rushton 2009). The channel's institutional identity exists in tension with a need to present itself as an authentic, risk-taking partner to its youth audience; the paternalistic connotations of the BBC's history as the UK's oldest and largest broadcaster is at odds with the rebellious older sibling role a youth channel plays for its audience. The edgy humor and anarchic identity central to youth appeal is easily accessible for commercially funded broadcasters such as E4, cable channel MTV UK, or media company Vice. However, at the BBC this is tempered by fears of censure and scandal, under the watch of a hypervigilant British press ever eager to attack the corporation. The battles fought by its parent

institution against criticism from commercial competitors and an aggressive political discourse (Born 2011) become laser-focused around BBC Three.

The channel's niche focus on a youth demographic has seen its value constantly questioned by political and broadcasting figures outside of its target demographic (Rushton 2010). Here a classed ideological construction of "appropriate" public service broadcasting conflicts with the noise and potential controversy required of youth entertainment. These tensions lay at the heart of BBC Three. Former BBC Three channel head Danny Cohen described such attacks as "a kind of chauvinism around young people, a belief that they are less deserving of licence-fee money than anyone else" (Rushton 2010). BBC Three has long been caught between the need to demonstrate its public value by producing popular programming that draws youth audiences, and the need to prove its distinctiveness by providing public service content—news, documentary and the arts—not offered by the commercial market due to their tendency to draw lower ratings. Across its life the channel has been attacked for a perceived reliance on audience-drawing celebrity and lifestyle programming, and by extension their class-informed low cultural status ("BBC3 Criticised" 2004; "BBC Defies" 2005; Rushton 2010).

Since the late 2000s the channel has sought to rectify such assumptions, commissioning a breadth of documentary programming and a string of successful dramas (before budget cuts hampered the genre) (Woods 2016, 50–1). Yet despite critical acclaim and awards attention, BBC Three still pushed against public perceptions that it harbored cheeky lifestyle programming, low-brow sitcom and imports of bawdy US animated series like *Family Guy* (Fox, 1999–2003, 2005–) and *American Dad* (Fox/TBS 2005–). The move online would see BBC Three respond to a huge budget cut by narrowing its focus to comedy and documentary (with a small drama budget), as well as cutting away entertainment programming and imported US animation. This refocusing drew on the channel's legacy in developing new voices and as a source of "original British content" (Gannagé-Stewart 2016a), emphasizing its public service value and national distinction. These were also genres that could readily be deployed across digital spaces through short-form video as the channel increased its investment in digital content.

INNOVATION OR COST-CUTTING?

BBC Three's move online pairs the BBC's PSB responsibilities for both digital innovation and youth reach. The corporation has a remit-required role in leading digital media developments in the UK (Evans 2011, 34) and broadcasting policy positions public service broadcasters as responsible for reaching older children and youth audiences ("Communications " 2003). BBC Three's move online continued its role as a vanguard of the BBC's innovations in streaming video on demand. It was the first British channel to stream live in 2008, and since 2013 has debuted an array of comedy content on iPlayer before linear broadcast. These strategies served as precursors for the BBC's embrace of channel and sport live streams, along with its development of iPlayer streaming originals and early premieres (Deans and Conlan 2014).

The corporation positioned its decision to move BBC Three online as a test case for how the BBC and the British television industry as a whole could reposition itself in the

streaming age and a potential non-linear future (Kanter 2014). It also claimed that the shift reflected changes in the viewing behavior of BBC Three's target audience (Kavanagh 2015a). Live viewing fell to just over one third (36%) of 16- to 24-year-olds' total viewing in 2015; however, the reach of broadcast TV among 16- to 35-year-olds stayed stable at 82% due to streaming on demand services, most prominently the BBC's iPlayer and Channel 4's All4 (Farber 2016). The move built on strong viewing figures for BBC Three programming on iPlayer, particularly school sitcom *Bad Education* (2012–2014) and award-winning factual drama *Murdered by My Boyfriend* (2014) (Price 2014; Chapman 2014). Yet most of BBC Three's factual output saw markedly lower viewing figures (Chapman 2014), illustrating the tricky task of drawing BBC Three's audience to the challenging content that was central to its PSB remit, outside of a linear flow.

BBC Three's move online was touted as an innovative decision, but the 2014 announcement came years ahead of schedule, arguably hastened by the corporation's need to implement cost-saving measures in the face of a 26% reduction in its license fee–funded budget (£1.5 billion by 2017) (Kanter 2015). The channel's "reinvention" was accompanied by a £50 million reduction in its programming budget (from £80 million to £30 million), severely hampering its ability to deliver a breadth of content and compete with other channels and platforms. The BBC sought to counter criticism by asserting strong youth viewing of its mainstream channels BBC One and Two (Kanter 2015). Yet arguably, when it came to representing the specificity of British youth experience, the niche focus of BBC Three offered that which broad-appeal family viewing could not. The budget cuts, perhaps even more than the move online, endangered the channel's role in building relationships with the BBC license-fee payers of the future.

The move online required the BBC to discursively reposition BBC Three in the minds of the public and press, with the latter eagerly reporting a drop in the BBC's youth audience following BBC Three's closure as a linear channel (Gannagé-Stewart 2016a). The corporation countered that BBC Three was now "a youth brand on TV, online and social media," that was "not consumed like a traditional TV channel" (2016a). Spread across iPlayer, YouTube, the BBC website, and a range of social media spaces, this multi-platform youth brand faces increased challenges in drawing audiences and asserting its brand identity. It must now define itself within the strong overarching brand of iPlayer, and attempt to cut through the "noisy highway" (Grainge and Johnson 2015, 33) of the online content ecosystem. Here it competes for attention with a range of freely available digital content across social media platforms, including video content from powerful US media brands Vice and Buzzfeed. Alongside this looms the powerful pull of international SVOD platforms Amazon and Netflix, each with a global reach of over 200 countries. These companies' library catalogues and range of new, largely US-produced programming benefit from financial reserves well beyond that of the BBC, with the corporation's PSB remit stretched across a breadth of media, technologies, and social responsibilities (including the World Service, rural broadband, and free TV licenses for old age pensioners).

BBC Three's increased investment in original short-form and digital content (£6 million, or a fifth of its budget) facilitated its spread across the channel's branded spaces on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Long-form programming familiar from linear BBC
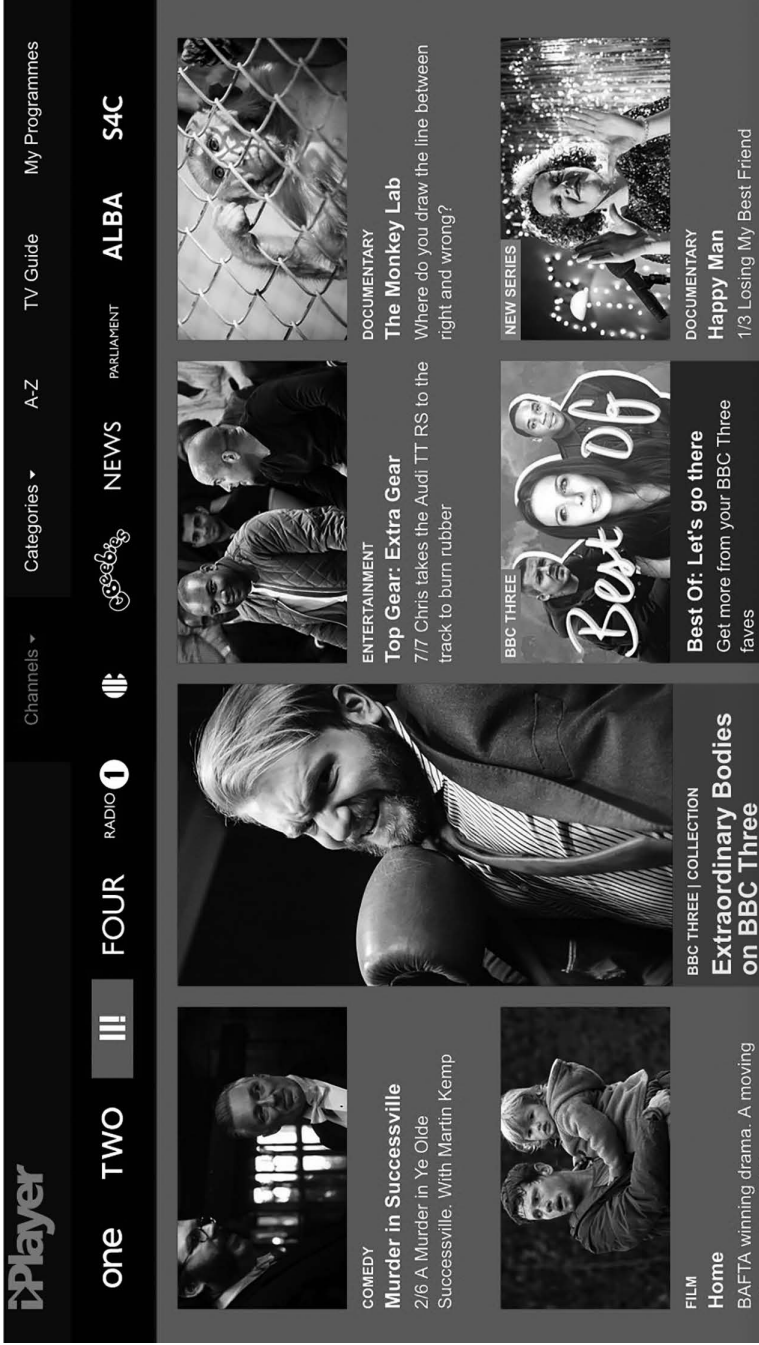
FIGURE 28.1 *BBC Three as it appears in the iPlayer interface.*

Three remained within the boundaries of iPlayer, but short-form was more "spreadable" (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). This shorter, shareable, embeddable media content could be spread and repurposed by its audience. In this quest to become nimble, reactive, and spreadable, BBC Three uses the social media platforms of global media giants to fulfil its PSB remit to reach those youth audiences not drawn to iPlayer or linear media. However, the challenge here is to balance the embrace of powerful international media platforms with the retention of BBC Three's British PSB identity; independent industry regulator Ofcom's 2015 review of PSB raised questions over how far "young people distinguish public service content from other content" ("Public Service" 2015, 3). Would a spreadable BBC Three risk diluting its connection to the BBC? Across its short-form videos, BBC Three's authorship is signaled by a brief opening ident, and the channel's brand frames each YouTube thumbnail. But the challenge is in retaining a connection between this programming on YouTube and the ideologies and social contract embedded in license fee–funded PSB.

The "streamlined" BBC Three sought to maintain this connection through an assertion of prestige, youth voice, and national distinction. Breadth had long been central to the channel's PSB remit, yet the transition online and a greatly reduced programming budget led to a narrower programming focus. Here BBC Three asserted its PSB value by drawing on its preexisting critical and awards successes and its remit to develop new voices.

PROGRAMMING: REFINING, DEFINING, AND LEGITIMATING

Since its birth in 2003, BBC Three had been a mixed-genre channel, combining entertainment, drama, comedy, documentary, and news. This distinguished it from its entertainment-focused competitors ITV2 and E4, where US imports, comedy, and reality dominate schedules, alongside limited original British youth drama on E4. On BBC Three brash entertainment programming such as *Snog Marry Avoid* (2008–2013), where flamboyant or excessive femininities were given 'make-unders', and *Don't Tell the Bride*, where hapless bridegrooms secretly planned their weddings, sat alongside BAFTA-winning telefantasy dramas *In the Flesh* (2013–2014) and *The Fades* (2011). New comic voices offered a range of perspectives on the world, from sketch show grotesquery *Little Britain* (BBC One/BBC Three, 2002–2007) to the surreal world-building of *The Mighty Boosh* (2004–2007) and pirate radio mockumentary *People Just Do Nothing* (2012–). BBC Three's wealth of documentary content chronicled the lives of young people at home and across the world, helping to distinguish the channel from ITV2 and E4 and to strongly assert its PSB credentials. Factual programming explored topics ranging from the Middle East conflicts (*Our War* [2011–2014]), to male suicide rates (*Professor Green: Suicide and Me* [2015]), to child labor (*Stacey Dooley Investigates: Child Labour* [2009]), and gun violence in the US (*Reggie Yates: Life and Death in Chicago* [2016]).

After announcing its "reinvention" in 2014, BBC Three underwent a lengthy period of development ahead of its 2016 transition. In 2015 the new head of channel Damian

FIGURE 28.2 *BBC Three's presence as a YouTube channel.*

Kavanagh sought to clarify the revised channel brand, in response to an industry campaign against the channel's "closure":

> I want to make it very clear we will always make ground-breaking drama like *Murdered by My Boyfriend* and *In the Flesh*. We will still give you comedy of the calibre of the *Mighty Boosh* and *Gavin & Stacey* and we will still make documentaries like *Our War* and *Life and Death Row*. We will still champion new talent like Georgina Campbell and James Corden. That is what we do now and what we will always do.
>
> (Kavanagh 2015b)

This statement attempted to articulate to viewers, regulators and the industry at large that the "new BBC Three" would be a legitimated space. The programs it highlighted included the small-audience, skewed-perspective cult comedy that had long been the channel's forte, along with risk-taking drama and documentary, and nearly all were BAFTA-winning and critically acclaimed. Notably absent were the channel's high-rating programs from low-status genres that were frequently referenced in critiques or press reports on the channel ("BBC3 Defies" 2005; Rushton 2010; Beaumont-Thomas 2014). Kavanagh's reframing of BBC Three offered up the channel as a model of prestige British youth television: award-winning, nationally distinct, niche targeted, and appropriately PSB. However the further reduction of its already depleted drama budget (a costly genre for a cash-strapped channel, with comedy and documentary notably cheaper to produce), along with the loss of popular but "lowbrow" factual entertainment, panel shows, and imported animation risked shrinking BBC Three's cultural footprint. Could this new "streamlined" BBC Three assert its voice in a crowded online marketplace, where competition increased beyond its traditional linear national foes?

BBC Three was rebranded around the twin themes of "make you laugh" and "make you think," with comedy and documentary each receiving a third (£10 million) of the programming budget. In emphasizing areas where British youth voice could be strongly articulated, the move highlighted the channel's desired balance of PSB remit and youth reach. This asserted its national distinction as a purveyor of "original British content" (Gannagé-Stewart 2016a), a legitimated service worthy of the license fee. In the process it signaled its support for the British independent production sector that had opposed the budget cut and move online.

BBC Three had some notable programming successes with female protagonists and writers in the year following its online transition, previously a rarity on the channel. Along with a 2017 short-form season produced and curated by British actor and producer Idris Elba that showcased British BAME youth,[2] these successes indicate BBC Three as a potential flagship for the corporation's on-going mission to increase its representational and creative diversity. Dark comedy *Fleabag*, written by and starring Phoebe Waller-Bridge, debuted in the summer of 2016 to significant critical acclaim, word-of-mouth success, and BAFTA nominations. This was BBC Three's first international co-production with Amazon Prime Video (as co-productions are increasingly the norm in British fiction programming, to meet the budgetary expectations of home

audiences and to facilitate export). As with most co-productions, Amazon's involvement was little heralded in the UK broadcast, lest it trouble BBC Three's assertion of national distinction, but its international reach and critical success conferred additional prestige on the new BBC Three brand. Earlier in 2016, Marnie Dickens's *Thirteen* was the first BBC Three drama to debut as online-only and earned notable critical and ratings success. The thriller benefited from heavy promotion in the last few weeks of linear BBC Three, across all BBC's channels and in the channel's branded social media spaces. Its significant cross-platform promotion indicated the tactics needed to facilitate discovery in SVOD (Grainge and Johnson 2015, 33), and by August it was the most-requested show to feature on iPlayer that year (Gannagé-Stewart 2016b).

DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING IDENTITIES ONLINE

By mid-2016, the top 20 most-requested shows on iPlayer included seven BBC Three shows, and a strategic focus on YouTube as an additional platform for all short-form video saw the channel doubling its subscribers and trebling its viewing time on the platform (Gannagé-Stewart 2016b). All of BBC Three's factual content up to 30 minutes in length is posted to YouTube as well as iPlayer, and the move online saw an increase in the production of documentaries ranging from 5 to 30 minutes. Where hour-long documentary had been a centerpiece of linear BBC Three (with a prime 9 p.m. timeslot), these shorter running times increased the genre's spreadability.

As a streaming-only service, BBC Three currently faces challenges in promoting and leading its niche audience to its content within the expanse of iPlayer (which holds programming from seven different television channels). At present, iPlayer lacks the personalization algorithms of other SVOD platforms (although individual logins will be introduced in late 2017), and with weekly episode debuts for its long-form programming BBC Three can struggle to draw back a demographic who increasingly expect to "binge" view (Gannagé-Stewart 2016c, 2016d). However, viewers *did* follow BBC Three to iPlayer, and by mid-2016 boosted the channel's monthly views on the platform to 30 million, with requests of its programming rising by 6% to account for 10% of all iPlayer viewing (Gannagé-Stewart 2016b).

In the absence of the "shop window" of the linear channel, the relaunched BBC Three website was positioned as the home of BBC Three, supported by the channel's branded Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr feeds. These digital spaces sought to retain the cheeky, comic, gossipy BBC Three "voice" that had previously been constructed through the interstitial elements of continuity announcers, idents, and adverts. In shifting from linear to digital spaces, BBC Three spreads out into its audiences' digital everyday, embedding itself into their social media feeds, its programming just a swipe away on ever-present mobile devices. The channel's Twitter identity shifted from the live-tweeting and promotional role that accompanied the linear channel to become a primary facilitator for the channel's online spread. Its Twitter and Facebook feeds took the place of the televisual linear flow, constantly linking to the BBC Three website, iPlayer, and YouTube, as well as hosting short-form content themselves. In sharing new and recent programs, short-form video, and promotional content, these social media

spaces keep the relatively static database of on-demand programs "live" and articulate the channel's nationally specific voice in a global media swirl.

As an easily embeddable and spreadable form, short-form content plays a key role in BBC Three's assertion of itself as a "platform neutral" brand. Long-form programming remains within the boundaries of iPlayer, but short-form digital content has a greater freedom of movement. This allows BBC Three to embed PSB content into the digital spaces frequented by its target audience, yet these spaces are already dominated by multinational commercial competitors such as Vice, Buzzfeed, and Fusion. BBC Three leads innovation in short-form among its British youth television competitors; however, in these international digital spaces it comes up against companies that built their brands as digital native media. Here documentary and new comic voices now no longer offer the distinction they did in the linear market of British youth television.

This pulls at the tensions at the heart of BBC Three as a license fee–funded national broadcaster—between British youth television as PSB and as commercial product. As a digital immigrant rather than a native, the channel continues to negotiate its place in the online ecosystem. BBC Three may be small, but its success here plays a key role in the future of nearly a century of British PSB and the social contract at the heart of the license fee. Its audiences will become the license fee payers of the future, and BBC Three must assert its distinctiveness across their digital habitats to convince them of its value in this crowded marketplace, and the necessity of the BBC that birthed it.

NOTES

1 All free-to-air channels in the UK are now delivered digitally since the switchover in 2012.
2 This is a demographic term used across British industry and politics, referring to black, Asian, and minority ethnic.

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