

Television Audience Perceptions of Innovation and Distinctiveness

Research Summary

Commissioned by: BBC Trust

Conducted by: [Blinc Research](#)

December 2007



1. CONTEXT

The BBC Trust has made it clear in its first year of operation that it is keen to encourage “innovation and distinctiveness” in BBC output. In the 2006-7 Annual Report, published in July 2007, the Trust said:

“Our audience research shows that public approval of the BBC remains strong but audiences want the BBC to provide a steady flow of new programme ideas. This means the BBC must show more creative ambition.....we are looking for output that displays ambition, high quality, distinctiveness and originality”.

This was based on earlier research published by the Trust, looking at the public’s attitudes to the importance and performance of a range of BBC activities. The BBC Trust’s Purpose Remit Survey conducted in February 2007 identified a clear “innovation gap”: while 72% of the public felt that it was important that the BBC has “lots of fresh and new ideas”, only 51% agreed that the BBC was performing well here. This gap was the largest overall on the survey. (Source: BMRB. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/consult/closed_consultations/purpose_remits_closed.html#part-5 for more detail).

To better understand what was driving this perception, the BBC Trust commissioned the media research agency Blinc to undertake a qualitative research project. The overall objective was to understand in more detail what the public means when it says it is looking for more ‘fresh and new ideas’ from the BBC, and the potential implications for the BBC. The project focused on television because earlier research suggested that this is where the audience perceives there to be the most immediate areas of concern.

2. ABOUT THE RESEARCH

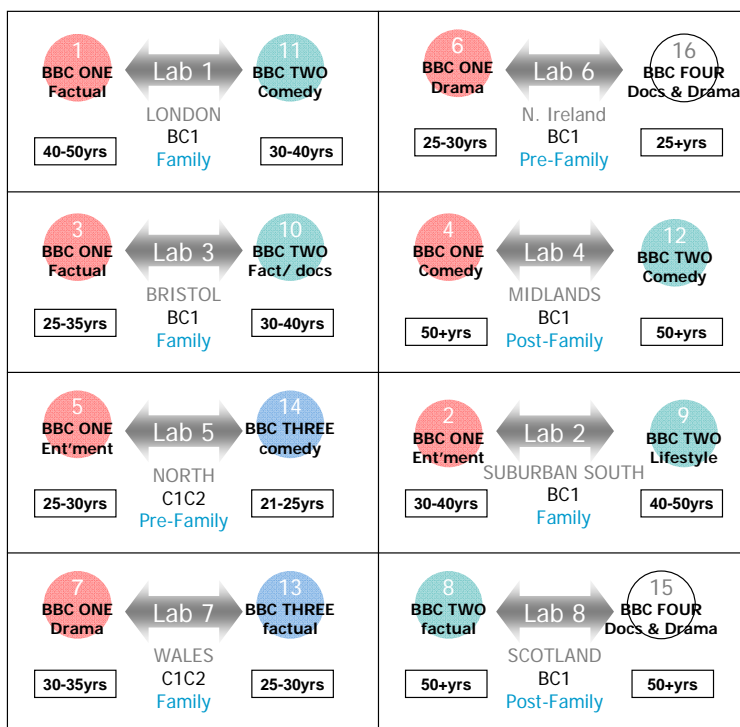
2.1 The aims of the research

- To clarify what audiences for different channels and genres mean when they talk about 'fresh' or 'new' ideas
- To explore issues around originality in peaktime TV programmes and formats within four key genres (drama, factual, entertainment and comedy)
- To identify the language which audiences habitually use to talk about these issues
- To identify what audiences mean by original or distinctive programming.

2.2 Who we spoke to

We carried out 8 'Audience labs' in October 2007. Each of these consisted of 12 people divided into 2 groups of 6 on the basis of a channel affinity and genre preference. They contained an equal mix of men and women, and a spread of social grades and life stages. Sessions were carried out in the four nations of the UK, and were recruited to reflect local ethnic composition.

Here is the complete grid of the audience sessions:



2.3 What did we do in the research?

The audience labs lasted for 3 hours. Each of the sessions was moderated by 2 people, and the respondents discussed the issues in both separate groups of 6 and as a whole group of 12. This more dynamic environment allows the research to get beyond the more top of mind responses and helps elicit a richer feedback from the participants – the 2 groups may challenge each others views, for example.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 How do the public judge distinctiveness?

The public has a wide range of ways of judging distinctiveness in regard to television. It can be understood in terms of:

- Individual programmes
- The range of programmes
- The volume of programmes other broadcasters wouldn't make/show
- Brand values
- The prominence of such programmes
- The channel portfolio as evidence of commitment to content and providing the navigational tool to find it
- Talent

3.2 Are the 'Innovation gap' and concerns about distinctive programming real issues for the audience?

- We should note first of all that the perceived lack of enough fresh and new ideas on television is not a new issue. It has emerged in other surveys, including OFCOM's first review of public service broadcasting. It is certainly felt by the audience to apply to television generally, but people's expectations of the BBC are higher because they believe the BBC's public funding means that it has fewer pressures to compete as fiercely in the marketplace.
- A clear finding from the Audience Labs in this research is that there is a small but significant perception among the public that there is less distinctive TV on the BBC than there once was.
- People felt that in the past, it was easy for the BBC to claim, reasonably, that it had real range and depth across its two television channels. Overall, BBC One was clearly seen to be providing quality entertainment, and BBC Two was seen to be providing quality factual programming. This was felt to be distinctive from what was on offer elsewhere.
- However, the growth of multi-channel television has complicated things. People feel that the explosion of choice in the multi-channel world has provided an alternative supply of range and depth.
- Having said that, TV generally is felt to be increasingly dominated by big entertainment shows, 'ratings chasers', celebrity, soap wars, make-over and reality TV. The BBC is felt to have succumbed to this trend to a certain extent.
- The prominence of and noise around this type of negatively perceived TV (though of course at the same time often widely watched and enjoyed...) is crowding out perceptions of the more distinctive aspects of the BBC offer - which is felt to be increasingly difficult to find and notice.

- There are also concerns that there is not enough volume or prominence of a genuinely alternative offering to this type of TV (in the form of serious drama and factual documentaries) and a strong belief that the BBC should strive more to provide an alternative.
- Critical to this problem of perception among viewers is a certain lack of understanding of the BBC television portfolio. When people were shown the range and depth of programming across the BBC television portfolio they judged it positively, recognising that there were still programmes other channels wouldn't/couldn't do.
- However, most people's viewing remains largely with BBC One and Two. Figures from the BBC show that 90% of viewing to BBC television is accounted for by BBC One and Two. In this context, people's actual experience of the choice on offer is much more limited.
- Furthermore, there are some concerns amongst viewers that the portfolio has a bias towards entertainment. BBC1 is of course prominent in viewers' minds in forming this view. BBC2 is felt to be increasingly mainstream; and these perceptions are reinforced by an increasingly visible BBC3 which is seen to focus on entertainment. For some, the existence of BBC4 isn't felt to be a sufficient counterweight to this perceived entertainment skew – partly because they don't know very much about it.
- All in all, this leads to the irony that although there is more choice, people perceive that there is less choice.

3.3 So do they want the BBC to do things very differently to what it does now?

Despite these concerns, the research did not suggest a public clamour for the BBC to change its overall strategic direction or a desire for a vast increase in 'public service programming' at the expense of what they like and enjoy watching. The more subtle messages that emerged indicate that:

- No programme genre per se is seen as taboo for the BBC – it can be acceptable for the BBC to enter a genre as long as there is some rationale for it being a fresh approach and not just a rehash of something else. For example there was strong endorsement for Strictly Come Dancing and the Apprentice despite a general criticism of celebrity based shows and reality TV – their content, tone and execution were felt to be consonant with the BBC's values.
- The familiar is seen as being as important as the new, as it fits in with how people watch television. They expect their viewing diet to comprise mostly familiar 'old favourite' programmes, with a few that are a slight twist on a familiar theme, and very few that are genuinely 'new new' and groundbreaking. A few 'must see' great shows each week, combined with the trusted familiar programmes actually adds up to a great week for viewers.

- The 'classics', such as University Challenge, Mastermind, Antiques Roadshow – are hugely valued as core to what the BBC is and should do – and provide a welcome alternative
- Other programmes that were singled out as good examples of the BBC doing what it does best included Doctor Who (old idea successfully refreshed), Paris (depth, prominence, breadth, non-celebrity talent) and Tribe (pioneering show in a new genre with integrity)

3.4 Other areas discussed

- The 'talent' that features in programmes can be a strong signal of distinctiveness – there was a sense that there is such a thing as a BBC 'type' – who will tend to be intelligent, their own person, a real talent, and not in thrall to celebrity/youth/attractiveness
- There was also a sense that the BBC should take responsible risks – and not just be 'edgy'/'out there'/'shocking'/'random' like C4 can be seen to be
- Risk-taking is seen as important, but it was felt it should be anchored in the BBC's values/heritage and its core competencies i.e. in such areas as:
 - Developing new talent
 - Developing drama – not buying it in
 - Giving more scheduling prominence to difficult output
 - Providing editorial leadership in difficult/challenging/important subjects – try to broaden its appeal but also respect necessary complexity

3.5 What kinds of language do the public use in this area?

- It emerged strongly that the language currently used internally in the BBC does not resonate when discussing these issues with the public. Words such as innovative (seen by the audience as meaning 'new technology'), ambitious (seen as 'expensive'), creative (seen as 'arty'), and challenging (seen as 'hard work') don't resonate with the audience – they are seen more as industry/conference language. "Distinctiveness" in particular is seen as very uninspiring: it is too neutral, and does not relate to how people actually watch television.
- Stronger words that were felt by the audience to convey what they were looking for the BBC to worry about were those such as 'fresh', 'new', 'different'. To convey the fact that they still want TV to be familiar they soften it further to 'a new take', 'a slight twist', 'a bit different'. When asked to say what words conveyed the best, most enjoyed programmes, "inventive" and "imaginative" had a strong resonance – these words convey creativity to the ordinary viewer and have 'something of the magic of great telly'. They were also felt to be dimensions where the BBC can outperform other channels.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The research suggests that the BBC Trust and Executive will want to:

- Consider how best to exploit full value from the television portfolio of BBC One, Two, Three and Four
- Consider further the extent to which scheduling and marketing can help highlight the full spread of programming across the portfolio

Our understanding of the Delivering Creative Future strategy is that initiatives such as 'Fewer, Better' (including fewer newer commissions, and exploiting programmes to the full) have the potential to work well, since this will reduce clutter and help give prominence to the best programmes.



www.blinc.tv