Alisong Payne

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Branding Television

Alison Payne

Catherine Johnson's book *Branding Television* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012) contributes to television studies by describing, explaining, and illustrating why and how television industries have turned to branding as a response to changes in technology. The book examines the television industries in the United States and the United Kingdom suggesting that, while the evolution of television into a digital, multi-channel, multi-platform industry has not followed a common route or time frame, the adoption of branding as a strategy to respond to greater competition has been similar in both countries. Johnson illustrates her argument with case histories from Fox, HBO, and MTV in the United States and the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5, and UKTV in the United Kingdom.

In the introduction Johnson discusses the issues surrounding the periodisation of television, choosing to focus on the technological shift from broadcasting to cable, satellite, and then digital. The central argument of the book is that the adoption of branding techniques can be linked to this technological change, which is 'the fundamental shift that began in the 1980s…the gradual challenge to the centrality of broadcasting to our understanding of television as a medium' (p.9). Johnson discusses a number of approaches to the periodisation of broadcasting including one suggested by John Ellis,[1] who argues that the availability of channels, platforms, and content has moved from scarcity to availability to plenty. While Johnson argues that adopting the technological shift as the basis of periodisation is similar to this approach in that the result of the growth of digital technologies has led to an explosion of competing channels, formats, and platforms, she is not specific in explaining why this competition has evolved. I would instead suggest that the audiences available to broadcasters have moved in the opposite direction, from plenty to availability to scarcity.

Although viewers spend more time and engage with a wider variety of screens where content can be accessed this viewing time is a finite resource. When viewers have access to dozens if not hundreds of channels programmes are competing for a shrinking resource of available audiences. Since 1947 the BBC has moved from a monopoly to a duopoly and now maintains an audience share of about 20%. ITV, rather than sharing an audience with the BBC, now struggles to hold a 15% share of viewers.[2] A similar situation has evolved in the United States where the three national broadcasters now compete for viewer attention with hundreds of cable and satellite channels and an additional network channel (Fox). It would have been helpful if Johnson's book had placed the areas she discusses – including the extension of digital media platforms via computers and mobile devices and the establishment of content consolidators, like Hulu – into a more detailed analysis of how viewing patterns and screen usage have changed with the shift in technology.

During the 30-year period of Johnson's analysis I was working as a brand and communication strategist with clients in both the commercial and public sectors, including six years spent in the research and marketing department of an ITV contractor. The organisations that I worked with were forced to come to terms with and manage these technological changes, which directly impacted on both the activities of their business and their business models. In Celia Lury's terms I was party to the 'inside-out'[3] perspective on brands. My response to this book therefore cannot help but be informed by this practitioner perspective; I was on the 'inside' trying to retain viewer loyalty and attention for brands and channels that were suddenly confronted with a level of competition they had never experienced before.

In my experience branding is implemented by organisations as a response to scarcity and the need to compete for finite resources. In this previously-mentioned situation the channels were competing for audiences and the revenue accrued from selling these audiences to advertisers. Branding is only one of a number of strategies that organisations could adopt; they could, for example, reduce the price of their service or product, invest in improvements to the service, or broaden the distribution of the service. Johnson's analysis does not fully discuss the challenge that television channels face in choosing a strategy that would help them compete effectively. The BBC and ITV do not have the same range of competitive strategies available to them as other service brands; they cannot affect the price the viewer pays to watch their channels and although they can broaden the distribution of their content to new platforms, allowing them to compete for attention in all available settings, this offers them little unique competitive advantage. Branding offers one of the few strategies available to the BBC and ITV to compete for viewer attention by establishing differentiation between themselves and their competitors.

In examining the response of British channels to increased competition and technological change since the 1980s, Johnson makes a valuable point in her analysis of public service broadcasting between 'marketing' and 'marketization', arguing that to suggest that the adoption of branding 'marketization' techniques by the BBC and Channel 4 undermines their public service remit is asking the wrong question (p.109). Public service broadcasters (PSBs) have had to adopt these techniques to respond to the political pressure that began in the 1980s, which required that they contribute to the conversion to digital broadcasting in the United Kingdom and generate income from sources beyond the public purse or shrinking advertising revenues.[4] The book is particularly detailed in its analysis of British public service broadcasters and the comparison of the proliferation of channels – as well as the technologies to deliver them – in the United Kingdom and the United States.

While Johnson's argument that public service channels in the United Kingdom have adopted commercial branding 'marketization' techniques is convincing it would have benefited the argument if she had also explored what remains of the public service broadcaster values in these semi-commercial organisations. As Adam Arvidsson argues, 'the brand should be conceived as a "personality", with emotional or even ethical dimensions'.[5] It is arguable that public service broadcaster brands have stronger associations with values such as integrity, honesty, objectivity, and quality, and viewers have higher expectations of them to deliver against these values. One can only look at the volcanic response by the BBC and politicians to the *Newsnight*/Jimmy Savile scandal to illustrate the extent to which the BBC is still defined by brand values that were established through its charter, public service remit, and the historic expectations of its viewers. It would also have been interesting to include an analysis of America's public service broadcaster PBS as a comparison with the commercial American broadcasters and British public service channels. PBS has also been defending its position by adopting branding techniques, as S.M. Chan-Olmsted and Y. Kim illustrate: 'PBS has been a more active and established brand since the mid-1990s when it mounted a national branding campaign…with the slogan, "if PBS doesn't do it, who will?"…effectively supported by PBS local affiliates'.[6]

Johnson's book explores a wide area in terms of both geography and time period in comparing the American and British broadcasting ecology since the 1980s and looking in more detail at a number of channels. For a student new to the concept of branding in this context it provides a succinct introduction and as a result, it seems churlish to criticise it for not exploring some areas in more depth. For example, the evolution of UKTV from a raft of channels launched under a notion of 'Britishness' linked with a generic descriptor (UKTV Drama, UKTV Bright Ideas, etc.) to a set of channels, including 'Dave' and 'Alibi', which 'more clearly articulate its relationship with its audience' (p. 78) is not solely a response to the technological change and digital switchover but also an attempt to address the failure of the broadcaster to establish an umbrella brand for these channels. 'For a broadcaster to expand its business into niche…programming services, it needs to first assess whether its current brand has acquired the value to fortify and benefit the new business line.'[7] The UKTV brand simply did not have the equity to provide the protection and support for these channels and the company was forced to invest in an expensive rebranding exercise to re-launch them separately. It is interesting to note that in 2013 the interstitials for the individual brands *Alibi, Dave*, et al now include a list of all the UKTV channel brands, re-introducing the corporate UKTV branding. The company appears to believe that the equity of the individual channel brands is now strong enough to support the corporate brand.

Johnson makes the important distinction between corporate, channel, and programme brands and provides a chapter (pp. 143-166) that defines and illustrates the criteria required for a series of programmes to become a programme brand: longevity, transferability, and multiplicity. These three criteria define programme brands that are able to 'facilitate extensions across multiple texts and platforms' (p. 165). Programme series that acquire the position of programme brands offer multiple points of access for viewers and may lead to the situation that the brand becomes influenced and manipulated by the viewer, sometimes beyond the control of the management of the programme brand. It would have been a more challenging exercise to try and define a set of criteria for a channel brand. As Johnson points out it is a contested issue as to whether channel brands exist or can be developed, as they lack consistency – a key attribute of brands, as content invariably changes over time. In Johnson's analysis of HBO and MTV there is an assumption that these do function as brands, facilitated by the homogeneity of their content and their focus on a clearly defined audience; also, that all the channels discussed are managed as brands by the controlling organisation. It would be an interesting challenge for a future writer to develop Johnson's analysis to examine a complex, multi-faceted television brand such as Sky, which functions as a corporate brand, a delivery brand, and an umbrella brand for a portfolio of channels including Sky1, Sky Living, Sky Arts, and Sky Sport.

To illustrate the evolution in branding strategy and to compare the influence of the controlling media conglomerates on channels in the United States with the public service brands of the BBC, ITV, and Channel 4 in the United Kingdom, Johnson analyses the use of space and time by the channel idents and interstitials of on-air branding. This is an illuminating exercise and reinforces her earlier comparisons between the British and American development of television brands, with the American evolution characterised by the establishment of media conglomerates and the British landscape characterised by competition and fragmentation. However, Johnson's description and analyses are focused primarily on the outward faces of the television brands she discusses – in Celia Lury's terminology the 'outside-in'[8] of the brand. Brands are viewed from their visual expression: idents, interstitials, corporate public statements of intent, press reports, public relations statements, and company reports. Johnson makes the point that these brands also have other stakeholders that include advertising media buyers, but this role of brands in competing for resources other than audiences is not part of her remit. However, as Arvidsson says 'brands are economic'[9] it is not possible to divorce brands from their business models and their sources of revenue. This is Lury's 'inside-out' perspective on brands, one that Johnson does not explore.

An analysis of industry data illustrates that in addition to immense technological change over the last 30 years there has also been a paradigm shift in the way these television brands generate income for their services. In Britain in 2000 subscription income overtook licence revenue as an income stream for broadcasters; in 2003-2004 subscription revenue outstripped advertising revenue as the largest source of income for British television providers.[10] In a subscription-based business model channel owners and channel deliverers like Sky and Virgin Media have a direct relationship with viewers through the payment system, which provides them with the ability to build a one-to-one brand relationship based on considerable knowledge of the individual viewer, reinforcing or amending the external expression of the brand seen through on-screen promotions. This direct relationship is not available to the BBC and advertising-funded channels.

Johnson makes the point that the effective presentation of television branding helps viewers navigate through multiple platforms to follow their preferred channels and programme brands. While the book mentions that channel brands have other important stakeholders, including the key stakeholder group of decision-makers in the media-buying industry, this is not explored. This represents an important omission, as a number of writers argue that this key group of stakeholders favour channel brands perceived to be strong viewer brands as offering a more homogenous and stable audience. As Marr Ots and Per-Erik Wolff argue in their study of media buyers, a strong viewer brand delivers 'a congruent image [which] provides the benefit of increasing the "impact" of their promotional message'.[11]

In summary, Johnson's book is focused on examining how the adoption of branding techniques and the investment that this has required from television channels and programmes can provide a perspective on the fundamental changes that have taken place in television in the period of technological change after the 1980s. The book draws on a rich and detailed knowledge of both British and American television industries during this period, particularly the British public service channels and the visual audience-facing expression of television brands both on screen and on-line in the United States and the United Kingdom. However, the discussion of branding in its competition for scarce resources is focused primarily on the viewer. Johnson makes the point that television brands are complex partly because they require engagement and support from a number of stakeholders and argues that 'there is the need for further historical work that traces the historical precedents for the changes witnessed in television over the past 30 years' (p. 10). In concurring with this position I would hope that other academics would extend Johnson's analysis to explore branding television in this wider context.

Notes

1. Ellis 2000.
2. Ofcom http://www.ofcom.org.uk/static/cmr-10/UKCM-2.28.html (accessed on 14 April 2012)
3. Lury 2004, pp. 63-69.
4. BBC commercial interests now deliver nearly 25% of its revenues. BBC Report and Accounts 2010/2011 http://www.bbc.co.uk/annualreport/2012/ (accessed 21 February 2013).
5. Arvidsson 2006, p. 67.
6. Chan-Olmsted & Kim 2001, p. 79.
7. Ibid., p.76.
8. Lury 2004, pp. 53-62.
9. Arvidsson 2006, p. 5.
10. Ofcom http://www.ofcom.org.uk/static/cmr-10/UKCM-2.28.html (accessed on 14 April 2012).
11. Ots & Wolff 2008, p. 108.

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About the author

Alison Payne, *Birkbeck College*