Exploring Television Seasonality
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While the pressure from on-demand video services grows, and time-shifting of viewing becomes easier and more popular, viewing of linear, broadcast television still remains the dominant method of consuming television in the UK. This is particularly clear when looking at television seasonally, rather than on a programme-by-programme basis; while timeshifting now represents 14% of television viewing in the UK, according to BARB, most of this viewing occurs in the short term. Not only that, but live viewing is still key around events such as sports, which still appear to function as a way of binding communities of shared interests. At the same time, the increasingly international nature of televisual product, and increasingly synchronised international release schedules on both broadcast and on-demand platforms, can be seen as detaching the specifics of seasonal associations within a particular culture from the television product, as can be seen in the spread of the US version of Halloween internationally, largely through film and television.

This paper will consider the continued significance of television seasonality, even in the era of on-demand and timeshifting. It will draw upon my own research into seasonality and genre, as well as the research of other academics, including that from the special issue of the Journal of Popular Television and the subsequent dossier on Christmas television that I have edited. This research demonstrates that seasonality is significant in television viewing in a number of ways: it reinforces tradition and group identity in both visible and banal ways (along the lines of Billig’s conception of Banal Nationalism), it supports and encourages particular frameworks of feeling about the seasons and nature, and it provides frameworks for interpretation of narratives and concepts due to the wider associations of the seasons. Thirty years ago, Paddy Scannell argued that the temporal construction of broadcasting, including its seasonal arrangements, were significant and in need of study. Through this overview, the paper argues that not only is the study of television seasonality still important, but that it is part of the wider consideration of the temporality of television that needs to be engaged with and understood as we see a generational shift away from the live and linear, but one that still engages with some aspects of the linear model, whether for specific media events or in the patterns of releasing and consumption of on-demand material.

Thirty years ago, Paddy Scannell’s chapter ‘Radio Times: The Temporal Arrangements of Broadcasting in the Modern World’ built on the work of Anthony Giddens to claim that "Attention to the structuring of time and space must be a central concern of any theory that wishes to take account of the actual conditions that shape and are shaped by the activities and interactions of human beings" (p.15). This included the temporal arrangements of broadcasting, which Scannell pointed out are:

fundamentally oriented - irrespective of motive or intention - towards the maintenance of the recognisably routine features of day-to-day life for whole populations. At the same time they provide a service attuned to the changing interests, needs and circumstances of people at different phases in their life cycle. Broadcasting, whose medium is time, is profoundly implicated in the temporal arrangements of modern societies. (p.28)

However, despite Scannell’s clear laying out of the importance of temporality in relation to broadcasting, and his ideas being continued by people such as John Ellis, who called scheduling ‘the last creative act in television’, there has been little analysis of these relationships. It can seem
that Scannell hit all of the key concepts first time around, and that anything else would be largely meaningless elaboration.

This idea of meaningless elaboration can feel reinforced by the changes happening in media consumption today. If you ask my undergraduates, they will tell you that nobody consumes broadcast media, or if they do it is not based on any schedule at all, but is just whatever they want to watch whenever they want to watch it. However, and this is not to pick on my undergraduates for basing their ideas on their lived experience rather than other people's, this is simply not true. Even if it were true, there would still, to my mind, be reason in being interested in seasonality in broadcasting as part of the history of the media and the cultures in which they operated. To ignore the way that television was so much a part of the 1970s British Christmas could be seen as folly. But then, someone who studies television would say that.

But this is not just me being protective of my research. Despite my undergraduates' claims, and the claims of many media commentators, traditional, linear, broadcast television still dominates over on-demand services. According to BARB, [SLIDE] the proportion of UK households with a subscription to a Streaming Video On-Demand service in the first quarter of 2018 was 39.3%¹. Yes, it's rising fast, but that still means that the majority of households do not have SVOD. On top of that, the most popular means of accessing linear television [SLIDE] is still through an aerial, rather than through cable or satellite services. Of all of the television services available, Ofcom records that the most popular [SLIDE] are still the public service broadcasters, accounting for just over half the broadcast television audience in 2017, [SLIDE] 70% if you include the portfolio channels (BBC3 and 4, ITV 2, 3, 4, Encore, etc.)². In fact, it is the subscription television services such as Sky or Virgin Media that are losing out to SVOD services, which are seen as cheaper³. Ofcom also reports, based on BARB and other data, that [SLIDE] 'Of the 5 hours 11 minutes average video content that individuals watched per day, 71% originated from broadcast TV, and 58% was watched live on the TV set'⁴. So while the commentators (and my students) are rushing to say that linear broadcast television is dead, the data shows that we have not reached that stage, yet, and that it is in fact in rather good health.

And I would argue that part of the reason for this is familiarity, is the very place of broadcasting in establishing a connection to culture and society through co-temporality, and reinforcing the temporal patterns of life, just as Scannell stated. This is often focused around specific events, whether that's a sporting event or the finale of a talent show or reality television series, or an election. However, it is also more broadly concerned with seasonality.

In the UK, television viewing is expected to decline in the summer, with warmer weather attracting people to the outdoors rather than the TV, or away on holiday. The figures are boosted by major sporting events, but a look at [SLIDE] the monthly viewing data from BARB for 2014-18 makes clear the trend. Basically, if you want your programme to stand a better chance of reaching the maximum viewership, screen it in December or January.

And the broadcasters and video on demand suppliers themselves recognise the importance of seasonality and cultural identity in programming. From the subscription broadcast side, I noticed that on May 4th, otherwise known as Star Wars Day, Virgin Media made sure that their banner of ‘things you might like’ was full of Star Wars related material. BBC iPlayer still acts as a crossover point between broadcaster and streaming service, as do All4 and ITV Hub. Last Christmas, the BBC experimented with presenting what they called ‘box sets’ of favourite programmes, in recognition of the way that people are moving towards curating their own television experiences, particularly at holidays. While this presentation of ‘box sets’ of older BBC series through iPlayer has continued beyond Christmas, trialling or launching it at Christmas tied in to the modern experience of festive television. At the same time, of course, this served to remind people of what the BBC has produced, and why they may have an attachment to the broadcaster, as well as offering a way of engaging new audiences and generating brand loyalty with them. It can be seen as part of the nostalgic element typical of the broadcast Christmas, which serves to remind people that the broadcaster is ‘part of the family’, or at least that they have a long-standing relationship, one that may not be acknowledged, between audience, broadcaster and season.

One of the strategies being used by Netflix and other transnational subscription services to increase their subscriber base is to incorporate and to develop more local content. One element of this, albeit an underplayed one, is the presentation of seasonally-appropriate content. This may be simply promoting seasonal films, and has certainly for Amazon and Netflix in the UK included

![Figure 11: Average daily viewing (all individuals) by month: 2014-2018](image)

*Source: BARB. All individuals (4+), network.*
presenting at Christmas video of homely fires burning on the hearth; indeed, there were a number of different videos of fireplaces available, so the consumer could select the one that suited their aesthetic. This localisation, even if it is primarily through the curation of existing material and presenting it as appropriate for the season, therefore shows the streaming service as being in tune with the seasonal aspects of the culture, and therefore engaging with the banal expressions of culture that are familiar and expected, but not generally considered consciously.

Hopefully what I have covered so far will serve to outline why studying seasonality and scheduling in television is still relevant. What I would like to do with my remaining time is to rapidly outline some ways that we can or could conduct that study. To do so I will be drawing primarily on the special issue and Christmas television dossier that I edited for the Journal of Popular Television [SLIDE], as well as my own research and that I have encountered along the way.

Firstly, seasonality and cultural history; my own research into seasonal horror story-telling fits in here. So too does the consideration of television in socialist countries, and the way that these countries worked to actively construct new traditions or to reinterpret existing ones to fit with new ideological and identity frameworks. This research examines how the layering of a culture’s history is expressed through its television, and can uncover the roots of what we take for granted now. It can also raise questions such as ‘Why does BBC1 still show the London Lord Mayor’s Show on national television every year?’ Then there is the issue of changing populations over time, including seasonal staples falling out of favour, such as the Christmas broadcast from the circus, or Summertime Special, while programming starts to involve other seasonal events, such as covering Diwali or Holi.

Such issues obviously tie in to idea of cultural identity, which can also appear in how gender is treated in relation to seasonality. For example, Knowles pointed to the cultural link between the light summer ‘beach read’ and female-centred programming, while Warner demonstrated the ways that programmes such as Kirstie’s Crafty Christmas reproduce concepts of crafting as women’s work, and that such work is valued only in relation to how it augments the home and family life rather than being treated as an economically-valuable enterprise. As Warner points out, this issue of woman as unpaid and economically undervalued home-maker is particularly relevant around festivals and family-oriented events such as Christmas. This obviously raises questions about how other activities are treated by programme-makers in ways which either diminish or valourise them because of their gender and also seasonal associations.

These articles also suggest that there is a lack of broader exploration of the connections between genre and season, as does Lindsay Steenberg’s examination of the Halloween episodes of American detective dramas. Yet there are clear patterns of when new programmes in particular genres are broadcast that are widely acknowledged: new drama in autumn and winter in the northern hemisphere, or spring and summer in the southern. But what about particular genres beyond ‘drama’ or ‘documentary’. And what about the programming of particular genres of film; my research indicated that horror films are more frequent around Christmas than Halloween, for example.
There is also the production and industrial aspect of seasonal broadcasting. It is fairly easy to find some commentary from programme-makers on making programmes for Christmas, whether that is a *Radio Times* feature on how a location was dressed with snow despite it being August, or Stephen Moffatt explaining about his strategies for putting himself into a Christmas frame of mind for writing the *Doctor Who* Christmas specials. Tucker, Sercombe and Wolfenden presented an interesting reflection on the selection of programming for the prime-time Christmas slot on BBC Alba, where the budget means that the selected material has to be usable at other times of year, as well as fitting into the associations of Christmas with family and home and particularly homecoming. (They also make the interesting point that an audience in the Gàidhealtachd may prefer to see a lovely sunny summer’s day on their Christmas television, where the English programme-makers are desperately trying to fake snow and cold in the middle of August for their Christmas TV.) Other seasons and seasonal events, with the exception of sporting events, receive far less attention, and the academic examination of these seasons and events is even less. Yet the broadcast calendar is built around sporting events and religious events and political events, all of which are known beforehand and are well-established. And the matter of how programmes are selected and constructed with the consideration of when they will go out also received little attention. Then there is the way that seasonality ties in to the structuring of a series, as indicated by Andrea Wright’s article on the ways that the reception of the *Downton Abbey* Christmas specials differed between American and UK audiences, in part because in the US they were broadcast directly at the end of the preceding series, in the position of a season finale, rather than being somewhat apart and ‘special’ as they were in the UK. This article thus also speaks to questions around how programmes made for a particular season are received in a different national and temporal context.

This leads on to considerations of how people respond differently to programmes because of the season. Knowles’ article considers the way that various female-centred dramas were understood as appropriate to particular times of the year, indicating the way that audiences have a strong, if not often openly expressed, innate understanding of what sort of programme goes when. Hoffmann’s consideration of *Mad Men* and the wider use of seasonal episodes in ‘quality TV’ demonstrates how such programmes can draw on the expectations of the audience in order to emphasise that they are not ‘ordinary TV’. Sarah Cardwell took an aesthetic approach to seasonality in cookery programmes, examining how their presentation can engage the audience sensually.

[SLIDE] One of the reasons that examining seasonality is important now is exactly because the television environment is changing. We still have the chance to examine television seasonality in the UK as it is rather than as an object of historical interest. This will enable us to better understand what is happening as we shift to a different temporal engagement with television. The same applies to considering other aspects of scheduling, such as the significance of the Sunday night drama, or the understanding of what is appropriate for broadcasting at which time of the day. The digital humanities offer opportunities for mapping these patterns, and for crunching the massive amounts of scheduling data that exists - you should see the spreadsheets.
I have of Christmas and Halloween programming! And the situation is different in different countries and in different broadcast environments.

So as I run out of time, I just want to state that I hope that I have encouraged at least some of you to consider the temporal and seasonal nature of television more. Whether we are in TVIV or not (I think it’s still TVIII), not everyone is in that position of being able to select what they watch when they want to watch it. Not everyone who is able to do so chooses to do so. But what people do do is what they have typically done for decades: connect their viewing to the season, in various ways. And that, to me, makes that something worth studying.

Thank you.