

Book Review

Channel 5: the early years by Christine Fanthome. Luton: University of Luton Press, 2003

Well written, accessible, and comprehensive in its coverage, this historical analysis of the early years of Britain's fifth and final terrestrial television channel marks a success both for the author and the Institute of Education, University of London where Christine Fanthome completed her PhD in Media and Communication. Fanthome's readable, engaging, and frequently thought-provoking paperback evidences the evolution from doctoral thesis to published volume. It offers not only an accomplished overview of Channel 5 but also a 'master' class on the transition from student apprentice to authorial voice. As such, the book deserves to be widely read by those with professional or academic interests in the media and broadcasting; doctoral candidates contemplating publishing from their thesis; and, more generally, all adults concerned with, and wanting to be informed about, what appears (and what does not) on their television screens.

Writing, in this review, from the perspective of one located in the field of education, my comments are intended for inclusion in a journal dedicated to this broad domain. Observations, consequently, are aimed at highlighting a few of the issues raised in Fanthome's publication that link directly to the concerns of educators and other social scientists. Thus, whilst sketching the parameters of the book, I have not focused on matters that are outside my generalist sphere and which might be addressed more adroitly by those in the media industry. Rather, I have attempted to identify some of the themes raised in the study that have bearing on issues of enduring importance to those whose interests lie with the betterment of the conditions of existence of young people. To be sure, broadcasting is neither remote from nor oblique to the work of educators but closely connected in that both are simultaneously pedagogic and constitutive of the lifeworlds of children, adolescents, and learners of all ages.

The scope of Fanthome's project, appositely described as informative, carefully sculpted, and lively, serves as an induction into the British yet increasingly global world of broadcasting. It contains in-depth formal interviews with key figures in television including household names such as Dawn Airey, Greg Dyke, David Elstein, John Hambley, Kevin Lygo, and Nick Milligan. The book is well illustrated, and unusually so, by colour plates, tables of official statistics, and excellent graphs of audience demographics. These qualitative and quantitative elements are combined seamlessly to produce an incisive, insightful, and often humorous narrative that presents not only in-front-of-the-camera but also behind-the-scenes aspects of Channel 5. Citing, for instance, Greg Dyke's famously inaccurate view that 'Channel 5 is the greatest public relations disaster of all times... The first thing anyone will know about it is when it screws up their television set' (Fanthome, 2003, p vii) and his equally erroneous prediction that the retuning of the nation's receivers represented a 'burglar's charter' (Fanthome, 2003, p 111), the later Chairman of Channel 5 Broadcasting Ltd was interviewed by the author regarding the station's corporate identity, market, and other successes. Arguably typifying changing perceptions of the prospects extended by the channel, Dyke's volte-face is mirrored by the significantly different expressions of interest in obtaining the franchise as demonstrated by the two bidding rounds for the licence. Whereas in 1992 there had been but a sole applicant submitting a tender of £1,000 by 1995 there were four companies competing with the largest offer standing at £36,261,158.

Apart from documenting a unique chronology of Channel 5 that draws on academic literature, commentaries by cultural intermediaries, and press cuttings, it is arguably Fanthome's conversations with important media players that signal some of the most valuable

dimensions of her work. Since, combined with revealing new information about Channel 5, Fanthome's interpretative analysis displays skilled interviewing, reporting, and editing techniques. Situated in a potentially litigious arena, one in which all authors who write about the living unenviably find themselves, Fanthome proficiently negotiates a host of practical, ethical, and intellectual difficulties. For researchers involved with what may be termed 'sensitive subjects' (Brannen, 1988), Fanthome's achievement demonstrates a high level of competence from which much may be learned.

Substantively, the book is concerned with the arrival of a brand new channel at the end of the twentieth-, and beginning of the twenty-first, century. It identifies and charts distinct phases in the history of Channel 5, from its conception in the late 1980s, and launch in 1997, to the end of its fifth year of transmission. Divided into four parts, the manuscript contextualizes the nature of contemporary broadcasting; reviews early plans for the fifth channel; documents the transition from licence to screen; and, finally, examines responses and reactions to Channel 5 on air. Filling a significant gap in the existing literature, Fanthome's synoptic account analyses Britain's broadcasting environment in an era characterized by instability as new technology including satellite, cable, and, later, digital television emerged. Located in a milieu of multi-channel viewing, policy changes, and increasingly dominant market forces, Fanthome discusses some of the general challenges to established media practices. More specifically, she shows how these wider developments provided opportunities for, and simultaneously exerted limitations on, the early years of Channel 5. Overall, this lucid institutional study is capably organised, debated with the utmost clarity, and expertly synthesised. Individual sections are well summarised and there are useful points of clarification at the end of chapters.

In each of the book's sub-divisions, far-reaching issues, many of which impinge directly on educational inquiry, are interwoven with empirical data collected by the author. For instance, the range of topics with which Fanthome is concerned includes the repositioning of viewers (from citizens to consumers) along with an associated shift in power bases (from sites of production to sites of consumption). Matters such as these are surely of relevance to those educators who, whilst acknowledging the empowering potential of choice, are impelled by normative values to question whether there is 'more to life than shopping' (Morgan 1997). Discussion of the tensions between regulated public-service broadcasting and deregulated narrowcasting is initiated by Fanthome through examination of paternalistic Reithian conceptualizations of civic responsibility as portrayed by traditional or dated mainstream British Broadcasting Corporation programming. Here, producer-broadcasters are held duty-bound to enlighten and educate a homogenous mass audience. Customarily, this was achieved through broad-based 'welfare' scheduling buttressed by genre quotas of certain types of programme for well-established groups such as the family unit, men, women, and children. Contrasted with this consensual notion of society is the current trend towards publisher-broadcasting. Underpinned by neo-liberalism, it is a system which relies on the purchase and distribution of independent productions to satisfy, concurrently, commercial imperatives and the niche demands of newer social and cultural alliances. The trajectories of publisher-broadcasting pose for criticalist educators questions about which audiences and identity groups are recognized, authorized, and sustained, and which silenced, subjugated, and delegitimized.

Set against this sea-change in broadcasting, one that prompted both positive initiative and sceptical comment from the media industry, Fanthome's examination offers insights into the gamble surrounding the birth of what eventually became the modern mainstream Channel 5, understood as an analogue commercial operation with public-service commitments. Extending opportunities for business ventures and fragmenting audiences, the book explains how initial plans and licence bids for the fifth channel were structured. The regulatory requirements of the Independent Television Commission, which imposed certain obligations as well as restrictions, were tempered by other considerations, such as budgetary limitations

and the changing tastes of audiences which had 'grown up' and 'moved on'. In an analysis of the tenders and subsequent programme schedules, it is shown how different viewing genres (such as documentary, current affairs, sport, and education) were each allocated a minimum number of hours for transmission. Scheduling for all classifications of children's television (cartoons and animation, drama and stories, factual, light entertainment and quizzes, and pre-school), for example, was apportioned 14.40 hours per week. Whilst Fanthome's sample of actual screening hours shows this target to have been exceeded, it is also pointed out that Channel 5 weekday-programming made little attempt to attract young audiences. Cheap early-morning programmes, often repeats, were seen as merely serving the role of 'electronic babysitter' (Fanthome, 2003, p 144). Only weekend children's viewing, it is suggested, held out the promise of greater enrichment with drama and a magazine programme.

For those children who are limited in their access to a wide range of media, books, and conversation, which is the experience of many as working mothers continue to support households (Mayall, 2002), it becomes possible to suggest that inequalities may be increased by impoverished programming that offers but 'schedule fodder' (Buckingham, 2000, p 90). This, however, is not to denote that audiences automatically react to bland screenings either unimaginatively or uncritically. Drawing attention to arguments about children's empowerment or disenfranchisement by television as one particular form of media technology (Buckingham, 2000), Fanthome's comments provoke scrutiny of the ideologies, motives, and strategies which underpin programming decisions. For those who recognize that learning is grounded in the lived experiences of young people and that education takes place not just in schools but in a multiplicity of sites (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1997), the pedagogic strength, if not emancipatory potential, of television requires educators to take seriously developments in the media industry. Generating questions about the types of citizenry that transmission regimes promote, many educators will be roused by Fanthome's analysis of Britain's fifth channel to query whether the scheduling offered to audiences encourages submission or promotes activity; bolsters the status quo or supports personal involvement; or, more grandly, extends the possibility of changing lives for the better. Those prompted to read the history of Channel 5 will undoubtedly emerge with more nuanced understandings of broadcasting. Perhaps they will be positioned so as to address questions such as, how might the transformative capacity of television be deployed in ways that work towards a profoundly more inclusive and socially just society?

Judy Hemingway

References

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