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Streaming British Youth Television: Online BBC Three as a Transitional Moment

by Faye Woods

In the summer of 2016, two UK lectures by high-profile television executives highlighted television's ongoing struggle to engage with youth audiences. Shane Smith—CEO of the US-based multiplatform media company Vice Media—gave a contentious MacTaggart Lecture to the assembled British media industry at the 2016 Edinburgh International Television Festival. In it, he charged that linear television was neglecting “the interests and needs of the world’s youth.”¹ These comments echoed those of former BBC television executive Liz Warner, who had argued that television was failing young audiences in a BAFTA lecture the previous week. Warner claimed that British television was getting “getting boring, old and boring” and needed to assert itself more forcefully in the digital media realm to compete, a space that Smith has long marketed himself and Vice Media as mastering.

In February 2016, the BBC had taken a decisive step in this direction by closing its digital youth channel BBC Three as a linear channel, relaunching it as an online-only channel. This new BBC Three was a “platform neutral” brand hosted on the BBC’s streaming video-on-demand platform iPlayer, with an increased investment in short-form content spreading its British youth television brand across YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and other social platforms.² This expansion of its short-form content meant that BBC Three was no longer only competing with established providers of British youth television on digital channels E4 and ITV2; it was also competing for attention with international media brands such as Vice, a former magazine turned US-based global media brand with twelve digital channels and more than seven million YouTube subscribers, which marketed itself as a fleet-

¹ Jasper Jackson and Mark Sweney, “Vice’s Founder Thinks Television Is Failing Young People—Is He Right?,” *The Guardian*, August 28, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/aug/28/vices-founder-thinks-television-is-failing-young-people-is-he-right>; Liz Warner, “Liz Warner: BAFTA Television Lecture,” BAFTA, July 8, 2016, <http://www.bafta.org/media-centre/transcripts/liz-warner-bafta-television-lecture>.

² Hannah Gannagé-Stewart, “TV Rejects Millennial Malaise,” *Broadcast*, September 1, 2016, <http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/news/tv-rejects-millennial-malaise/5108930.article>.

footed media disruptor able to reach an elusive youth audience.³ British youth television has always been constructed through a transatlantic dance with US youth media, a push-and-pull relationship, drawing formally on US teen TV yet defining itself against it in its assertion of national distinction.⁴ BBC Three's move online indicated a new phase for British youth television: one marked by greater international competition, where a defined British voice and perspective marked its distinction within a global youth media flow. Yet without attention and investment, this distinction could potentially be swallowed up in the torrent of global media content targeting youth audiences.

Smith's charges over television's neglect of the world's youth were typically bombastic and provocative; however, his words perhaps struck a chord for a British industry playing catchup in an international digital media market dominated by US companies while also dealing with BBC Three's controversial move online and the resulting budget cuts. The move online was accompanied by a raid on the channel's finances to bolster a huge shortfall in the BBC's overall budget; BBC Three's programming budget was cut by £45 million to £25 million, a move that hampered its investment in original British youth programming. The move formed part of a history of the BBC cutting youth-focused provisions to shore up funding of mainstream programming, a series of decisions that have progressively damaged the corporation's reach to and relationship with youth audiences, the license-fee payers of the future.⁵ A continually cash-strapped BBC frames these decisions as a choice between investment in niche or mass audiences, and the corporation is quick to point out that youth audiences view BBC One programming in large numbers.⁶ Yet BBC Three plays an essential

³ Jane Martinson, "The Virtues of Vice: How Punk Magazine Was Transformed into Media Giant," *The Guardian*, January 1, 2015,

<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/jan/01/virtues-of-vice-magazine-transformed-into-global-giant>; Peter White, "Vice: The Story So Far," Broadcast, August 24, 2016, <http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/news/vice-the-story-so-far/5108676.article>.

⁴ Faye Woods, *British Youth Television: Transnational Teens, Industry, Genre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 52–55.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 52. The BBC is a public service broadcaster funded by the license fee—£145.50 as of 2017—that is required to watch and record live television in the United Kingdom. In 2016 the license fee was extended to cover both live and on-demand viewing on iPlayer.

⁶ Christopher Hooten, "More Young People Are Watching Planet Earth 2 Than The X Factor," *The Independent*, December 1, 2016,

role in bringing the world to British youth and capturing their own experiences, struggles, and investments. This responsibility is essential for a public service broadcaster (PSB) like the BBC, as the requirement to reach youth audiences is written into the public service objectives set by the 2003 Communications Act.⁷

The corporation had presented the channel's move online as reaching out to this audience, a response to shifting viewing patterns and a pathfinder for how traditionally dominant broadcasters could pursue youth audiences drifting quickly away from linear television.⁸ Research by Ofcom saw live viewing fall to one-third of total viewing (36 percent) among sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds in the United Kingdom in 2015; however, the reach of broadcast TV among those aged sixteen to thirty-five stayed stable at 82 percent, given broadcasters' streaming video-on-demand (SVOD) services, particularly the BBC iPlayer and All4 from Channel 4.⁹

The iPlayer became the primary home of this streamlined online-only BBC Three, whose brand was tightened to focus primarily on documentary and comedy and stripped of its popular, yet often criticized, US animation imports and factual entertainment programming (e.g., Don't Tell the Bride [BBC Three/BBC One/Sky One, 2007–], Sun, Sex and Suspicious Parents [BBC Three, 2011–2015]). Comedy and documentary were genres in which British youth voices could be strongly articulated and that enabled the channel to assert its national distinction in the multinational permeable boundaries of the digital media ecosystem while also legitimating its space in the wider BBC and as a product of the license fee. As Inge Ejbye Sørensen has argued, “Both the BBC and Channel 4 use documentary as one of the

entertainment/tv/news/planet-earth-2-ii-young-viewers-x-factor-bbc-itv-david-attenborough-viewing-figures-ratings-a7449296.html; Hannah Gannagé-Stewart, “BBC Youth Viewing Drops 18% after BBC3 Closure,” *Broadcast*, August 22 2016, <http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/news/bbc-youth-viewing-drops-18-after-bbc3-closure/5108618.article>.

⁷ “Communications Act 2003,” *Legislation*, 2003, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/21/contents>.

⁸ Warner, “Liz Warner: BAFTA Television Lecture”; Jake Kanter, “BBC Eyes Online-Only Future for BBC3,” *Broadcast*, March 5, 2014, <http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/bbc-eyes-online-only-future-for-bbc3/5068278.article>.

⁹ Alex Farber, “Live TV Loses Young Viewers,” *Broadcast*, July 14, 2016, <http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/live-tv-loses-young-viewers/5106719.article>.

main genres with which to promote their brands, differentiate themselves from their competitors, and demonstrate their commitment to serious, public service programming.”¹⁰ BBC Three has a decadelong, often ignored, history of documenting youth experience through factual programming, sharing territory that cool kid on the block Vice has touted as distinctive to its own brand and that Smith argued was absent from linear television.¹¹

Vice was a constant presence in the discourse surrounding the lengthy development of BBC Three’s online-only identity, where it was held up as the holy grail of reaching youth audiences.¹² BBC Three controller Damien Kavanagh later expressed frustration at the press’s constant pitching of the companies as rivals, arguing that the attention of the youth audience was not a “zero-sum game.”¹³ Yet Vice and BBC Three were intertwined, particularly with the latter’s stronger embrace of short-form and digital, with 20 percent of its budget devoted to such content; the move formed a cornerstone of its transition into a platform-neutral brand. Vice’s former head of development Max Gogarty was hired to lead the channel’s short-form division, indicating the influence of the company in this field.¹⁴ During its linear lifetime, BBC Three had been a constant target of press and political critique over its content and its status as PSB channel, and this press-built rivalry with Vice was indicative of how the online-only BBC Three was pitched into the global media ecosystem.¹⁵ In a spreadable media economy based on the shares, likes, and click-throughs, the social platforms of YouTube, Twitter, Snapchat, and particularly Facebook have ascended as powerful spaces for sharing news and media content.¹⁶ To reach its youth audience in the

¹⁰ Inge Ejbye Sørensen, “Channels as Content Curators: Multiplatform Strategies for Documentary Film and Factual Content in British Public Service Broadcasting,” European Journal of Communication 29, no. 1 (2014): 34–49, 36.

¹¹ Gannagé-Stewart, “TV Rejects.”

¹² For more detailed discussion of this process, see Woods, British Youth Television, 46–57.

¹³ Gannagé-Stewart, “TV Rejects.”

¹⁴ Damian Kavanagh, “BBC Three: Where We Are,” About the BBC, June, 26, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/aboutthebbc/entries/c9a425fb-df7b-454e-b83b-34a139acc4e2>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46–57.

¹⁶ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Robert W. Gehl, “A History of Like,” New Inquiry, March 27, 2013, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/a->

spaces they frequented, the platform-neutral BBC Three is increasing its presence in these spaces via short-form and digital content. In doing so, it now competes with the international media brands—including Vice and BuzzFeed—which have an established foothold in the “noisy highway” of the online content ecosystem.¹⁷

BBC Three is still negotiating this extension of its established comedy and documentary brand, experimenting with how to punch through the crowded market and lower budgets of short-form and digital content. This will require the BBC Three brand to build audience relationships that counter the aura of establishment the BBC brings as a PSB corporation, the suspicion that “a channel emblazoned with the BBC logo—however it is animated—will never quite be cool.”¹⁸ It is still finding its own voice in the struggle to produce eye-catching and spreadable content, as well as working out how to draw viewers with factual content that looks beyond Vice’s “edgy” subcultural gaze and how to use the flexibility of short form to develop new comic voices. After its first year as an online-only channel, it continues to grapple with the challenge of breaking through in a crowded digital marketplace, balancing this with the ethics and accountability of a public service broadcaster.

Short-form video’s ability to function as “spreadable media” facilitates BBC Three’s expansion of its boundaries beyond iPlayer, as it reaches out to its target audience in their social media habitats.¹⁹ Short-form’s spreadability enables it to serve a dual role as original content and promotional paratext.²⁰ Original short-form factual and comedy content is produced for viewing on and sharing via social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. Promotional short-form video seeks to draw the audience back to the branded home of iPlayer, with platform-exclusive long-form factual and comedy “unbundled” into

history-of-like/; John Herrman, “Mutually Assured Content,” The Awl, July 30, 2015, <http://www.theawl.com/2015/07/in-no-charts>.

¹⁷ Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson, Promotional Screen Industries (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015), 33.

¹⁸ Katherine Rushton, “BBC3: Search for the Secret of Youth,” Broadcast, June 18, 2009, <http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/bbc3-search-for-the-secret-of-youth/5002614.article>.

¹⁹ Jenkins, Ford, and Green, Spreadable Media.

²⁰ Jonathan Gray, Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

shareable short-form promotional paratexts.²¹ Here programs are broken down into “fragmentary, yet self-contained, segments,” trailers, clips or edited extracts (“cut-downs”) hosted on Facebook or Twitter.²² These serve as potentially viral promotional objects and as intact shareable texts themselves. Yet we might question how much this short-form content is connected with the BBC in audiences’ minds when it is accessed on the platforms of multinational media companies, beyond the branded frame of the BBC iPlayer and its ideological connections to PSB and the license fee.

Ofcom’s 2014 review of public service broadcasting across television, radio, and online raised questions over how far “young people distinguish public service content from other content,” which suggests that public service broadcasters need to balance this multiplatform reach out to youth audiences with a stronger articulation of their brand identities.²³ As Cathy Johnson and Paul Grainge point out, “In the new economics of attention it is not just the amount of time that people devote to media content that is at stake, but also the quality of that attention. . . . Content is not simply about ratings and viewing hits, in this sense, but also the depth of involvement, interest and feeling (or affect) that audiovisual forms can inspire.”²⁴

At its heart the affective audience relationship BBC Three needs is one built on trust and value, of belief in the BBC, “entwining viewers’ emotional connections and experiences with brand connections and experiences.”²⁵ This relationship builds future license fee payers, so when the BBC cuts the budgets of youth-focused services it damages its own future.

One way BBC Three can build youth relationships and define itself within their crowded mediascape is by developing and supporting diverse voices. Vice executives noted that the company solidified its own footing in the United Kingdom following the 2011 London riots, when “young people were very, very angry and didn’t feel that media

²¹ Max Dawson, “Little Players, Big Shows: Format, Narration, and Style on Television’s New Smaller Screens,” *Convergence* 13, no. 3 (2007): 231–250.

²² *Ibid.*, 234; Hannah Gannagé-Stewart, “BBC Three’s First Rating Reveal,” Broadcast, April 7, 2016 <http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/news/bbc3s-first-ratings-revealed/5102341.article>.

²³ Ofcom, “Public Service Broadcasting in the Internet Age,” July 2, 2015, <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/consultations/psb-review-3/>.

²⁴ Grainge and Johnson, *Promotional Screen Industries*, 27.

²⁵ Jennifer Gillan, *Television Brandcasting: The Return of the Content-Promotion Hybrid* (London: Routledge, 2014), 4.

companies were delivering them a realistic, true or honest vision of what was going on.”²⁶ Diversity—in gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability—is slowly becoming a central concern of the British television industry both in front of and behind the camera with campaigners influencing the development of internal policies that take small steps to counter the stark lack of diversity on screen and in industry personnel.²⁷ BBC Three can be at the front of this, using its budget and brand to develop factual and in particular drama and comedy content that counters its past tendency toward white male voices (which have dominated its comedy pipelines in particular). Two of BBC Three’s biggest audience and critical successes in 2016 came from white female creators exploring the psyches of young women. In April 2016, *Thirteen* (2016) was BBC Three’s first drama to debut on the “platform neutral” brand, and by August it was the year’s most-requested program on iPlayer to date, drawing three million requests. Dark comedy *Fleabag* (2016–), meanwhile, saw its British critical acclaim extended internationally with its acquisition by Amazon Instant Video.²⁸

As Mary Celeste Kearney notes in her contribution to this In Focus, white youth are not the only consumers and producers of media. Short-form’s smaller budgets and space for innovation and risk taking can further these steps and offer a pipeline for BAME (the standard terminology used in British politics and the creative industries to refer to “Black Asian and Minority Ethnic”) creative personnel—including executives, writers, directors, actors, and a range of other production roles—who struggle to gain traction in the industry. Here BBC Three has the opportunity to offer the “meaningful diversity” sought by the Tumblr users discussed by Allison McCracken in this In Focus.²⁹ One of BBC Three’s most

²⁶ Creative director Alex Miller, qtd. in White, “Vice.”

²⁷ Jasper Jackson, “BBC to Consider Producers’ Diversity Record When Commissioning TV Shows,” *The Guardian*, October 17, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/oct/17/bbc-producers-diversity-commissioning-tv-guidelines>.

²⁸ Hannah Gannagé-Stewart, “BBC3 iPlayer Requests Jump after Online Launch,” *Broadcast*, August 23, 2016, <http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/news/bbc3-iplayer-requests-jump-after-online-launch/5108645.article>.

²⁹ Mary Beltran, “Meaningful Diversity: Exploring Questions of Equitable Representation on Diverse Ensemble Cast Shows,” *Flow: A Critical Forum on Television and Media Culture* 12, no. 7 (2010), <https://www.flowjournal.org/2010/08/meaningful-diversity/>.

high-profile short-form commissions has been the anthology series Five by Five (2017) from British actor and producer Idris Elba's production company Green Door, which pairs emerging and experienced acting and creative personnel. A key role of BBC Three could be the support and development of British BAME creative personnel currently working in independent web series—an area underdeveloped in the United Kingdom in comparison to the United States. The seeds of this were sown in 2016 when BBC Three produced a short-form series from Kayode Ewumi continuing his popular YouTube mockumentary Hood Documentary (2015), and a new episode of Cecile Emeke's Ackee & Saltfish (2015) web series in its Comedy Feeds strand of online pilots.³⁰ Giving a BBC platform for a breadth of British youth voices needs to be a central role of BBC Three.

Liz Warner's stark critique of the British television industry characterized BBC Three as "a bold foot forward yet to work."³¹ BBC Three exists at present as a transitional moment in British youth television and in "traditional" broadcasters' relationships with youth audiences as a whole. The youth media landscape grapples with unanswerable questions about its future, ones that, at present BBC Three struggles to grasp itself. How can it help to build affective relationships that tie its brand, and the BBC itself, to youth audiences? What is the role of the BBC brand—and the value of the license fee—for an audience that defines itself by its international, boundaryless media consumption? With a demographic accustomed to accessing content for free (legally or illegally) or through international subscription-based libraries of content from a wealth of sources (including the BBC itself), what support is there for the breadth of services that a public service broadcaster like the BBC is required to fund from the license fee?³² BBC Three plays a role in maintaining the increasingly shaky social contract between the British citizen and the license fee. As BBC Three moves further into the spaces of multinational media brands to reach its target audience, will the thread that connects the viewer with the license-fee-funded BBC be pulled ever more thinly in the process? These remain questions that the British television industry is unable to answer at present with BBC Three the pathfinder for the BBC and the industry as a whole. But it cannot

³⁰ Bim Adewunmi, "You Should Be Paying Attention to Kayode Ewumi," BuzzFeed, January 26, 2016, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/bimadewunmi/keep-it-locked-yeah>.

³¹ Warner, "Liz Warner."

³² This includes not only television content and the infrastructure that carries it, across a range of terrestrial and digital channels, but also radio stations, the website and iPlayer, the world service, industry training, and free license fees for pensioners.

do this without investment, and the swinging cuts to its budget fundamentally harm BBC Three's presence and central role in the recent growth of British youth television. The BBC needs to invest in its relationship with the licence-fee payer of the future, or its future may be cast in doubt.