From High Culture to Hip Culture: Transforming the BBC into BBC America

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“If you’re an American flipping through hundreds of channels and you come across us, you’re probably thinking, ‘hmmm, BBC America, that’ll be some nice Jane Austen piece’. Then there’s me with a big dildo.”

— British comedian Graham Norton

In a 2003 television ad campaign for BBC America, a group of American twenty somethings offer testimonials extolling the greatness of the cable channel’s hit BBC import, The Office. “It’s willing to take a risk in a way that no American show is willing to,” says one. “It’s so real, that it was kind of shocking,” says another. “It’s over the edge of what would be acceptable at a normal American network.” One might easily mistake this as a commercial for HBO, since the ad pinpoints the primary traits of ‘quality TV’ associated with the prosperous pay-cable outlet: it’s risky, it’s ‘real’, it’s not network TV. This is an intriguing connection, in fact, as the hip, maverick identity established in this commercial diverges notably from what the BBC brand has historically signified in the U.S. Indeed, prior to the emergence of BBC America in the late 1990s, few Americans would have connected the BBC with HBO; PBS would have been the most likely association. Further, the material that BBC America has presented to the U.S. differs significantly from what the BBC has sent over to American television in the recent past.

BBC America was launched in the U.S. in March 1998 as a cable channel funded by both subscription fees and advertising. It was a joint venture with Discovery Networks; Discovery put up $100 million
in start-up costs for the channel and handled ad sales, while the entertainment channels division of BBC Worldwide, a commercial subsidiary of the BBC, purchased and supplied the programming. While the majority of programs featured on BBC America originally aired on BBC1 or BBC2 in Britain, the channel also buys shows from Channel 4 and independent producers like Endemol. With a programming schedule dominated by lifestyle reality shows (Chasing Rooms, What Not to Wear, Cash in the Attic), contemporary comedies (My Hero, Coupling, The Office), classic comedies (Fawlty Towers, Monty Python), crime dramas (The Vice, Murder in Mind), talk shows (PARKINSON, SO Graham Norton), and daily live airings of BBC World News, BBC America reached an estimated 40 million television homes in the U.S. by early 2005. While this number represented less than half of the total number of television households in the States, it is actually an impressive figure given that the channel aired only on digital cable and satellite line-ups in this period, and this total surpassed even HBO’s reach.3

BBC America began garnering significant media attention in 2003, riding the success of The Office. Scores of articles about the channel appeared in American newspapers at this time, with television critics raving about the superiority of the channel’s programming, especially in comparison to what was viewed as a dearth of quality American network fare. Thus, in only five years, BBC America rocketed from an obscure digital cable channel to what the trade paper Broadcasting and Cable called “a beacon for programming trends,” battling the vaunted HBO for the crown of network superior. How did BBC America find such success so quickly? Further, how exactly has the BBC’s identity been transformed in the U.S. through the development BBC America, and why did the corporation decide to forge this new path in the States across the turn of the century?

In this chapter, I will first discuss how the particular marketing and programming choices made by BBC America in its inaugural half-decade separated the new channel from the traditional BBC brand identity in the U.S. I will then argue that this reorientation was the result of two primary goals for BBC America’s parent corporation: first, simply to succeed on American television and thus generate revenue for the BBC, revenue necessary for survival in the competitive multi-channel global television marketplace; and second, more indirectly, to help the BBC maintain its current operational and funding structure in anticipation of its potential 2006 Royal Charter renewal, fighting off attempts to drastically alter the corporation. Finally, I will end the chapter with a discussion of how the ongoing globalization of media industries and contents has been a central factor in the success of this transnational channel.

The BBC-PBS connection

As Jeffrey Miller has argued, the BBC has historically staked its reputation on a divergence from and cultural superiority to mainstream American network television, and the exportation of British shows to the U.S. has played a central role in perpetuating that reputation. Miller places these exports within an historical legacy of cultural exchange between America and Britain in order to illustrate the long-perceived cultural perception that “British cultural artifacts are better than American ones” and that American “[t]elevision was merely the newest frontier in which a cultivated British sensibility might help civilize the wilderness.” This cultivated sensibility has largely been oriented around shows and series with historical and literary ties, including Brideshead Revisited and The Forsyte Saga, and even, to some extent, comedy shows such as Monty Python.6 Traditionally, American institutions like PBS and sponsoring corporations like Mobil tied themselves to these programs, the BBC, and “Britishness” itself in order to elevate their cultural standing in the U.S. When cable arrived in the 1980s, the cable channel A&E (Arts & Entertainment) similarly and successfully adopted BBC programming as a way to elevate its brand identity above typical cable fare, especially the many reruns of network programming on competing channels. Time cultural critic James Poniewozik dismissively described the stereotypical American fan of this era of BBC programming thusly:

[These viewers are] buttered-scone Angophiles who have supported middlebrow imports like Ballykissangel and Masterpiece Theatre through pledge drive after pledge drive: those self-hating televisual Tories who cling to genteel dramas and dotty, dated comedies as a Union Jacked bulwark against American TV’s tendency to be so crude, so commercial...so American.7

Drawing on Herbert Gans’ more academic distinctions among so-called taste cultures, it can be said that BBC programming became identified in America as part of “upper-middle culture,” as television to be consumed along with foreign films and the New Yorker.8 Similarly, in her study of British literary adaptations, Sarah Cardwell describes the BBC adaptations as taking on the identity of “a ‘haven’ within the televisual,”9 and
in America, this haven was defined by drawing on high culture connotations of literary sensibility and elite tastes to distinctly separate BBC – and PBS – fare from mainstream low and middlebrow culture that otherwise filled American television screens.

As these descriptions illustrate, the BBC has historically defined itself comparatively to mainstream American broadcasting, and as broadcast historian Michele Hilmes has shown, the corporation has done so since its beginning days to validate its own existence as a publicly funded, non-commercial broadcaster.10 Partly to justify charging every television set owner in Britain a substantial license fee, the BBC has had to prove that its programming has higher cultural value than American programming and that this value could only come from a non-commercial system. The traditional method for proving this was to create a rhetorical high culture-low culture split between BBC programming and American programming, with the exportation of literary dramas and classic comedies into America public television as a way to perpetuate that split on America’s own screens.

With the arrival of BBC America in the late 1990s, I do not believe that these aims to bolster the BBC’s reputation changed; it is quite clear, however, that the BBC’s strategies to support this reputation were transformed, as illustrated by BBC America’s particular marketing and programming choices. In fact, rather than perpetuating this traditional separation between American and British TV and correspondingly between the low and the high, with BBC America the corporation managed to mesh the national identities of British and American television and the low and the high, while still presenting the BBC as the superior program producer due to its unique organizational nature.

Transforming the BBC into BBC America

When BBC America first launched in limited distribution, it was programmed in the mold of the PBS-identified reputation of the BBC, with literary adaptations and classic cult sitcoms predominant. In fact, an October 1998 review of the channel complained that, “As it stands now, its content is too much like a public television station – and a second-rate station at that.”11 Quite facetiously, BBC America’s then-CEO Paul Lee more recently remarked, “Six years ago, the typical BBC America viewer would have been a 54-year-old man in a bowler hat, probably gay and didn’t know it.”12 More seriously, he described elsewhere, “At first...the BBC America brand was pretty stuffy and close to PBS,”13 and “People told me, ‘The only things you can do are what you’ve already made a success of...Mysteries, classic dramas, maybe the more conservative sitcoms from PBS.’”14 Lee and his colleagues realized quickly, though, that following these old rules in the new digital cable and satellite world would only doom them to failure. Thus, by early 2000, BBC America had begun to transform itself away from the old BBC image in America, shaping itself into an entity that was, as Paul Lee described, “closer to the new Beetle than to the Jaguar: vibrant, contemporary, different.”15 Indeed, the model of a successful cable channel in the early twenty-first century was no longer A&E, as it had been in the 1980s. It was now HBO and MTV leading the way toward success, and the desired target demographic, especially for the more costly digital cable channels, became younger and hipper.

As a result, BBC America began to explicitly distance itself from the traditional BBC brand in America, intending to attract an audience quite different than the stereotypical “buttered-scone Anglophile” Masterpiece Theater crowd. In one notable example, a spring 2004 BBC America commercial for the channel’s Mystery Monday line-up began with a voice-over declaring, “It’s no mystery; BBC America is the place for new crime shows.” This tagline clearly recalls the long-running PBS series Mystery!, which presents episodes of shows like Poirot and Rumpole of the Bailey, and the stylized contemporary dramas of violent urban crime featured in the Mystery Monday line-up were quite far from the witty, literary whodunits that have typically made up the Mystery! series. Just as the Monday night line-up was no Mystery!, BBC America was no PBS.16

I’d like to delve more deeply into the specific traits of BBC America’s brand at this point and explore how this image has been geared towards staking out a distinctive place within the cluttered American multi-channel line-up. Specifically, I want to show how in trying to define an image based around markers of hip quality rather than high culture, BBC America has drawn on “three Rs”: risks, realism, and refinement.

First, in his many interviews with the press about the channel’s early success, former CEO Paul Lee invariably focused on the idea of creative risk-taking by BBC America. For example:

- “We definitely like to take risks, and when you take risks your chances of creating a hit increase.”17
- “Shows like The Office and Curb Your Enthusiasm take creative risks. They represent a different way of making television. The same sophisticated upscale audience that HBO attracts has also found
BBC America, FX, Bravo and other networks that take creative risks.\textsuperscript{18}

- “HBO succeeded by tapping an audience that wanted risks, and BBC America plays to the same audience.”\textsuperscript{19}

The risks he refers to here run the gamut from explicit language, often heard during episodes of \textit{So Graham Norton}, to graphic sex and violence, with the explicit cop drama \textit{Wire in the Blood} advertised in commercials as “the most shocking two hours of television,” to simple creative innovation, often credited to unconventional shows within traditional genres, like the sitcom \textit{The Office}.

Even some of BBC America’s advertisements went the risky route. A January 2002 ad campaign for BBC America was halted after the ads were rejected by potential outlets for displaying bad taste. One presented a clip from \textit{So Graham Norton} depicting the host with a sex toy and containing the tagline, “Don’t bother calling. We’re sorry already.” Matt Smith, creative director for the agency that produced the ad, responded to the controversy with a revealing comment: “What’s interesting about this rejection was that it told me we’d captured what BBC America was all about. We’re being provocative because normal BBC programming is provocative and [our American programming] is not.”\textsuperscript{20}

In this vein, BBC America explicitly separated itself from traditional network television, as well as from the traditional BBC image, and aligned with those cable channels identified with hip, quality programming, such as HBO. In fact, even when Lee didn’t actually use the word “risk” in an interview, he still managed to imply that because BBC America was not beholden to the same standards and formulas as network television, it could be much more innovative:

- “We’re not dependent just on whether eyeballs are going to be there the next second. We’re making shows audiences are going to remember. In television today with so much competition, memorable shows shine much more brightly than they used to...The 100 channel universe puts more value on great content.”\textsuperscript{21}
- “The key is to be seen as a destination for creativity, especially when audiences are getting bored with traditional television.”\textsuperscript{22}
- “Look at the stars of American TV of the last few years. They are Tony Soprano, Ozzy Osbourne, Vic Mackey from \textit{The Shield}, Larry David from \textit{Curb Your Enthusiasm}, and now David Brent. They’re all anti-heroes. Our research told us five years ago that Americans were getting bored of what they call ‘cookie-cutter’ TV – the ‘Honey, I’m home’ comedies – and so it’s proved.”\textsuperscript{23}

It is quite easy to read between the lines of this latter quote – the stars he cites were borne by cable television, and the “Honey, I’m home” comedies he references are certainly representative of network television. According to Lee’s rhetoric, the networks are incapable of taking risks because of their heavy dependence on advertising; because of its parentage, BBC America is not as beholden to these limits.

A second distinguishing element of BBC America’s inaugural brand translated this creative risk into realism. An \textit{American Demographics} article on BBC America referenced a series of focus groups conducted by Discovery Networks, which found that “most of the focus-group participants said they appreciated BBC America’s realistic approach.”\textsuperscript{24}

What “realistic approach” exactly means is unclear, but that phrase certainly describes the many lifestyle reality shows on BBC America, touted by critics for their presentation of “unvarnished portraits of the lives of real people” and frequently contrasted with the American versions of the same shows on the basis of authenticity.\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Entertainment Weekly} fittingly praised a set of cop dramas on BBC America for their character depth, represented by the fact that they “rarely feature anyone who would make it past the 8 x 10-glossy stage at an American TV audition.”\textsuperscript{26}

Indeed, similar to the risk rhetoric, one notion circulating throughout BBC America’s promotion during this period was that their shows were more genuine and authentic in content than mainstream network television because of their relative distance from the commercial world. The fictional show most connected with this particular rhetoric of realism was \textit{The Office}, as it was frequently praised for using its mockumentary format to avoid the artificial manipulations of typical American sitcoms – such as the laugh track and the contrived and predictable “setup-development-payoff gag structure”\textsuperscript{27} – resulting in a depiction of what the BBC America website touted as the “excruciating truth about the world of nine-to-five.”\textsuperscript{28} BBC America executive Kevin Reilly described \textit{The Office} in just this vein: “Workplace comedies are a staple of TV. Unfortunately, most office comedies have all the reality leeched out of them.”\textsuperscript{29} Similarly, another BBC America “man-on-the-street” commercial for \textit{The Office} contained the following testimonials:

- “\textit{The Office} has characters that you know, people that you’ve seen. These are people that you actually work with in your offices.”
"None of them look like actors. They don’t look like cast members of Friends."
"It feels real. It feels more real than, you know, any real reality show."

The underlying tone of the commercial, especially underscored by the sneering reference to Friends, is that only by circumventing the traditional mechanisms of commercial television production can such a realistic show be produced. A final thread of rhetoric surrounding BBC America’s identity was intriguingly tied to an old BBC definition, and this is the idea that BBC America provides programming of refinement, or programming which can better your life and uplift your cultural sensibilities. Only rather than tying refinement to the circumstance of bringing high culture material into an otherwise low culture wasteland, as in the past Reithian ideal, this updated version of refinement takes low culture texts and lifts them to a higher plane of cultural value. In this sense, BBC America’s programming publicity openly acknowledged that its shows trafficked in some of the same low genres as mainstream American television; it just claimed to do them better and with greater cultural value. For instance, whereas network reality shows have been endlessly criticized for humiliating and degrading their participants, not to mention their viewers, BBC America’s reality shows were touted as vehicles for improvement and enrichment. If, as a New York Times editorial described, “the [reality] genre has always been a slightly sour cocktail of exploitation, voyeurism and humiliation,” BBC America presented its reality shows as an amiable elixir of civility, collective participation, and enrichment.

And if The Office was the ideal show to define BBC America’s rhetoric of realism, Faking It best highlighted the channel’s tropes of refinement. Faking It was a reality show in which a participant was given a month to adopt an identity wholly unsuited to her personality and experience, with the assistance of an expert in that field, and then tested herself to see if she could “perform” that identity well enough to fool other experts (e.g., a classical musician performs as a hip-hop DJ, a fry cook tries to pass as a professional chef, an insurance salesman becomes a stunt man). Despite the obvious potential for it, Faking It was not about showcasing the participant’s inadequacies, putting them in a position to be humiliated, or mocking their failures, the approaches most often identified as low culture tendencies of network reality shows. Instead, Faking It focused on the complexities of the struggle to adopt a different identity and on the heartfelt partnerships that developed between the training experts and the participants. A Village Voice review perceptively described the perception left by Faking It in contrast to the typical makeover reality show:

Makeover shows have spread across the airwaves like a plague, constantly mutating into ever more virulent strains. But the British series Faking It...goes beyond mascara and haircuts, wallpaper and floor treatments. Instead of Queer Eye-style tips on how to rub in hair gel or ‘zhush’ your jacket, Faking It heads for more sticky, uncharted territory: career, craftsmanship, identity.

In essence, the viewer learned about class boundaries, cultural stereotypes, and human nature from Faking It, viewing societal processes and personal achievements rather than surface outcomes and material gains.

Similarly, the show Life Laundry, in which a host forces participants to discard the worthless belongings they have accumulated in their homes over the decades and the emotional baggage that goes with them, was heralded by the BBC America website as “more than just a makeover show” and a “show that will literally change your life.”

This latter slogan could only apply “literally” to the show’s participants, but the ad strongly implied that Life Laundry could improve the viewer’s life by extension, through teaching the audience how to rid their lives of both material and emotional clutter. I believe that this message of refinement and betterment was exactly the impression that BBC America was hoping that viewers would take away from all of their reality shows in this period. While these programs may have fallen under the same generic umbrella as network reality shows, cable reality shows, and even American adaptations of the same shows, the channel wanted to convey the impression that what it offered was not just another makeover show or just another personality competition. Only BBC America’s versions served a genuine function of potentially improving a viewer’s everyday life.

The bottom line for what BBC America tried to become through these marketing strategies was well summarized by former CEO Paul Lee in praising one of the channel’s ad agencies: “They made us look cool but high quality.” And cool but high quality is an apt definition for most of America’s successful cable channels. In fact, one could even see BBC America’s early 2000 programming as a crystallization of nearly all of the prominent cable television trends in America at the
time: the channel offered HBO-style edginess, TLC's lifestyle reality, FX's gritty police dramas and USA’s light-hearted ones, Comedy Central's topical sketch comedy, and CNN-style news. This success subsequently gained the attention of the broadcast networks. As the influential trade paper Variety described in late 2004, "Broadcast execs are scouring for potential primetime programming the ever-rotating lineup at BBC America," a fact which Paul Lee continually stressed during his tenure as CEO:

- "Five years ago people said to us watch the big networks, copy the broadcast networks because you'll never be relevant if you don't. Now they are the ones paying closer attention to us, and some of the other cable networks, because we are the ones taking the risks."  
- "Far from us taking notes on what big broadcast networks are doing, we're flattered they are watching us closely."  
- "People search harder for programming that stands out. The big analog networks are looking over their shoulders at us."  

This was rather hyperbolic publicity rhetoric, since the networks have looked over their shoulders at all of cable and not just the relatively small BBC America. But it was part of a strategy labeled "public relations success" by the New York Times, since BBC America had succeed by 2003 in attaining a level of media attention that certainly outstripped its subscriber reach. And it reached this level by following the contemporary model for success in the cable and satellite landscape in the U.S.: developing a rhetoric of hip quality oriented around risk, realism and refinement, and thereby separating the channel's identity from the traditional network model of commercial, conservative, mass-oriented aims. The channel's British identity then acted as a distinguishing supplemental factor to mark it as unique within the huge sea of competing cable and satellite channels.

How BBC America Served the BBC

While these strategies served as means to success in the States for BBC America, I also believe that their impact was intended to reverberate back toward Britain. By the late 1990s, the BBC was already looking toward its potential 2006 charter renewal and considering how to argue for the maintenance of its basic structure and license fee support. The BBC was taking on considerable criticism at the turn of the millenie for allegedly abandoning its founding public service principles and highbrow programming in favor of “dumbed-down” shows that merely duplicated the offerings of the many commercial terrestrial and satellite channels flooding the nation. It was especially accused of becoming “too American” in direction, which translated into being concerned with mass popularity rather than cultural edification and public service.

If it hoped to retain its position as a license fee-supported public corporation, the BBC had to argue that it had not turned its back on its public service principles, and in fact, only a large-scale public broadcaster like the BBC could truly provide popular, high quality programming with cultural value in the contemporary multi-channel, commercial-dominated world of global broadcasting. Greg Dyke, the former Director-General of the BBC, said exactly this in a November 2003 speech, and in doing so, echoed the same rhetoric evident in the construction of BBC America's brand:

Far from being a barrier to the success of commercial enterprise, we can be the catalyst for competition, for quality and creativity... Being publicly funded gives us freedom to take risks, to be creative and to ask awkward questions. That is something we should all treasure and if we lose it we do so at our peril.  

He also added proudly that the BBC “manages to be more popular than its commercial counterparts” in Britain, thus underscoring that only the publicly funded BBC could provide programming that is both culturally valuable and popular. This delicate combination was exactly what BBC America insisted it maintained, and its success in America's own cable and satellite backyard could be used as proof of the BBC's superiority over the very programming it was accused of parroting. The two Golden Globes awarded to The Office in February 2004 must have been a dream-come-true for the BBC in that regard, since the show defeated the most highly acclaimed American sitcoms. In fact, this victory was referenced in the BBC's 2004 governance proposal as evidence that the BBC had become a global leader in television.

In fact, BBC America became so successful in this period that it was nearly a victim of that success. In addition to the critical praise it received, the channel also provoked measurable criticism back in England. Some questioned why the BBC should be chasing ratings and profits outside of its own borders, while others offered that if the
BBC could run an international commercial channel so successfully, perhaps the corporation could operate successfully at home without the license fee system. Rivals to the BBC also complained that it was unfair for the BBC to benefit from both internal, guaranteed public funding and external commercial funding, and to use its dominant domestic market position, earned via a license fee contributed by nearly all British citizens, to compete internationally.\(^{43}\)

These criticisms extended to BBC America’s highly successful parent company, BBC Worldwide, and in late 2004, the BBC held an internal review to consider selling off its international commercial arm. There was speculation that BBC Worldwide would sell for as much as \$3.6 billion, with suitors including Time Warner, Bertelsmann, and Disney,\(^ {44}\) but the corporation ultimately decided not to sell. The BBC’s judgment was that BBC Worldwide and its ancillary commercial operations were in fact enhancing the public service value of the license fee, by exploiting fully the BBC’s assets and thereby bringing valuable profits back to the corporation, profits that were helping to prevent increases in that fee. In a speech declaring these findings, BBC Director-General Mark Thompson explained, “The review has concluded that we do have a duty to derive as much commercial value as we can out of the intellectual property created by licence-fee investment.” He further defended the BBC’s indispensable integrity in the midst of exploding global commercialism:

> Despite its eccentricities and failings, [the BBC] remains one of the greatest – some might say the greatest – force for cultural good in the world...Its programme-making heritage – its conviction, its commitment to talent and to giving that talent the time to get things right, its commitment to gratuitous quality (in other words, quality over and above what you would need to provide to make a programme fit for commercial purpose) – this heritage is what the emerging on-demand world is crying out for. The future is heading towards, not away from, the BBC.\(^ {45}\)

It is quite striking how closely these ideas conform to the publicity rhetoric that surrounded BBC America, thus illustrating how valuable the channel’s success in the U.S. could be for the corporation and its larger aims.

In fact, the parallels between the BBC’s charter-renewal arguments and BBC America’s publicity rhetoric at this time were numerous. To those who accused the BBC of abandoning its high culture aims by fos-

tering commercially successful shows, then-BBC2 controller Jane Root responded:

> Read between the lines and they want a BBC that is timid, small and under-funded; shrunk in ambition and lacking in impact; appealing to those already in the know...A polite, almost embalmed public service...Look at PBS in the states – if you can find it. It has no real salience, no impact.\(^ {46}\)

After once again distinguishing this old PBS-identified BBC image from its new image, likely so as not to appear elitist or out-of-touch with the ordinary license fee-paying public, she then argued that The Office, which began its life on BBC2, was indeed public service broadcasting because of its high-risk unconventionality, meaning that despite its acknowledged quality, a commercial broadcaster likely would not have developed the show:

> Four out of five comedies struggle. Comedy is expensive. The BBC spent 18 million pounds on this riskiest of genres last year. Hardly surprising that commercial channels aren’t exactly queuing up to have a go. It’s a classic example of market failure but comedy falls outside the definitions of public service. That worries me. If the 40-year history of BBC2 has taught us anything, it’s that we should reject narrow notions of public service broadcasting. We should choose broad over niche. Bold over meek. Alive over embalmed.\(^ {47}\)

Further, Paul Lee’s repeated insistence on how BBC America blazed a trail for American networks to follow illustrates that the corporation was trying to prove that it was most certainly not becoming Americanized; instead, it was the American networks that had to play catch-up with the more innovative BBC. This is in part why I believe it was crucial for BBC America to reshape the corporation’s identity in the U.S. and offer America shows within popular, mainstream genres instead of the stereotypical upper-middlebrow, PBS-style programming. Rather than opening itself up to questions of irrelevance and elitism by continuing to highlight “stuffy” and “embalmed” shows, the BBC tried to prove on American soil that it could do what the American networks do, only better, and only with its operational structure left intact.

In this sense, the BBC tried to use its transnational success in order to shore up its national control. And in just about every regard, starting
with its very name, BBC America is a transnational entity. Its programming structure presents a hybridity of British programs with American-style scheduling and flow, as even its BBC-originated programs are interrupted by commercials. And in addition to airing British shows in the U.S., BBC America also began commissioning original programs specifically for American audiences in 2003, such as the garden makeover show *Ground Force America*. Similarly, and much to the consternation of many of its fans, *Faking It* began replacing the original British soundtracks for the show with American-accented voiceovers. Finally, despite Paul Lee's insistence that the channel's programmers were "cherry-picking the best of what the BBC is producing and putting it all on one channel," BBC America has not actually provided what anyone might truly consider the best of the BBC or of British television in general. For example, none of the documentaries for which the corporation has become so internationally respected have appeared, and many innovative British sitcoms and dramas have never been included in the programming line-up.

The reasoning behind these circumstances can be found in a statement by David Bernath, vice-president of programming for BBC America: "We are a mainstream American channel, so our shows need to appeal to an American audience." As the *New York Times* further explicates, "That means references to British culture can't be too parochial and the accents can't require subtitles...The trick, it seems, is to spot cultural distinctions that are different enough to seem exotic yet not so strange that they actually seem foreign." Thus, the expressed intent here is to create a truly transnationally oriented, rather than solely nationally defined, television channel. It is not simply the BBC airing in America; it is BBC America.

**Conclusions**

While BBC America clearly tried to market itself as a new entity, there were some crucial similarities with the BBC's past identity in the U.S. As Jeffery Miller describes in reference to the U.S. popularity of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* in the 1970s:

As was the case with other imported shows from *The Avengers* to *Upstairs, Downstairs*, difference itself — or the varying utterances of otherness — was attractive, especially to an audience angry with or weary of the cultural norms that were the sources of American comedy. That attraction was heightened by the fact that *Monty Python* appeared almost exclusively on television stations operating outside the norm of commercial American broadcasting.

This description could easily be applied to BBC America: its shows were attractive as an "other" to mainstream American television, and they appeared industrially outside the norm of the commercial networks. While this is exactly what HBO has done as well — sell itself as an alternative for those who are too smart and sophisticated for network fare — this is also reminiscent of the traditional *Masterpiece Theater* image of the BBC image or even *Monty Python*’s combination of wacky, sometimes racy humor (i.e. risks) and highbrow references (i.e. refinement).

However, a crucial distinction between past and present is that BBC America has tried to portray itself as a hybrid of the best of British and American television and has marketed its superiority on that basis, rather than pinning its identity on being uniquely British, much as past BBC programming in America did. This might explain the constant references to previous BBC fans in the U.S. as bowler-wearers or "tea-sipping Anglophiles," as well as the presence of young, urban-identified Americans in its ad campaigns and the many allusions to HBO. While the national identity of the BBC may have represented high Anglo culture to Americans in the past, the transnational identity of BBC America represents hip global culture in the present.

Thus, BBC America has indeed become "a beacon for programming trends," as this circumstance echoes an ongoing development within globalized media in the twenty-first century, where national borders between programming and production are increasingly blurring. While this has been happening for some time in the rest of the world, given the growth of satellite distribution and the dominance of American television abroad, it is only now encroaching onto American screens. American producers are looking abroad for new reality and game show formats, the networks and cable channels are adopting British sitcom and drama formats in increasing numbers, and transnational production companies like Endemol and FremantleMedia are producing shows for American television. Further, even the American seasonal scheduling model is starting to shift to one more common to international programming, particularly the BBC, with the growth of limited-run series premiering throughout the calendar year. BBC America has thus also represented an attempt to capitalize on these increasingly invisible lines between national origins, identities and methods in global and American television. David Bernath describes, "We don't
think of Coldplay as a British group; it’s just a group. We don’t go to ‘Harry Potter’ and think of it as the British thing. [Hopefully] in 2008 people will say, ‘Did you see that thing on BBC America?’ and they don’t even think of it as British.”

However, if this were to happen it would represent a seismic shift from the resolutely nationalistic past of American television. BBC America does represent an exception, albeit still a rare one, to the historic rule that U.S. television is always U.S.-produced television. Further, NBC’s rather disastrous remake of the BBC’s Coupling in Fall 2003 received as much press for its British origins as for its controversial content, since many post-cancellation reviews compared it negatively to the original. For its part, BBC America heavily publicized the fact that it was airing the original episodes of Coupling at the same time that NBC was airing the remake. Importantly, they highlighted most strongly the fact that it was a hip quality sitcom, not simply that it was British. In this manner, BBC America was clearly trying to push toward acceptance within the home-grown tradition of American television while still posing itself as superior because of its risks, realism and refinement, in addition to its Britishness. While I don’t foresee this transnational trend in U.S. television moving much beyond BBC America in the near future, it is at least indicative of the fact that the American television networks are feeling the impact of international competition, yet another factor they never had to deal with prior to the digital age. And the BBC has furthered its international efforts, launching other global channels, including BBC Canada, BBC Japan, and BBC Prime, which airs in parts of Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

Ultimately, while BBC America did not topple the mighty U.S. networks in the first half of the 2000s, it did at least thrive financially and rhetorically within the heavily competitive cable and satellite market. I also believe that the channel’s U.S. prosperity and the success of channels like it will have an impact on present and future BBC charter discussions. At the very least, BBC America did succeed in affecting the image of the BBC in the U.S. Then-CEO Paul Lee said in November 2003, “Research that we’ve done backs up the view that Americans now see the BBC and Britain as young, funny, maybe a little eccentric, but definitely someone you’d like to meet at a party.” In fact, an ideal representative of this description, Graham Norton, was invited to the party: he signed a two-year contract in 2003 with American cable channel Comedy Central. Somehow I doubt that Jane Austen would have received the same invitation.

Notes
3 According to Nielsen Media, there were about 109.6 million television households in the U.S. in early 2005 (see www.nielsenmedia.com/newsreleases/2004/04-05_nati-UE.htm). An estimated 24 million households were subscribed to satellite services, and out of the approximately 70 million cable-subscribing households, 24 million were subscribed to digital cable tiers (see www.forbes.com/personaltech/2005/01/05/cx_de_0105cable.html). Finally, as of early 2005, HBO reached about 28 million subscribers, though HBO’s subscriber totals frequently fluctuate across the year, as viewers subscribe for particular shows, such as The Sopranos, and then cancel the service when those shows are on hiatus.
5 Jeffry Miller, Something Completely Different: British Television and American Culture (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 20, 178.
6 Miller offers an especially astute reading of Monty Python’s success on PBS on pages 127–38.
13 Quoted in Romano.
14 Quoted in Poniewozik.
15 Quoted in Poniewozik.
16 Of course, both of these identities are artificially constructed discourses—just as PBS has aired plenty of lowbrow British comedies, BBC America’s countless reruns of Changing Rooms should taint its hip quotient. But again in both cases, reality has been overshadowed by successful image-
building, and these multiple images have served key rhetorical purposes on both sides of the ocean.


21 Quoted in Myers.

22 Ibid.


28 www.bbcamerica.com/genre/comedy_games/the_office/the_office_about.jsp


30 Even creator-star Ricky Gervais opted for reality rhetoric when discussing the show with an American newspaper: “Just for that half hour, I hope [viewers] suspend their disbelief and feel that they are eavesdropping on these people. I hope they don’t think of me as an actor, but they do sort of think, ‘I wonder what Brent’s doing now,’ because I watch and go, ‘I wonder if he’s at work.’ Just for a minute, you want to think that he exists.” Quoted in Robert Wilonsky, “Back to Work,” Dallas Observer (November 25, 2004). Retrieved December 15, 2004, from LexisNexis.


33 http://www.bbcamerica.com/genre/home_living/life_laundry/life_laundry.jsp


37 Quoted in Romano.

38 Quoted in Myers.

39 James.


41 Ibid.


43 For good summary of some of these criticisms, see Tim Webb and Miranda McLachlan, “BBC Worldwide Has to Change; The Only Question is How,” Independent on Sunday (September 26, 2004), 6–7. Retrieved December 15, 2004, from LexisNexis Academic.


47 Ibid.

48 The only exception is BBC World News, which airs live without commercial interruptions.


51 Quoted in James.

52 James.

53 Miller, 130.

54 James. Incidentally, according to BBC America.com’s message boards, the channel has alienated a segment of its fanbase by not objecting to these disparaging descriptions of its Anglophilic viewers. There has also been a considerable outcry in response to BBC America’s cancellation of the soap opera EastEnders. Channel spokespersons say that the removal was due to low ratings, while angry fans point out that EastEnders didn’t draw too much less than the many repeats of daytime lifestyle reality shows do. I would point out the fact that the show does not fit into the channel’s risks-reality-refinement strategy, thereby stressing that this may also have been a key factor in its cancellation.

55 Quoted in James.

56 Coupling lasted for only four episodes on NBC, following a substantial publicity campaign.


58 Quoted in Naughton.
Index

A&E 277, 279
Academy Awards 3
Ache, Caran d’
   See Emmanuel Poire
Account of a Visit to the Front 162
Adventure Unlimited 185
Advertiser’s Weekly 261, 272n24
Advertising 28
   and American broadcasting 177–8, 243, 245, 277
   Anglo-American reciprocal influences 254–70
   and baseball 34
   as an antidote to communist propaganda 256–7
Advertising Association (UK) 256
After Twelve Months of War 158
Agencies Agreement (1927) 197, 199, 200, 204
Aims of Industry 257
Alcock, C. W. 39
Allen Quartermain 177, 185, 186
American Commonwealth, The 93, 94–5, 98, 103, 104n1
American Demographics 281
Americanization 2, 3, 5, 6, 7n8, 148, 177, 180, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 190n57, 195, 202, 209, 210, 216, 217, 218, 222, 231, 236, 250n8, 255, 257, 270
See also American media; cultural imperialism; United Press of America
American Commentary 180
American media
   British attitudes towards 93–104, 145–7, 150–1, 177, 189n22, 198, 210, 239–41, 241–2, 243, 244, 245, 246
   international dominance of 238
American Review of Reviews 99
America Speaks 178
“Among the Status Seekers” 261–2
Amos n’ Andy 178
Anderson, Benedict 1
Angell, Norman 166, 176, 177
Anglo-American diplomatic relations 93, 95, 101, 104n3, 237
See also Anglo-American “special relationship”; Trent affair
opposed by Scottish nationalists 245
Anglo-American media comparisons and advertising 259, 266
and commercial broadcasting 235
during the U.S. Civil War 145–7
James Bryce’s views 94–5
news values 195–210
speed 48–63
See also BBC America; British Broadcasting Corporation; broadcasting values; interviewing; journalistic values; media style; the New Journalism; othering
Anglo-American “special relationship” 2, 111, 117, 123, 155, 172
Anglo-French Propaganda Council 110
Answering You 113, 124n22
See also Leslie Howard
Appleton’s Journal 80
Arkansas Gazette, The 166
Arnold, Matthew 11, 33, 105n5
Artists’ Society 73
Arts & Entertainment
   See A&E.
Arundel Club 74
Asmodeus 89
Asquith, Anthony 108, 110