

Taste, Standards and 'Public Service' Comedy in the 1970s and 1980s

Heather Sutherland

The notion of 'the popular' provokes many different reactions, not least in debates regarding the nature of 'high' and 'low' culture. Within British broadcasting, and particularly in the case of the BBC, there exists an enduring contradiction. Popular programming has been generally disregarded and dismissed as 'low brow', yet broadcasting institutions cannot survive without it. This presentation stems from my PhD research, conducted three years ago, which examined how the BBC approached the idea of popularity through the workings of its Television Light Entertainment Group in the 1970s and 1980s. The Corporation faced a multitude of pressures during the years under review; indeed the title for Volume VI of the official history of the BBC, the project to which my research was attached, *'The BBC Under Siege'* highlights this. Seaton, for instance, clearly identifies that these were years in which the idea of 'public service broadcasting' was 'strongly challenged',¹ ultimately making life 'uncomfortable' for broadcasters who had previously 'taken 'public service' for granted'. The main concern 'became not merely what the BBC did, but whether it would survive at all'. My thesis aimed to consider the question 'what actual difference did the broader political climate make at the programme end of the machine?' In particular, how did this 'cost conscious, competitive and highly politicised atmosphere of the 1980s'² impact upon the operation and development of Light Entertainment and Comedy within BBC TV? This presentation is going to concentrate on one particular aspect of that research – namely the handling of taste and standards in comedy programming.

Attitude and Pride

As Ed Harris states, 'Taste and Decency is a very 'BBC' type category'³ The BBC has always prided itself on the high standard of its programmes, as former Director-General Michael Checkland emphasised in 1987; 'The BBC has always been concerned that its programmes should reflect good taste, and insisted that its programme makers should preserve the highest standards.'⁴ The difficulty came in the need for the BBC to provide entertainment in order to fulfil its promise to 'inform, educate *and entertain*.' With regard to Light Entertainment and Comedy specifically, there have always been questions surrounding aspects of taste, due to the irreverent nature of much entertainment content⁵

¹ Curran, J. and Seaton, J. (1997). *Power Without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain*. Fifth Edition. London: Routledge. p.209.

² Barnett, Steven., Curry, Andrew and Chalmers, Alan G. (1994). *The Battle for the BBC: A British Broadcasting Conspiracy?* London: Aurum. p.10.

³ Harris, Ed (2002) *Not in Front of the Telly; 75 years of the BBC's Complaints Department*. Polperro Press. Pg.159.

⁴ Morris, Colin (1987). *Drawing the Line: Taste and Standards in BBC Programmes*. BBC Books. Michael Checkland. Foreword.

⁵ From the outset of BBC Light Entertainment production, the staff members of the Variety department, in producing programmes for radio, found strict rules affected their work. Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff described how, in the early days; "The BBC forbade jokes containing references to politics and politicians, advertisements, drink and prohibition in the United States, clergymen, medical matters and human infirmities, Scotsmen and Welshmen but not apparently Irishmen"(Scannell/Cardiff: 1991: 226-7). With the advent of television, new problems arose. Each new 'landmark' entertainment series has raised eyebrows in some way; James Moir, former head of Variety and Light Entertainment, raised the example of the use of " 'bloodies' and 'bleedin' s' in *Step toe and Son*", commenting that these words may seem, "mild now but at that time, heaven's"(interview with author 11/03/05) Mrs Mary Whitehouse, founder of the National Viewer and Listeners' Association, had a particular vendetta against *Till Death Us Do Part*, mainly due to the use of bad language. During the 1960s in particular, under Sir Hugh Carleton Greene as Director-General, the

and the highly subjective nature of humour. For the Light Entertainment Group, issues of taste and standards were often confused with general opinion of the genre, which tended to be low in some quarters of the Corporation. However, despite such questions surrounding aspects of taste, the BBC always accepted that, despite being a less than respected genre, light entertainment programmes should be produced to the same high standard of those in News, Current Affairs etc. Indeed, Bill Cotton, former Head of Light Entertainment and Controller of BBC1, has stated that the BBC's biggest achievement was that 'it applied to popular contemporary entertainment the same values it applied to everything else.'⁶ The feeling of the BBC with regard to standards was summed up by a statement made by a member of the Board of Governors commenting on Light Entertainment; 'if the BBC, with its public service responsibility, did not maintain those standards, who would?'⁷

Concern for taste and standards in comedy was of paramount importance because of the seemingly direct relationship between 'falling standards', the Corporation's reputation and, ultimately, its survival. During the late 1970s and into the 1980's the BBC was facing a 'culture of complaint' within Britain.⁸ For example, it was reluctantly admitted that support for Mr Mary Whitehouse had increased at this point.⁹ The National Viewer and Listeners' Association and Mrs Whitehouse continued to voice concerns regarding how the Corporation controlled taste within programmes. For example, following an edition of the *Dave Allen Show* on Boxing Day 1979, Mary Whitehouse wrote to the producers complaining that the humour was 'crude and vulgar and thoroughly irreverent',¹⁰ and had led to 'an unusually large number of complaints' from her fellow NVLA members. In essence, taste and standards were felt to be 'a political problem'¹¹ and whilst it was agreed that 'it was wrong to let political considerations influence programme judgements'¹², it was recognised that still 'surely the easiest target was bad language'. As a result, as the BBC's arguments with the Monty Python team over matters of taste demonstrate, the management staff stated that the BBC 'had a wider responsibility than to creative self-indulgence: the need to preserve its own freedom and independence.'¹³

However, this is not to say that the production of comedy in the BBC during these years

production of light entertainment had pushed every possible boundary, due to his wish to "open the windows...encourage enterprise and the taking of risks...to make the BBC a place where talent of all sorts, however unconventional was recognised and nurtured." (Greene: 1969: 13-4)

⁶ WAC R143/141/1 Bill Cotton, transcript of interview for the BBC Oral History Programme. 1988.

⁷ WAC Film No 8/9. Board of Governors Minutes 1983-9. Minute taking from Meeting held on 17th January 1985.

⁸ With organisations such as the National Viewer and Listeners Association, led by Mary Whitehouse, still voicing its concerns, it can be suggested that the BBC was facing a 'culture of complaint' in the early 1980s; the public did not hold back on their opinions if they disapproved of the BBC's programmes or policies. (In 1983 the 'Voice of the Listener' organisation was also formed by Jocelyn Hay in protest against Radio 4 being turned into an 'all news and current affairs network'. This again highlights that the listeners (and viewers) in the 1980s were aware of their rights (as viewers and listeners) and were willing to mobilise themselves against the BBC if they felt these rights had been violated. See <http://www.vlv.org.uk/vlvaboutuspg.html>).

⁹ BBC RAPIC B650 - 001 - 002. Editorial Control of Programmes General. Part 1 ??/10/62-31/12/86. R78/2572/1, Rapic 10084199. Paper G.133/78. Taste and Standards in Television Drama. 29th June 1978. Prepared for Board Meeting 6th July. Note sent prior to meeting on 29th June 1978 by Chairman Michael Swann. (Also held in B650-005-002 101224347 A0002221 Standards of Taste General Part 2 09/01/74 - 31/12/87).

¹⁰ N 829-3 10053795 R 78/2495/1 National Viewers and Listeners Association: Programme Criticism. Letter from Mary Whitehouse to Peter Whitmore (Producer *Dave Allen at Large*) 8th January 1980.

¹¹ BBC RAPIC B650-005-002 10124347 A0002221 Standards of Taste - General Part 2 09/01/74 - 31/12/87. Board of Governors Minutes of 6th July 1978. Minute 479, Taste and Standards in Television Drama. 'The Vice-Chairman added that the BBC had to solve not an aesthetic but a political problem, and the Board wanted the professionals' help in solving it'

¹² BBC RAPIC B650-005-002 10124347 A0002221 Standards of Taste - General Part 2 09/01/74 - 31/12/87. Board of Governors Minutes of 6th July 1978. Minute 479, Taste and Standards in Television Drama.

¹³ Hewison, Robert. (1981). *Irreverence, Scurrility, Profanity, Vilification and Licentious Abuse. Monty Python: The Case Against*. London: Eyre Methuen. Pg.25.

became overly curtailed by strict regulations. Indeed, protecting creativity in comedy was crucial to the maintenance of these programmes as 'public service offerings'. The need to maintain the reputation of the Corporation needed to be balanced with the need to be creative. Expanding on this argument, it was stated that within light entertainment in general, it was essential to 'maintain faith in the intelligence of the audience.... there must...be a place for comedy with a cutting edge, for otherwise comic invention and bright wit will soon deteriorate into blandness'.¹⁴ The need to experiment was also viewed as vital in competitive terms for, as Morris explained in 1986, within the BBC it would be considered disastrous 'if we filtered out all of our programmes the harsh realities to the point where the public began to regard the BBC as the Kiddie-Winks channel and turned to ITV for raw realism and red-blooded entertainment'.¹⁵ Defending the acceptability of the humour within some programmes therefore became essential. With reputation in mind, the BBC developed what it considered to be a scrupulous, meticulous manner in which it dealt with problems of taste in comedy. A little 'bad taste' was acceptable so long as the whole programme was of a high standard, but should there be any problems or doubt there was a series of checks and balances for the staff to go through.

The Production Process

The production of BBC Light Entertainment programmes is very much tied into the individuals who come into contact with them and according to Colin Morris, "The soundness of the producer's instinct has usually served both the BBC and the wider community well."¹⁶ Within the BBC, the Light Entertainment Group was not always awarded respect for its programmes. However, as James Moir, former Head of Variety and Light Entertainment, pointed out to me, 'It wasn't that it wasn't the most respected department, it was that entertainment as a *genre*, to some compared less favourably...[the] group...under some fairly legendary leaders...was deeply respected.'¹⁷ The BBC recognised that the *people* working within Light Entertainment could be relied upon to make good decisions with regard to taste. Staff members had their own code of practice relating to taste and the system of checks and balances that was in place was structured in such a way as to include the programme makers in decisions about their programmes; their opinions were respected.

According to a paper presented at a BBC General Advisory Council in 1982, 'The safeguards built into the production process are considerable. Producers work in close consultation with departmental management. Borderline material is recognised and discussed at an early stage...there is a reluctance to impose restrictions on writers and performers unless justification for doing so is substantial.'¹⁸ Management staff worked *with* Light Entertainment staff rather than impose any restrictions that would amount to a form of censorship.

¹⁴ BBC WAC R78/2551/1 General Entertainment Programmes Policy. The British Broadcasting Corporation General Advisory Council. Confidential Paper G.A.C 379. 1972. Light Entertainment: Television and Radio.

¹⁵ BBC RAPIC B650-005-002 Standards of Taste – General Part 2. 09/01/74 – 31/12/87 10124347 A0002221. BM(86). G108/86. By Dr Colin Morris. Essay: Taste and Standards in BBC Programmes: for discussion at the meeting of the GAC on 16th July 1986. p20.

¹⁶ Morris, Colin (1987). *Drawing the Line: Taste and Standards in BBC Programmes*. BBC Books. Pg.25.

¹⁷ James Moir, interview with author, 11th March 2005.

¹⁸ WAC R78/2551/1 General Entertainment Programme Policy. GAC Paper 631: Television Light Entertainment. 2nd August 1982. Pg.8

The method of 'upward referral' was used extensively in the production of what are now known as components of the 'Alternative Comedy Movement'. For example, 'Not the Nine O Clock News' was very much a team effort linking Light Entertainment Staff to Management. Brian Wenham, in his interview for the BBC Oral History Project in 1988, described the process in detail. He stated that John Howard Davies (as Head of Comedy and the first to commission 'Not the Nine O Clock News') was hesitant about attempting this type of topical programme, recalling the controversy created by 'That Was The Week That Was'. Concerns were discussed and a deal was struck. The process was adopted whereby Wenham viewed each programme, making alterations when he believed there was a lapse of taste, particularly if there had been an incident in the news, which may have affected the reaction of the audience to a sketch that at any other time would have had no problem. For example, the 'Ayatollah' song was cut by Wenham due to the April 1980 London Iranian Embassy siege occurring in the same week that the song was supposed to be broadcast; it was felt that the song could be too offensive for viewers, given the situation that had occurred. The song was eventually broadcast at the end of May 1980.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGBfYoldZQ4>

This was not a top-down censorship approach. Producers had no problem with this process; Paul Jackson commented that, 'the policy of referral upwards worked very well because people were...sensible and it was a trusting and shared environment.'¹⁹

Producers realised that they had a defence team in place should there be any protests regarding specific programmes. It was an active partnership between the programme makers and management staff, to ensure programmes were of the highest standard.

Nurture and Growth and Generation Gaps

Certainly within the BBC there was opposition to the new style of comedy appearing in the 1980s, and there was doubt as to whether the highest standards were being maintained. 'The Young Ones' experienced a lot of animosity, mainly due to a lack of understanding and knowledge about the age group for which the programme was intended. Paul Jackson was often called to justify sketches to his seniors, who, he recalls, 'were on their own admission too old to get this modern humour.'²⁰ The following comment made at a Board of Management meeting in 1984 certainly betrays the lack of appreciation for the programme; "the previous weeks' edition of 'The Young Ones' had certainly corresponded to its title 'Sick'.²¹ -

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r711rZ4M5K0>

The language used in 'The Young Ones' was considered by many of the BBC Management staff to be coarse and distasteful but, as Jackson pointed out in an essay written for the Broadcasting Standards Council, the language the characters use is actually extremely childish; it does not constitute what would be considered 'normal' swear words; 'Neil, in one moment of real exasperation and anger got as far as 'floppy disks' as an expletive.'²² The problem that 'The Young Ones' had was in the image of the

¹⁹ Paul Jackson, interview with author, 1st February 2005.

²⁰ Shearman, Colin. (1985). 'The Comic Strip Tease' in *The Guardian*, 23rd October 1985.

²¹ WAC R78/2551/1 General Entertainment Programme Policy. Board of Management meeting, 18th June 1984. Minute 370.A.

²² Jackson, Paul. (1991). 'Language in Comedy' in Andrea Hargrave (ed) *A Matter of Manners? The Limits of Broadcasting*

'Alternative Comedy' movement; Maureen Cleave, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, stated, 'alternative comedy was viewed as 'schoolboy-ish';...comedy that isn't funny, at least not to grown-ups.'²³ The problem was that the people in charge at the BBC were those 'grown-ups', very much detached from the youth culture scene. As Jackson stated, 'you have to remember who you are dealing with here...middle-aged men, who have to answer to older middle-aged men.'²⁴ The writers and producer of the programme were asked to produce an essay on it, to describe what exactly they were trying to do with it. Under the headings 'Language'; 'Violence'; 'Grossness'; 'Moral Stance' and 'The Form of the 'Young Ones'' an attempt was made to aid the understanding of the BBC managers, spelling out the elements of previous comedies that had been drawn upon by the writers. Above all it was emphasised that, as the writers stated, 'we are trying to make people laugh.'²⁵ Whilst BBC Management may have asked for clarification and did not *like* the programme, the fact that a second series was commissioned does hint at a degree of willingness within the BBC to take a risk where questions of tastes and standards were concerned, as Alexei Sayle commented, 'there was a culture of tolerance...people...allowed the lower echelon to do stuff that they didn't like, didn't agree with.'²⁶

The Corporation stuck with the new items it had chosen to invest in, nurtured the programmes and allowed them to develop, defending them against criticism, *if they were funny*. According to Mr Sayle, the ITV company Granada viewed the new 'alternative' comics before the BBC but, as Sayle commented, 'what Granada always did was they'd panic'.²⁷ According to Sayle the BBC possessed 'its own kind of internal drive and...culture'²⁸ that assisted it in fostering the development of the new, riskier comics. The case of 'Boom Boom Out Go The Lights', the first of the BBC programmes to feature the new style of comedy, certainly highlights this. The first edition, broadcast in 1980, had caused particular concern for BBC Management due to Alexei Sayle's choice of language, which had to be bleeped out for transmission,²⁹ and the performers' lack of television experience.³⁰ The programme received 'the worst audience response in the history of the [light entertainment] department – it went out to a very small audience and received an 'Appreciation Index' of 46 -...but the BBC did see something in it and commissioned another one.'³¹ The BBC seemed to recognise that 'Good broadcasting inevitably involves responsible risk taking in order to enlarge and enrich the worthwhile experience of listeners and viewers.'³²

Audience Research

The way in which the BBC handled questions of taste in comedy very much depended

Language. Broadcasting Standards Council Research, Monograph Series: 3. John Libbey: London. Pg.63.

²³ Cleave, Maureen (1987). 'Comedy's Alternative Action Man' in *Daily Telegraph*, 11th April 1987.

²⁴ Wilmut Roger and Peter Rosengard. (1989). *Didn't You Kill My Mother-In-Law? The Story of Alternative Comedy from the Comedy Store to Saturday Live*. Methuen. Pg.106.

²⁵ WAC T70/12, T70/14. *The Young Ones; Pre-amble*

²⁶ Alexei Sayle, interview with author, 7th February 2005.

²⁷ Alexei Sayle, interview with author, 7th February 2005.

²⁸ Alexei Sayle, interview with author, 7th February 2005.

²⁹ Wilmut, Roger and Peter Rosengard (1989). *Didn't you kill my mother-in-law? The Story of Alternative Comedy in Britain from the Comedy Store to Saturday Live*. Methuen. Pg.69.

³⁰ Wilmut, Roger and Peter Rosengard (1989). *Didn't you kill my mother-in-law? The Story of Alternative Comedy in Britain from the Comedy Store to Saturday Live*. Methuen. Pg.68.

³¹ Wilmut, Roger and Rosengard, Peter. (1989). *Didn't you kill my mother-in-law? The Story of Alternative Comedy in Britain from the Comedy Store to Saturday Live*. Methuen. Pg.69.

³² Morris, Colin (1987). *Drawing the Line: Taste and Standards in BBC Programmes*. BBC Books. Pg.8.

on its perception of its audience. Within the BBC there *was* recognition that notions of taste were inextricably linked to the opinions of society at that time; as a paper presented at the BBC General Advisory Council in 1982 recognised; 'Variety and Comedy are bound to be much influenced by contemporary attitudes.'³³ The BBC was extremely conscious of social conditions outside of the BBC that may affect the reception of some entertainment programmes. For example, Gareth Gwenlan, former Head of Comedy, in 1987, suggested that the first episode of 'Life Without George', a sitcom centring on the theme of 'obsessional desire',³⁴ 'ought not to be shown in Aids week on BBC1' because the opening scene took place after a one night stand.³⁵ Similarly, the 1983 programme 'Sweet Sixteen', which centred on a woman divorcee embarking on second family with a younger man, was considered, by the BBC Programme Policy Committee to have a 'theme...which British society had perhaps not come to terms with.'³⁶ The Committee also questioned 'the appropriateness of placing this series immediately after 'Songs of Praise'.³⁷ The implication from these comments is that the content may have had an adverse effect on some viewers' responses to the programmes, given the social situations they were in, possibly leading them to complain that the programmes were in 'bad taste'.

With the start of the new decade came new attempts to monitor audience opinion of the tastes and standards in BBC programmes. In 1980 the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board conducted research into possible methods that could be used for the continuous measurement of boundaries of taste.³⁸ The results of this research highlighted particularly interesting points of view of the audience in terms of their perception of 'bad taste' in comedy shows. When asked the question 'What sorts of things do you find offensive or embarrassing on television, out of the 58% of the total sample that stated that there *was* something embarrassing or offensive, 26% stated 'smuttiness in comedy programmes'. However, 61% of the same 58% considered 'programmes of such poor quality that they are an insult to the viewer's intelligence' to be the most offensive aspect of BBC programmes.³⁹ What the audience actually found offensive in this report did not match the BBC Management's *perception* of the audience's tastes. It suggested that the audience would rather be presented with challenging material and make up their own minds regarding 'bad taste'. This report highlighted that it was important for the BBC to remember and understand, as James Moir put it, 'that the money that was being used to produce these programmes came from the public.'⁴⁰

Competition

It was not only the audience that was important in shaping the attitude of the BBC towards changing tastes. The introduction of new comedy, and therefore new tastes, on

³³ WAC R78/2551/1 General Entertainment Programme Policy. GAC Paper 631: Television Light Entertainment. 2nd August 1982. Pg.7

³⁴ www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/guide

³⁵ RAPIC File 10139555, Loc No. A0003888. BBC1 Light Entertainment Group – Proposals, Meetings and Comments Part 3. 02/10/86-31/12/88. Taken from Memo; From Head of Comedy to Controller BBC1 after their routine meeting 28th January 1987.

³⁶ RAPIC 10014544 Programme Policy Committee File 2. Meeting Minutes 3rd November 1983. Minute 147 c).

³⁷ RAPIC 10014544 Programme Policy Committee File 2. Meeting Minutes 20th October 1983. Minute 139 c).

³⁸ WAC R9/815/1. Report VR/80/341 Audience Research. 'Taste: Boundaries of Taste, Methods.' 1980. (Also quoting Katz, Elihu. (1977). *Social Research on Broadcasting: Proposals for Further Developments*. BBC.)

³⁹ WAC R9/815/1. Report VR/80/341 Audience Research. 'Taste: Boundaries of Taste, Methods.' 1980. Pg.3-4.

⁴⁰ James Moir, interview with author, 11th March 2005.

to television was linked to the extension of the competition facing the BBC in the early 1980s. As McNicholas demonstrates; 'the entry of Channel Four in 1982 represented a sea change in British broadcasting... Long gone were the days when the BBC was the only show in town.'⁴¹ Channel 4 was focusing its attentions on winning over younger audience members through promoting the new comic talents. The perceived threat to the BBC was so great that in a sense, in the early eighties, the BBC went *looking* for 'bad taste' that it thought younger audiences would appreciate. 'Bad taste' had contributed in the past to increased ratings. The mentality remained the same in the eighties and it was felt that the Corporation began to show elements that had previously been unacceptable due to the potential threat of losing younger audience members. The writer David Croft, known for 'family orientated' sitcoms, noted that, 'the BBC forgot about us for a while. They were looking for teen appeal stuff and a certain ageism crept in. If someone swore in a script they thought 'new wave, we'll have this'.⁴² Indeed, the BBC's archives demonstrate how styles of humour that had previously been overlooked or deemed inappropriate were now attractive given the new shape of the British television landscape. For example, at a Board meeting in February 1982 it was hoped the rumour that Alexei Sayle would be made an offer of work at the BBC was untrue; it was confirmed that no offer would be made.⁴³ However, by November of the same year Sayle was part of the cast of *The Young Ones* and internal comments regarding such humour had altered to 'the biggest breakthrough since *Fawlty Towers*... very timely in terms of new developments on Channel 4.'⁴⁴ With the threat of the new style of comedy appearing on Channel 4, the BBC wanted to be seen to be keeping up. The production and tolerance of programmes such as 'The Young Ones' can therefore demonstrate how BBC ideals in taste partly altered as a result of chasing a new audience, one that it did not want to lose to the competition.

Conclusion

Whilst BBC Light Entertainment staff state in any interview that they worked by the principle of 'if it's funny you do it',⁴⁵ the BBC's handling of issues of taste and standard suggests a far more complex approach to public service programme making at this time. There was innovation but care was also taken to avoid stepping over the line. For example, it says much of the pressure faced by the Corporation in the mid-1980s, in relation to taste and standards, that the cutting edge satirical programme *Spitting Image* appeared on ITV; as Morris pointed out, it was, hard to envisage the BBC of 1986 transmitting *Spitting Image* – which raises interesting questions both about the frontiers of taste and standards in contemporary society and the BBC's sense of its own place in that society.⁴⁶

Although the BBC had prided itself in the early 1980s on being able to 'set the pace'⁴⁷ in

⁴¹ McNicholas, Anthony. (2004) 'Wrenching the machine around: Eastenders, the BBC and institutional change.' In *Media, Culture and Society*. Vol. 26 (4). 495-6. Sage.

⁴² Rampton, James. 'Return of Mr Britcom' in *Independent*, 28th June 1996.

⁴³ R1/143/1. Board of Governors Programme Policy Committee Minutes, 181-2. Meeting 25th February, 1982. Minute 13, Programme Comment, d).

⁴⁴ TWPR 10th November 1982. Minute 317 cont. The Young Ones: Demolition.

⁴⁵ John Howard Davies, interview with author, 12th November 2004

⁴⁶ BBC RAPIC B650-005-002. Standards of Taste - General Part 2. 09/01/74 - 31/12/87. 10124347. A0002221. BM (86). G108/86. By Dr Colin Morris. Essay: Taste and Standards in BBC Programmes: for discussion at the meeting of the GAC on 16th July 1986. p.4.

⁴⁷ BBC WAC R78/2551/1 General Entertainment Programmes Policy. General Advisory Council. Confidential extracts from minutes of the meeting held on 3/11/82. 55. Television Light Entertainment. Paper GAC631 was circulated. p.24. In relation to

entertainment and being able to renegotiate taste boundaries itself, by the middle of the decade, it is clear 'BBC taste and standards' were defined externally as much as they were internally. In this respect it is clear how complicated the management of light entertainment taste and standards were and how much the Light Entertainment Group's own culture was inextricably linked to wider BBC's concerns about public expectations and survival. In particular the question of with whom the BBC should be popular was considered. Satisfying multiple audiences was a particular pressure of these years, making the production of light entertainment within the BBC particularly complicated.⁴⁸

Such details also inform us greatly about the attitude of the BBC to 'popularity' generally during these years. Parts of the Corporation hierarchy remained focused on the pejorative connotations of the word 'popular'. As Colin Morris highlighted in 1986: there is occasionally a certain elitism at work in the upper reaches of the BBC which shows itself in a greater willingness to take the risks involved in, say, political controversy than those inherent in popular entertainment. There are managers who would have gone to the stake cheerfully for *Real Lives* but would be boiled in oil rather than have to defend *Bob's Full House*...better...to be gaoled for breaching the Official Secrets Act than be sneered at for transmitting *Blankety Blank*.

However, although the opinion of Light Entertainment was less than generous at times, there was recognition that Light Entertainment and Comedy programming, and all the risk taking with regard to taste and standards involved in making such programmes, was vital to the survival of the Corporation. All the ways in which issues of taste and standards were handled are part of the BBC's relationship with its audience. Often referred to as the 'red nosed' brigade the Light Entertainment Group staff members did not mind being the 'frontline force' for the Corporation, but even within the Group there was concern at the prospect of being popular for the wrong reasons. Emphasis was ultimately placed upon achieving popularity through a better quality of entertainment programme. For the BBC and its Light Entertainment Group 'The real issue was not 'Is this a good kind of television for the BBC to be showing?'...but 'Is this television good of its kind?''⁴⁹

Heather Sutherland is currently the Postdoctoral Researcher for the University of Reading/AHRC 'Acting with Facts' project. In 2007, as part of the team working on Volume VI of the official history of the BBC, supervised by Professor Jean Seaton, she completed a PhD entitled 'Where is the Public Service in Light Entertainment? An Historical Study of the Workings of the BBC Television Light Entertainment Group, 1975-87.'

Comedy in particular, 'The BBC set the pace'.

⁴⁸ John Howard Davies, op.cit. (telephone interview). 'It depends how you qualify success, it's interesting, the repeats of *Terry and June* got bigger audiences than *Yes Minister* on BBC1 and then repeated on BBC2 or vice versa, put together. It never got large audiences. So if you qualify success in an audience sense, it wasn't. But if you qualify it as a programme the governors loved and the great and the good thought was great then it was a huge success'.

⁴⁹ B650-5-2 Standards of Taste Part 2 General (attached to B650-005-002 Standards of Taste General Part 2 09/01/74 – 31/12/87, 10124347, A0002221). Written By Colin Morris BUT no specific date given. Deduction suggests 1987. p28-9.

