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## **Summer loving? Female-orientated comedy drama, ITV and seasonal performance**

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### **Abstract**

British summer broadcasting has traditionally been (light) entertainment focused and has been the subject of lower expectations from producers, reviewers and audiences, to the extent that a summer broadcasting slot might be considered to impair the viewing figures and critical acclaim of a series. This article examines the decisions made by the British broadcaster ITV during 2004–2009, in the first years of its unification as a single plc, to reschedule the screenings of several drama productions – including my case studies *Jane Hall* (2006), *Monday Monday* (2009) and *Mister Eleven* (2009) – and considers the impact of their summer scheduling in relation to gender, genre and institutional strategy. It draws on Bennett's work on genre, television, gender and distinction, company reports, critical reviews and audience responses to argue that ITV's historical dependence on and appeal to a populist, often feminine, audience can be seen to create friction with its ambitions. The article concludes that the default association of 'quality television' with masculine interests and values, as well as concerns about financial risk in a challenging economic climate, led ITV into risk-averse scheduling decisions where contemporary female-orientated comedy-dramas series are concerned, which reinforce traditional notions of scheduling and programme quality.

### **Keywords**

scheduling

female audience

ITV

cultural capital

genre

gender

branding

summer

When Glenn Guglia, the shallow and selfish fiancé of Julia Sullivan in the 1980s-set film comedy *The Wedding Singer* (Coraci, 1998), is asked sardonically why he isn't at home watching *Miami Vice* (1984–1990), he answers cheerfully: 'Summer. Reruns'. This reflects the truism that summer represents the low point in the television year (see Rubens 1978; Barnett et al. 1991; BARB 2008; Vergeer et al. 2012, among others). The summer schedule is associated with low-quality, low-prestige productions and with repeats. In the British television environment, productions specifically commissioned with the aim of a summer broadcast have often been orientated around the particular demands – or lack thereof – made by the summer audience, who are assumed (when they are watching television at all) to be seeking light entertainment and similarly light levels of intellectual engagement. Historically, British TV summer scheduling has relied on variety productions such as the BBC's *Seaside Special* (1975–1979) and, in more recent years, reality series such as *Big Brother* (2000–), which for many years ran from May to August in the United Kingdom. Prestigious genres such as drama have conventionally begun airing in the autumn or New Year period, in line with broadcasting wisdom that audiences are then both more substantial and ready to give viewing their full attention and appreciation.

It is perhaps surprising that, in the era of on-demand viewing, such notions of seasonality persist at all; however, even a limited survey of television schedules, marketing for new shows, and press packs from broadcasters, bears out a strong level of continuing adherence to pre-cable and pre-timeshift notions of seasonality. There have been attempts by US networks to approach summer scheduling more innovatively, such as Fox's unsuccessful trial of a year-long schedule in 2004 (Friedman 2004: 23), but this has yet to become broadcasting orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup> Most recently this has been attempted by NBC and Netflix within the on-demand format, where series can be made available in their entirety in summer; however, it is telling that this is represented as 'the flexibility to experiment without affecting the traditional fall schedule' (Lynch 2015). As a result, departures from seasonal broadcasting conventions have yet to become common in the United States, and are rarer still in the United Kingdom. Rather, they form an element of a fast-changing broadcasting environment in which traditional television 'seasons' may in future be more comprehensively dismantled, but where this has not yet happened; notions of seasonality remain significant for viewer expectations and industry planning.

This article explores a segment of broadcasting which has low cultural prestige on several counts: its (largely) summer scheduling, its hybrid generic status as comedy-drama, and its target demographic – women. It focuses on the British broadcaster ITV and some aspects of ITV's comedy-drama productions during the twenty-first century, with a particular focus on productions screened from 2006 to 2009.<sup>2</sup> This was a critical period for ITV's development as a broadcaster and my research examines ITV's position in the market and the institutional and structural factors that played a role in the reception of these productions. I argue that ITV's historical dependence on and appeal to a populist, often feminine, audience can be seen to create friction with its ambitions in the 2000s as a newly formed plc. Now

consolidated into a single company, ITV attempted to forge a fresh identity as a mainstream broadcaster aiming to show it could produce quality television as well as popular fare. I will show how the default association of ‘quality television’ with masculine interests and values (see Imre 2009) leads ITV into risk-averse scheduling decisions where contemporary female-orientated comedy-drama series are concerned, which ultimately reinforce traditional notions of scheduling and programme quality just at a time when the company was avowing its attempt to be innovative in such matters.

Much of ITV’s output targets a female demographic: a 2006 interview with its then director of drama, Laura Mackie, states that ‘ITV1 will still be targeting the core female skewed, middle aged audience while trying to add on the elusive 16-34 year olds and men’ (Elliott 2006: 20). This statement is telling in conveying that while middle-aged women are a key demographic, broadcasters aspire to reach other, arguably more prestigious audiences, and this tension in the way particular kinds of programming are handled is one of the issues I will explore here. Female audiences have always been key targets for commercial broadcasters (Imre 2009: 392); however, while there is now a body of scholarly analysis of ‘feminine’ productions and genres, such as soap opera and, more recently, reality television formats, there is still a significant amount of television made for mainstream audiences which has not been critically examined, but which nevertheless plays a role in the public perception of what is being represented, as well as in the identity of its broadcaster (see Moseley and Wheatley 2008; Kay 2014, among others), and the series discussed here fit that description. Bennett’s (2006) use of Bourdieu to explain how prestige is attributed to particular TV genres demonstrates the gendered basis of much cultural distinction. Women tend to be regarded as a commercially necessary target audience, but a denigrated audience in cultural and critical terms (as discussed in Modleski 2008; Williamson 2005 and others) and the case studies

examined here show how an institution in crisis reverts to convention in treating female-orientated programmes as either simply commercial or potentially risky and problematic, to the detriment not only of the series themselves but arguably to ITV's own stated ambitions and future development.

While the television industry has conventionally regarded summer as a time of year requiring little originality or creativity and with low levels of engagement from viewers, in print fiction, summer has been seen quite differently, as a season for which particular products can be marketed and which is likely to involve a conscious investment by audiences. This is centred on what is commonly referred to as 'beach reading', encapsulating the expectation that readers will be taking time off, unwinding on holiday, and reading something relaxing, engrossing and entertaining. Similar logic applies in the film industry with its notion of the 'summer blockbuster', which is again the focus of considerable investment and expectation from producers and audiences. While this focus may be on entertainment rather than artistry or intellectual stimulation, audiences are expected to have enthusiasm for summer film or fiction offerings, in a way that is not associated with summer television, where a lack of effort on the industry's part seems largely to be accepted.

My focus here is on television productions that attempt to appeal to the useful but lightly esteemed mainstream female audience. These tend to incorporate quirky visual elements that are less often associated with a mainstream aesthetic (such as fantasy, non-realist scenes), and to centre on the thematic elements of the female-focused narratives that rose to popularity during the 1990s and early 2000s, which usually depict the relationship dilemmas of sexually active women in an urban environment, as exemplified by *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding, 1996) in print fiction and HBO's *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) on television. Two series of this kind, *Jane Hall* (2006) and *Monday Monday* (2009), were

broadcast in the United Kingdom during the summer period, in spite of being trailed and promoted as exciting new drama productions in the weekday prime-time slot of 9 p.m.; another, *Mister Eleven* (2009), was broadcast during the Christmas run-up. All these series underperformed relative to expectations, and therefore we might ask whether the summer broadcast slot allocated to *Jane Hall* and *Monday Monday* played a significant part in this underperformance, and how *Mister Eleven*'s underperformance (given that it was broadcast in a different holiday season, in the Christmas run-up) might complicate or complement that hypothesis. To explore this question, I will examine the activities of ITV during this period, considering critics' reviews and media commentary about the reception of selected series, ITV's own annual reports on its own performance, and audience responses gathered from viewer forums and online reviews of these series. These show that while seasonal performance appears to be a factor in the shows' reception, it is one that cannot be extricated from the generic and gendered identities of the shows; indeed, what emerges is that poor seasonal scheduling and performance seems to be closely linked with the shows' identities as feminine products which fit uncomfortably into the commercial feminine mainstream from which ITV profits, since they are shaped by the industry discourses about them into appearing to be unworthy of more prestigious, 'masculine' scheduling.

### **Female-focused television, innovation and the mainstream**

In the wake of the success of chick-lit print fictions like *Bridget Jones's Diary* and the popularity of HBO's *Sex and the City* and Fox's *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002), appropriating their model for further television productions beyond the United States was an attractive proposition. However, British attempts at creating similar narratives for television met with

mixed responses. One example was *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married* (1999) an adaptation of Marian Keyes' 1997 novel, produced as a sixteen-part half-hour ITV series and first shown in 1999. It did not gain a substantial audience in its 10.30 p.m. slot, and when shown again in an early evening slot in 2001, even though edited, audience complaints were received about its sexual content, which included a lesbian storyline. The complaints and the continued failure of the series to attract an audience proved insurmountable and *Lucy Sullivan* was withdrawn. Its failure demonstrates two things: first, the challenge of including sexual content and themes in a mainstream show without being judged to have exceeded boundaries of taste. This was something that subscription broadcasters like HBO are in a better position to do than ITV, which operates under the constraints of not only having to meet public service broadcasting obligations (which continue, even though those obligations have been reduced in recent years) and of being a mainstream commercial broadcaster with an intended heterogeneous audience and a family-friendly reputation to maintain. Second, it shows how difficult it can be for a series to succeed in the face of badly judged scheduling. In a television landscape increasingly featuring shows with more frank representations of female sexuality and humour that reflected post-feminist lifestyles and concerns (see Genz 2009; Gill 2007; Negra 2009, and others) British television seemed uncertain in its attempts to make use of the formula and how to position such shows; in a number of instances, they were ultimately aligned with the similarly disregarded summer season, as will be seen, further reinforcing the issues with contemporary female-orientated content that does not easily fit the mainstream mould established as successful for ITV.

Furthermore, a key factor affecting all the case studies to be discussed here is the postponement of a clutch of shows originally commissioned by ITV at the beginning of its life as a unified company. A number of drama productions were indefinitely shelved between

2004 and 2009; in 2004, it was reported that ITV had suffered a ‘fall in impacts across its trading audiences’ and that it ‘will need a strong autumn to avoid a year-on-year decline in ad revenue’ (Lee 2004) and therefore it can be assumed that postponed series had been dismissed as not up to this task. After outlining my case studies, I will discuss the institutional background to this situation, and examine the implications of this focus on ‘drama’ of particular kinds as the route to success.

### **Delayed dramas: Context and reception**

The first case study, *Jane Hall*, starred Sarah Smart as the eponymous Jane. Smart had previously appeared in another ITV comedy-drama series, *At Home with the Braithwaites* (2000–2003), which was also written by Sally Wainwright. A well-regarded screenwriter and playwright, who has since had further critical and popular success with the BBC1 blackly comic police drama *Happy Valley* (2014–), Wainwright wrote the autobiographical *Jane Hall* specifically with Smart in mind as the lead actress (McNulty 2006). The production aimed to be comic and quirky, in the manner of Wainwright’s and Smart’s earlier work, but makes central use of the key themes of romance and self-actualization seen in recent female-focused comedy-romance narratives. Jane is lacking in confidence, living with her parents in a northern town (Huddersfield), and having difficulty finding a job, boyfriend or sense of direction for her life. She decides to change her life completely, moving to London and taking up a job as the driver of a red London bus, the starting point for meeting new friends and potential partners and experiencing various comic disasters. Having been commissioned and produced in 2004, then rescheduled for autumn 2005, it was eventually screened in summer 2006, with the first episode of six airing at 9 p.m. on 12 July 2006. It had already

been screened in New Zealand in April 2006 on TV One, receiving good viewing figures and a largely positive reception from viewers (Anon. 2006).<sup>3</sup> However, its initial, fairly positive reception in the United Kingdom (its first episode [drew 4.1 million viewers and a 20% audience share \(Deans 2006\)](#)) was ITV's fifth highest rated programme that week [BARB 2006]) worsened during the series' run, and a second series was not commissioned ([Conlon 2006](#)).-

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The second of the delayed series, *Monday Monday*, was an ensemble comedy-drama about Butterworths supermarket and its staff relocating to Leeds, with various female characters experiencing life crises, including Christine Frances, head of human resources (played by popular actress Fay Ripley) and her PA, Sally Newman. It had been advertised in ITV's Winter 2007 publicity materials, but was then postponed, eventually being shown in July and August 2009. Writers Ben Edwards and Rachel New were then a new team but had worked on *Shameless* (2004–2013), a well-regarded Channel 4 drama series about a working-class community, and since then on the comedy-dramas *New Tricks* (2003–2015) and *Stella* (2012–). Like *Jane Hall*, *Monday Monday* received a lukewarm initial reception – 3.7 million, second in its slot but down on ITV's average of 5.6 million for 2009 in the slot (Roberts 2009) – that also declined during its run, but it nevertheless managed to reach an international audience, being shown in Australia in January 2011.

The third series examined here, the two-part *Mister Eleven*, was left in limbo for eighteen months from its production in 2008, eventually to be shown during the pre-Christmas season, on 11 and 18 December 2009. Like *Jane Hall*, its creative credentials were good, being written by *Shameless* writer Amanda Coe. While the Christmas period overall is considered a better slot for gaining viewers, the Friday 9 p.m. slot in which *Mister Eleven* aired is not, as Fridays are considered as an evening when viewers are more likely to be out

(thus prestigious shows are usually aired in a midweek slot). It was more negatively reviewed after its first episode than either *Monday Monday* or *Jane Hall*, and though as a stand-alone two-part series renewal was not an issue, expectations for its performance had been higher. The series had been widely previewed in the media as a return to British television for two former stars of the British soap opera *EastEnders* (1985–), Michelle Ryan and Sean Maguire, both of whom had recently been in US series such as *Bionic Woman* (2007), *Eve* (2003–2006) and *The Class* (2006–2007). *Mister Eleven* was based on the concept that research apparently shows women most often marry their eleventh sexual partner and depicts Saz Paley, a maths teacher, trying to engineer this for herself.

#### **ITV in crisis: Quality, branding and the balance sheet**

The delayed screenings of these shows should be seen in the context of an increasing sense of crisis at ITV for much of the first decade of the twenty-first century. This was the period in which a final merger between Carlton and Granada in 2004 marked the culmination of ITV's transformation from a network of regional franchises held by separate operators, into a single corporate entity, ITV plc, in 2004. As if this change was not significant enough, this period involved the disaster of ITV's venture into digital television,<sup>4</sup> increased competition from other commercial broadcasters, principally BSkyB, managerial chaos and mistrust, and as the backdrop to all other issues, the worldwide economic downturn affecting advertising revenue. Consequently, ITV's decisions and actions both represent, and respond to, volatility in the commercial television sector. The company was often reacting to sudden shifts during this time, while also attempting to build a long-term strategy under its new corporate identity. Advertising revenues dropped by £50m for ITV1 in 2005, prompting takeover speculation early in the new company's history; however, results for 2005 showed a 42% rise in operating profit and halving of its pension deficit (BBC News 2006a). In 2006, profits rose

by 36%, though advertising revenue was reported as falling by 3.3% on ITV1. (BBC News 2006b). Similar shifts continued during the next five years, which proved to be a transitional phase in several senses, including financial, strategic and in terms of identity.

ITV's aim at this point was both to adjust to its economic difficulties by accomplishing significant savings, and to enhance its programming reputation. This twin aspiration resulted in the cutting of many well-known series in order to 'refresh' its offering and in pursuit of better value – which seemed to mean longer-term runs and higher-prestige series that would attract critical regard as well as viewer affection. Simon Shaps, then ITV director of television, spoke in May 2006 of taking 'painful but necessary steps' in dropping certain programmes 'which, by the criteria of most of our competitors, are still performing incredibly well' in order to refocus on 'contemporary, less predictable work' that demonstrated ITV as being about 'more than cop shows and period detectives' (BBC News 2006c). Shaps referred to this as 'a kind of clause IV moment' for ITV; in other words, one that would change one of the inherent characteristics of the organization.<sup>5</sup> In June 2006 ITV made a further announcement that it was scaling back its drama production, emphasizing that this would involve cutting back productions of one- or two-part dramas to concentrate on long-running series. Consequently, series like *Jane Hall*, *Monday Monday* and *Mister Eleven* were downgraded as priorities for the new ITV.

An important element in the fate of these shows is the issue of regionality. ITV was initially conceived as a commercial broadcaster whose power would be limited, and commitments to its various audiences made secure, by its structure of separately operated regional franchises, an arrangement that lasted until the last of a series of mergers created ITV plc in 2004. Liarou has noted that 'historically, the regional structure of ITV gave writers an incentive to aim at popular audiences and address working-class audience groups'

(2012: 617) but in spite of ITV restating at intervals its continued commitment to regional production and programming, this shift had a noticeable effect during the early years of ITV plc, with the broadcaster reconfigured as a national network and brand. In 2002 ITV was pledging to increase its spending on regional production and to invest long-term in regional production companies (Anon. 2002: 11). Yet by 2006, it had announced that it was seeking £100 million in savings and that this would affect regional programming (Elliott 2006: 20). In 2009 ITV decided to close its Yorkshire studios, with the production arm and in particular the Leeds centre bearing the brunt of job cuts (Holmwood 2009) having concluded that it could not afford to run two operational centres in the north of England (Manchester, home of the iconic *Coronation Street* [1960–], was the survivor). Consequently, while ITV has reiterated its desire to support regional production in recent years, strategic decisions driven by economic misfortune have hollowed out this commitment, and both these manoeuvres can be traced in the performance and reception of the series discussed.

*Jane Hall* featured a visual emblem that gave it a clear regional identity in the London red bus – ironically, this was a factor that led to its delay in being screened in Britain. Its original title had been *Jane Hall's Big Bad Bus Ride*, but after the London terrorist attacks of 7 July 2005, when the image of the badly damaged London bus bombed on Tavistock Square became an iconic image of the attacks, this was felt to be potentially insensitive and so the title was shortened for British broadcast to simply *Jane Hall*. *Monday Monday* also has a clear regional identity rooted in its premise that the characters have relocated with the company to a town in northern Britain. It seems to be less distinctively located than *Jane Hall*; however, Tim Walker's *Independent* review of *Monday Monday* observed that the show was filled with shots of Leeds, and stated that the show was ‘advertising it as an attractive nightlife destination’ or ‘to prove beyond doubt that ITV was fulfilling its obligations to the

regions', ironically in the same year that saw the closure of the Leeds ITV studios (2009). This particular regional identity, though, seems less likely than a London-based one to make it internationally saleable, a factor that could ameliorate a relatively disappointing UK reception. *Mister Eleven* was read by many reviewers as a 'homecoming' narrative for its stars and a chance to see Michelle Ryan back in London, though in a more glamorous version than that of her *EastEnders* past. However, its London setting is less visually distinctive or recognizable than either *Jane Hall's* or the Leeds setting of *Monday Monday*; arguably the return of its stars from Hollywood provided this link to a sense of place and national identity, rather than the setting, and it was not screened internationally. Clearly, though, a regional identity remained important in the concept and commissioning of these ITV dramas and in some instances compensated for its seasonal displacement.

### **Genre, gender and cultural capital**

Of paramount importance, though, in the treatment of these shows – and thus their seasonal positioning – were the intertwined defining issues of gender and genre, with their attributed characteristics and expected audience strongly influencing institutional attitudes to them. Tony Bennett's work is useful here: Bennett uses Bourdieu's concepts of distinction and cultural capital in his work on broadcasting to examine the attribution of taste to television viewing choices (2006: 194). ITV has been historically low in cultural capital (see Johnson and Turnock 2005, among others) and by virtue of their genre and gendered position, so are the specific shows examined here. Bennett's work uncovers the 'strong role that gender plays in organising television preferences' (2006: 197), evidenced by men and women showing their strongest *dislike* for the genre strongly preferred by the other gender – respectively,

sport and soap operas. Johnson (2009) notes that ITV ‘traditionally does badly in summer’, which may be an additional dimension of ITV’s low cultural capital in comparison to the BBC; presumably the BBC’s reputation as a high-quality, trusted public service broadcaster makes its viewing figures more resistant to the overall summer slump. In considering institutions, ITV itself could be read as ‘feminine’ if viewed as being in binary opposition to the BBC (as it was for many years in the ‘cosy duopoly’ era of British television when they were the only broadcasters) with the BBC as provider of quality, rationally chosen programming versus ITV’s identity as appealing to the mass market and to consumer-led preferences. With regard to gender, Bennett’s research supports the established association, as observed by many feminist critics and cultural theorists, between feminine consumption and the lower standards of the mass market (see Modleski 2008, among others) but it also shows gender and genre associations as frequently interlinked.

Drama, however, represents an interesting and complex aspect of the findings on genre. Bennett’s analysis shows that drama has high cultural capital (2006: 201), and in critical discussions it often evokes references to highly regarded television milestones such as *Play for Today* (1970–1984). Yet ‘drama’ productions vary widely in content, theme and approach and the label can be applied in a very elastic manner; for instance, in 2007 ITV2 described their reality series *Katie and Peter: The Next Chapter* (2007–2008) as ‘drama’. It is common for dramas to be particularly ‘feminine’ in tone by focusing on issues (such as relationships or family crises) that are conventionally domestic and female-interest, and/or featuring a predominantly female cast. Comedy has also historically been regarded as a ‘lower’ form of narrative (see Stott 2005; Neale and Krutnik 1990, among others) and Bennett’s findings bear this out. Comedy-drama as a hybrid label is able to convey the qualities of such productions as being akin to romantic comedies on film, while making a

claim for greater cultural legitimacy and critical regard. This is assisted by such productions typically being scheduled in the 9 p.m. slot, used for drama of various kinds and other well-regarded genres such as documentaries, crime and thrillers. Nevertheless, it does little to secure a place in the more prestigious sections of seasonal scheduling, autumn and winter: while highly anticipated, critically acclaimed drama is very likely to be screened in those seasons, comedy-drama is seen as a much more disposable product, and this is marked by a double bind where it is seen as convenient low-season content, yet is also considered to be seasonally responsive and prone to becoming ‘out of date’, as we shall see. However, the qualities that make it seasonal or ephemeral are never defined, and are hard to distinguish from those found in other series. I would argue that these terms are commonly applied as a way of denigrating a programme’s cultural capital, rather than a description of this as an already completed judgement: they act, in short, as discourse, constructing these series as failures in the act of describing them.

The shared low cultural capital, then, of comedy, female-focused drama, ITV and summer-scheduled content, meant that it was always unlikely that the series discussed here would be highly regarded; it might even be expected that reviews might be shaped by assumptions about such programmes rather than their actual qualities. However, the tone of media coverage of these series shifts after transmission. As I noted earlier, a number of factors that countermanded such a judgement were prominent in media previews of these programmes: notably, the presence of well-regarded actors and screenwriters, and the use of interesting narrative concepts or innovations. In post-broadcast articles and reviews, though, the tone is either equivocal or, later, outright negative, suggesting that the series were simply not excelling in quality. It is particularly interesting, though, that these series’ status as delayed, ‘unseasonal’ productions is frequently commented on by audiences in online

discussions, and also in professional reviews. Mike Ward's *Daily Star* review of *Mister Eleven* sees the entire production through this lens:

What's weird about Michelle Ryan's new comedy-drama *Mister Eleven* is it's been sat gathering dust at ITV for about a year and a half. Finally getting around to showing it on Friday night was the telly equivalent of using up an old microwave chicken tikka that's been festering in the back of your fridge for God knows how long. Way past its use-by date but, hey, a pity to waste it, right...? (2009)

The comedy-drama is seen as easy to delay, yet also seen as having a sell-by date. This is the kind of judgement more readily used to criticize comedy; while both comedy and drama can be approvingly deemed 'classic', comedy is more likely to be considered out-of-date, whereas drama is likely to get plaudits for being topical which will be translated into faithfully reflecting its time at a later date. Ward also brings an industry perspective to the review, noting that the Friday before Christmas is 'hardly the time to start showing a top-quality new series. Far better to dig out a bit of a duffer you're a teensy bit embarrassed by – and hope its high-profile star can at least pull you in a reasonably respectable audience' (2009). This reflects a number of issues relevant to series like these: the expectation that their quality will be questionable, the importance of star names and lead actors, and broadcasters' perceived need to use seasonal viewing habits to their advantage and be shrewd in their scheduling. The remainder of this article will contextualize the issues Ward's review raises

around stars, seasonality, and the significance of delay, as being themselves part of a strongly gendered approach to evaluating the possible risks and rewards of commissioning and scheduling drama and comedy-drama productions that is indicated by ITV's actions during this period.

As it happened, ITV had been strategic in their decision to delay these series' transmission, though that decision was based not on the advantageous positive reception of the programmes, but on the advantage to the all-important balance sheet. ITV does not include the cost of a programme in its accounts until that programme has been screened (Ernst and Young 2015: 1263), meaning that in a troubled financial period, programmes deemed less time-sensitive than others, such as short-run drama series, can be postponed until it is felt that the corporate balance can accommodate their costs without a worrying loss being recorded. During the turbulent period of 2004–2009, this happened repeatedly, with the series discussed here being affected among many others (McMahon 2009). Seasonality, then, is important in the overall strategic approach to programming and scheduling; however, these case studies show that the importance of seasonal scheduling is subject to two other key factors: the cultural capital attributed to this (type of) production, and the broadcaster's overall financial situation. While operating in a particularly hostile financial environment, ITV were effectively forced to make decisions about which of their productions could be shelved: seasonality during this period then became one of the factors in a policy of damage limitation, where the low-prestige summer period and other dates when audiences were also expected to be low (such as the pre-Christmas Friday night slot eventually given to *Mister Eleven*) were allocated to dramas that needed to be 'used up', having posed some kind of difficulty that prevented them being aired at the time originally planned. For *Jane Hall*, its original title and potential links to a traumatic event provided an additional complication, but

the length of these delays, I would argue, is more indicative of cultural capital attributed to their gender, genre and seasonal positions, all of which are governed by commercial imperatives.

### **Critical, institutional and audience responses**

Viewers' contemporaneous responses to these series are informative. My research has drawn these from Digital Spy, a UK-based website hosting information and discussion on a wide range of popular media which features a large number of discussion threads on various television series, and Moopy, another UK-based site primarily about music, but which also hosts discussions of popular media in general. Of interest for my discussion are the comments that engage with issues of seasonality, delayed transmission, and institutional identity as affecting series performance.

The seasonal effect on *Jane Hall*'s performance was noted, with viewers complaining about the probability of it being shifted around to accommodate summer sporting events (as it was, mid-run, to show a Champions' League football match) and noting the uphill battle to gain respectable viewing figures at this time of year: 'That has to be okay for a hot summer week [3.9 million viewers]' (Jaycee Dove, 16 July 2006) and 'This crazy summer heatwave is sending ratings all over the shop' (BringBackThames 2006). Comments also show the series suffering in competition with summer stalwarts of reality television that had a loyal following: 'I won't be watching Jane Hall as Big Brother comes first for me' (magicmover 2006). *Monday Monday* is likewise seen as being subject to the challenge of the season: 'Don't know how a drama like this will fair [*sic*] – it could flop with it airing in the Summer'

(D.M.N. 2009). When it emerged that *Jane Hall* would not be renewed, viewers noted the disservice done to it by its scheduling: ‘Why axe Jane Hall and [...] shows that regularly appeal to unique audiences [...] Half the time, it’s where you put it!’ (Millar 2007).

It is also notable that forum commenters are aware of the ‘delayed’ status of these series and that this impacts on reception. Before the first episode of *Jane Hall* aired, one comment stated:

I’m watching it although I’ve not got much faith in it considering ITV had it on the shelf for 2 years. I can see ITV messing around with it in a few weeks to lose more audience to satisfy the advertisers. (Lakeuk 2006)

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Likewise, both the choice of slot and the delayed transmission are cited as reasons for *Mister Eleven*’s poor performance:

Is it just me, or can you often easily pick out the dramas that have been sat on the shelf a while. ‘Mister Eleven’ – in a low key Friday night slot – reeked of being a bit crap and [not] expected to do anything. (Smexy 2009)

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However, other commenters are aware of the industrial discourse around delays, but without fully subscribing to it themselves: ‘All the press really hammered Mister Eleven and made a big deal of it being held back but to be honest I wouldn’t have known. I really do have a rubbish radar for rubbish drama’ (Jark 2009). This supports my contention that the ‘out-of-date’ label is a self-fulfilling prophecy which reflects industry discourse about these series rather than their inherent qualities or their homogenous reception by viewers.

The final point of interest from viewer comments is their awareness of not only industrial discourses around the shows, but also the role that institutional identity can play in reception, with one *Jane Hall* viewer commenting: ‘Had this been on BBC or everyone’s darling Channel 4 then everyone would say what a triumph it was, because its ITV1 its not going to get a chance’ [sic] (Rubberymonkey<sup>2</sup> 2006). ITV’s reputation as a more populist, mainstream and arguably downmarket broadcaster is perceived as decisive here in a way that fits with its historically documented identity (see, e.g., Ellis 2005; Freedman 1999; Hand 2007). This notion of an institution trying to forge a new identity for itself in the wake of significant internal organizational change, and wider structural change within the sector, is evidenced by ITV’s own corporate communications, to which I will now turn.

It is instructive to consider the public presentation by ITV of its own performance during the period when these comedy-dramas were produced and broadcast. Between 2004 and 2009, an increasingly embattled ITV made its way through the first years of its operation as a unified commercial entity against a backdrop of falling advertising revenue and audience share, changes in top-level management and continuing concerns about adapting to the new digital environment. These issues are naturally presented in the best possible light in the company’s key public-facing documents, its annual reports and business reviews, but ITV’s comments in its annual reports on its priorities, successes, and changes in strategy illuminate

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the notions of ‘prestige’ and ‘quality’ that are at play in relation to the case studies examined here. Drama, established through Bennett’s analysis as having high prestige in television programming, is prominently discussed in each annual report as a leading element of ITV’s offering. I noted earlier that the prestige of drama reciprocally reinforces that of the 9 p.m. weekday slot, and in ITV’s 2006 annual report this slot is mentioned as critical to overcoming weaknesses in performance: ‘We must be ahead of audience tastes. In particular, we must regain our pre-eminence in drama series on ITV1 at 9.00pm’ (2007: 2). This connects the notion of showing ‘creative ambition’ (2007: 2) and leading, rather than following, audience tastes, with demonstrating pre-eminence in this key drama slot. It is also notable that drama launches are referred to as ‘winter’ events if any seasonal reference is made (2010: 6), reinforcing its associations with the most highly regarded aspects of the schedule and of TV production values more broadly. A final point of note are the references to the ITV ‘family of channels’, with each of the additional three channels targeting a particular demographic, with ITV2 ‘aimed at a younger, mainly female audience’ (2006: 12). ITV2’s content adheres very strongly to Bennett’s findings on the gendering of television genres and the lower levels of cultural capital attributed to feminine genres (see Knowles [2013] for a fuller discussion of this with regard to ITV2), which both reinforces this association, and, I would argue, leaves ITV1 as the channel now notably aiming to achieve higher cultural capital, which it aims to do through drama – and through configuring drama as often masculine by default. Even in dramas where women are lead protagonists, the tactics described by MacPherson (2007) where such content is ‘masculinized’ by employing elements and aesthetics associated with ‘quality television’ are in evidence, thus continuing to configure appeal to ‘television’s feminine pleasures’ (Imre 2009: 393) as something which is other to well-regarded drama.

It is notable that the dramas named as strong performers in ITV’s reports do not often correspond with the values that earn drama as a genre its cultural capital: the most often cited

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successes are ITV's soap operas, primarily *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale* (1972–).

These, along with high-profile entertainment series such as *The X Factor* (2004–), are named as examples of 2005 being a 'strong year in drama and entertainment' (2006: 4). These are also programmes ITV refers to repeatedly as its 'banker shows' (2004: 3). Such shows correspond to Bennett's findings on television, taste, genre and gender in being seen as having feminine appeal and low cultural capital. In contrast, the dramas ITV single out in their annual reports for praise tend to fall into known subgenres in being either detective or crime dramas, historically based, or adaptations of fictional classics, such as the new version of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (2007: 7) and Agatha Christie's *(Miss) Marple* (2005: 15). Dramas like this, I would argue, tend to have well-established audience appeal, prestige derived from the cultural capital attributed to literary and historical programming, or both.

Contemporary comedy-dramas such as *Jane Hall*, *Monday Monday* and *Mister Eleven* do not benefit from these factors; in fact, rather than packaging these female-focused comedy-dramas as daring content from a forward-thinking brand (as with *Sex and the City* and HBO), under pressure, ITV effectively concedes to the stereotype that they should be dismissed as unable to offer quality or innovation, and thus they are consigned to the filler slots of a run in summer, or, in the case of *Mister Eleven*, the nights before Christmas when audiences are expected to be out socializing, rather than at home to watch.

Lez Cooke notes that ITV's 'significant' contribution to social issue drama in the 1990s was reversed after 2002, 'with ITV becoming more conservative in the wake of its consolidation into one large company' (2015: 228). That effect can certainly be seen in its need to manage difficult market conditions; while risks were still being taken, it seems that some types of programming were seen as risk-worthy and others were written off, and seasonal positioning is a way of identifying these programmes. Unlike Fox and other US networks, ITV has never seriously considered a change in its approach to summer scheduling

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as a period from which very little can be expected. In spite of its mid-2000s executive chair Michael Grade identifying ‘lack of innovation in our programming’ (2006: 1) as one of ITV’s key problems, and the annual reports of this time clearly articulating ITV’s fear of being ‘out of date’, ironically, ITV shows itself to be highly susceptible to being driven by that fear to take the opposite approach during various phases of pressure and to retreat into conservatism in its strategic management of programming and scheduling, as well as in productions themselves.

Such decisions have wider implications than merely the short to medium-term commercial performance of ITV. It is a broadcaster that stakes a claim to embody the notion of the mainstream in British television, and which commissions drama ‘which can deliver the highest quality popular mainstream drama to the largest audience’ (ITV plc 2014) and as such it has an ability to shape common perceptions of the way that seasonal scheduling contributes to the attribution of cultural capital to TV programming and the way these perceptions can be absorbed as norms. Female-focused generic hybrid productions are judged accordingly, and their contested status as drama, only part of a hybrid label, cannot fully overcome this. Consequently, the seasonal scheduling decisions that are often presented as the outcome of the self-evident ‘out of date’ status of productions are, as I have argued, more indicative of the cultural capital attributed on the basis of the interlinked notions of genre and gender that Bennett sets out, reinforcing the role of female-focused productions as significant only in commercial terms, and as unworthy bearers of risk in a challenging environment. The gendered expectation that they will be low-status, poorly performing productions thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in the form of institutional strategy.

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### **Television programmes**

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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Friedman’s article describes the Fox channel’s 2004 break with scheduling tradition in commissioning five new shows to run in the summer season, stating that Fox’s ‘gamble that viewers would seek out fresh network summer programming hasn’t won any big hands yet’ (2004: 23), with audience share dropping 18 per cent in Nielsen ratings in comparison to the previous summer. He also notes that ‘this summer network reruns have often done better than the originals’, which suggests it is an active advantage to schedule previously shown content in summer.

<sup>2</sup> Independent Television or, as it has usually been known, ITV, is a British television broadcaster that began operating in 1955 as the United Kingdom’s first ever commercial broadcaster, breaking the monopoly of the BBC which had been in place since 1926. ITV was originally set up as a franchise of fourteen different regional networks, but over time this has been consolidated until in 2004 the remaining networks merged to form ITV plc. It has

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also historically been subject to public service broadcasting requirements, which have obliged it to include particular kinds of programming in its schedule, although these obligations have been progressively lightened since 1990.

<sup>3</sup> This positive reception seems to come from a general appreciation of, and willingness to attribute prestige to, UK comedy/drama productions by Australasian viewers. It is also often the case that such productions are screened in a different season to the United Kingdom showing, so that the April screening of *Jane Hall* made it part of the autumn season (a more highly regarded slot) rather than the summer season in which ITV eventually broadcast it.

<sup>4</sup> In 1998 ITV launched a digital subscription TV service (initially ONDigital, rebranded as ITV Digital in 2001) that aimed to rival the commercial satellite broadcaster British Sky Broadcasting (known as BSB and, later, Sky). However, the venture was beset by poor management, lack of external expertise, disagreements over investments, problems with its signal and software, and a muddled articulation of the service's offering. After suffering huge financial losses, ITV Digital entered administration in March 2002 and stopped broadcasting altogether in June 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Shaps's reference is to the Labour Party in Britain voting in 1995 to abolish Clause IV of its constitution, a commitment to nationalizing important industries which was considered to be a defining, socialist element of the party's identity.