

Part I
The Soap Business

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Soap Opera and the Broadcasting Industry

The essential soap

Popular journalism encourages the belief that soap opera is essential for the audience. It is the fix for their daily habit, which can spread across a number of different addictions; some may be addicted to one soap, some to two, three or even four soaps. While soap opera viewers may take pleasure from the form, it is, in fact, the broadcasters who really need the dramas for the success of their channels. For having the right soap operas brings audience share, and audience share and ratings are what soaps deliver to the broadcasters. Getting high ratings gives overnight, if not instant, satisfaction. But then they need to do it again and again, and to keep being able to get a high score week after week, month after month. Whilst it has always been recognized that soap opera is needed to bring and retain audiences for a channel, its role in a more competitive multi-channel era has and will become even more important. Soaps are essential to broadcasters. They are the lifeblood of the schedule. In his Huw Wheldon Memorial Lecture at the Royal Television Society Symposium, 16 September 1999, in Cambridge, Mal Young, Head of Series, BBC Drama Group, spoke of the importance of soap opera:

Channel Controllers love them. So do the advertisers and the schedulers. They're often referred to by a channel as the flagship programme. A show that can define and identify that channel and its viewers. A good quality soap can serve as a great entry point for the viewers, when

coming to a channel. They can be drawn to other programming that they would not normally sample.

Soap operas are vital to the television industry because, as Mal Young states, they are often referred to by a channel as 'the flagship programme'. They can define and identify the channel and its viewers. While it has always been important for the 'brand' of a television channel to be strong, it has and will become more and more important as the television industry moves further into the multi-channel era. When the move from analogue to digital is complete, and electronic programme guides become the navigator for viewers, then soap operas will become not only the lighthouse to guide them to other programmes, but the home port, as the maelstrom of channels scream like sirens luring viewers to sample their wares. If the ecology of broadcasting is to be preserved in the next turbulent period, soap operas are one of the most important tools for branding and bringing viewers back to channels. This chapter will explore the importance of the soap opera from the perspective of the broadcasting industry. It will draw on interviews and discussions with leading broadcasting figures. The aim of the chapter is to establish the function of the genre within the broadcasting industry, which is essential for any understanding of the popularity and continuing and increasing importance of the genre.

Traditionally, the soap opera has been a form which, although vital to the health of the television channels, has not been one that has been hugely respected by all members of the broadcasting hierarchy. This attitude has undergone a radical re-think, as is revealed in my discussions with the programme executives. When I first wrote about soap opera in the 1980s the form was seen by controllers as essential as part of the broadcasting range, but it was certainly not held in the high esteem which is now apparent across all the broadcasting companies. Formerly, the function of a soap opera was to deliver high audiences to a channel, and the job of the channel controller was to keep that audience watching for the rest of the night. The role of the soap opera is now much more complex and integral to the overall shape of the schedule throughout the evening.

At this point I need to explain the context of the interviews which are used in this chapter. In the winter of 1999 I interviewed the broadcasting executives whose comments form the basis of the information in this chapter. I knew all of them fairly well and we had talked about soap opera and other forms of popular television on many occasions over a number of years. The interviews lasted from one to two hours and only a tiny proportion of their opinions are given in this chapter.

Soap opera and the schedule

It is the spine of the schedule. It's at the heart of the ITV proposition.

David Liddiment, Director of Programmes, ITV Network Centre

The importance of soap opera for all broadcasters was articulated by the executives who control the schedules on British television, and each one cited the importance of soap operas in their schedules and stressed their crucial role in planning the whole evening's viewing. The Director of Programmes at ITV Network Centre, David Liddiment, discussed the main function of *Coronation Street* for ITV:

I think it is the spine of the schedule. It's at the heart of the ITV proposition, which is television at eye level that connects directly to its audience. . . . It's not television you look up to, it's not television you look down at, it's television that speaks your language. Looks you in the eye. It directly connects to a large part of our audiences and its concerns. It echoes our audience; it's very true to life. . . . If we as a channel are about massness, about embracing, involving, bringing people together, dispersed people together, then *Coronation Street* is absolutely bang at the centre of that proposition.

So the first importance of the soap opera to the television executive is that it *connects* with their audience. It speaks to them and it brings to the channel a regular and committed audience. For the secret of soap opera is that the broadcaster has to provide a programme which engenders in the audience an ongoing and constantly renewing interest in the characters and their stories. They have to want to know more, and in order to satisfy their curiosity they have to come back to the channel and watch the next episode. David Liddiment's *eye level* metaphor is an indication of the relationship which the soap opera has with its audience. The genre must be on the same level as the audience it addresses, and since the audience for the soap opera spans age, class, gender and race demographics, then the genre must speak of universals with which all members of the audience can empathize. It must, in David Liddiment's words, 'echo the audience'.

Once the broadcasters have found their holy grail in a successful soap opera, they treasure and cherish it and make it the cornerstone of their scheduling. Every programme controller emphasizes the importance of the soap opera in their individual scheduling plans. Speaking for ITV, David Liddiment said:

Technically it is the spine of our schedule, on which we build four evenings a week. So it's critical to the success of the ITV schedule that *Coronation Street* is healthy and strong. The strong nights on ITV tend to be the nights when *Coronation Street* is on, and the strong nights at the BBC tend to be the nights when *EastEnders* is on. Fight out Monday night between us.

David Liddiment clearly articulates the vital importance of *Coronation Street* to the ITV schedule:

Soap opera is important because it brings in a large regular audience and that provides a foundation stone for the rest of the evening's viewing. It is valuable in its own right and commercially, in terms of the audience it attracts to the channel, but it is also valuable in terms of what you can schedule off it. What you can promote around it in terms of the rest of the schedule.

Liddiment clearly expresses the *value* of soap operas as a commercial tool in the armoury of the scheduler. Liddiment is one of the British television executives with vast experience of soap opera. As a producer of *Coronation Street*, Director of Programmes at Granada and Head of ITV Network Centre, he has worked on and been responsible for soap operas and many other popular programmes for the ITV network. His views on the significance of soap operas, not just for ITV but for British television in general:

I think that Britain is unique in that each major terrestrial channel has a soap opera and they all play at different times to large audiences, or large audiences relative to the scale of the channel. I think that is unique. It may have spread, but in the 1960s and 1970s it differentiated British television to have these more ambitious soap operas. If you look at the daytime soap opera in America, which in a way they all seem to have derived from, there is something pretty cynical about them. They are all story, all event and they have a certain sort of instant gratification. You can watch them and get into them straight away and you can leave them straight away. Ours – and I include *Brookside* and *EastEnders* – are more rich and complex and sit in peak time. Soap opera in America was born out of a kind of commercial need. And I think that ours were born out of a kind of imagination, and to varying degrees I think that they still show that. So *EastEnders* is critical to BBC1's success and survival, *Coronation Street* to ITV and *Brookside* for Channel 4. In their own way, they all in some ways reflect the character of the channel, or help to define the nature and character of the channel.

A tool around which to build the schedule, but also a means of *branding* the channel, is a major function of the soap opera for the broadcaster. The notion of branding is discussed further below. Since I conducted this interview with David Liddiment in November 1999, he has commissioned the Yorkshire Television soap opera *Emmerdale* to provide five episodes per week. Running at 7.00 p.m., these aim to strengthen the ITV schedule.

Soap is the ultimate connecting point between BBC1 and its audience.

Peter Salmon, Controller BBC1

The importance of the soap opera to the health of the channels is a point which was stated quite forcefully by Peter Salmon, Controller of BBC1 (now Controller of Sport at the BBC). Salmon, also an executive who has experience as Director of Programmes at Granada, appreciates the importance of the genre for the channel. Like David Liddiment, he is a great supporter of the soap opera and represents that new breed of executive who admires the genre, appreciates its strengths and understands its importance in the ecology of broadcasting. Articulating the importance of soap opera in his position of Controller of BBC1, Salmon presented his initial views on the genre:

I suppose soap is the ultimate connecting point between BBC1 and its audience. It is the point at which you judge the temperature and the well-being of mainstream channels. If your soap is good or excellent then the channel is often good or excellent. On a practical level it is the way in which the largest number of BBC1 viewers connect with the channel. So the slots around it bask in the halo effect of a good soap.

The need for schedulers to have a soap opera is perceived by them as both a business tool and an emotional link with their audience – to unite with their everyday lives, even if only to bring them to the channel. Peter Salmon articulates the relationship between the BBC, its audience and the value of their soap opera:

We need soap operas, as compass points, as reference points in the schedule. Schedules are quite confusing, as you get more schedulers and more channels, I think that schedules are quite hard to read for the public. I'm not belittling them, I'm saying that we are not as important as we think we are, and you have to give . . . reference points in your schedule that they can see from a way out and that tap into the

rhythms of their own lives. And I think soap operas, alongside the news, probably, are some of the few moments in a week's schedule, that people are instinctively drawn to. And we exploit them in that in a benign way. They are the reference points across the week. We build our schedules, literally build our schedules, around them. We build whole nights around them, and I think they largely communicate whether the schedule is well or ill. And good soaps are really good indicators as to whether channel controllers, like me, and drama executives are paying attention to the schedules. Because if you are neglecting soaps, you are likely to be neglecting other things.

The building of schedules around the soap opera provides a new function for the soap opera. In earlier periods, certainly in the 1980s, the function of the soap opera was to bring the audience to the channel, and it was then the job of the succeeding programmes to retain the audience. The 'inheritance factor' was important, but it certainly was not the responsibility of the soap to carry the channel or alter the evening's viewing. Salmon acknowledges the important role which *EastEnders* has for BBC1, as does David Liddiment for the soap opera on ITV. He also touches on a vital difference in the broadcasting world in which the terrestrial channels are competing. Schedules are more confusing, and there are, indeed, more schedulers, but scheduling is not necessarily as good as when some of the individual schedulers scheduled their channels in the past. Schedules should never be confusing; if they are, the schedulers have not done their job properly.

Scheduling is what I call window-dressing.

Michael Grade

Michael Grade, who has worked as Director of Programmes at the BBC and Chief Executive of Channel 4, is one of the television executives who has worked in television both in the UK and the US. He is not a programme maker but a television executive who has a wide overview of the television industry in both countries. He knows how to recognize a good idea for a programme, support the programme makers and then use it to the very best advantage for success in whichever broadcasting organization he is working. He is renowned for his scheduling skills and is one of a handful of executives who had an instinctive knowledge of how to schedule programmes and link with the everyday lives of their audience. His knowledge of all types of programmes is vast, but he is particularly strong on entertainment and that includes the soap opera. Grade believes that sched-

uling is the vital art of television, as he and I have discussed at other times. Here he confirms this belief:

Well, scheduling is what I call window-dressing. You go to one of the big stores, big successful department stores, you know like Harvey Nichols, and the people who do the window only come in after the buyers have been out and bought the product, and the scheduler is essentially the window-dresser. You have got to put the goods in the window in an order and in a shape and style that will attract people in.

Grade does not use the expression 'window-dressing' to mean superfluity or frippery but rather in the sense of 'displaying wares', arranging them in the most attractive fashion to attract audiences. For it is in the arrangement of the available programmes that lies one of the most successful skills of the programme executive. Grade continues by talking about the function of the soap opera for television companies. His explanation coincides with that of Peter Salmon and locates the soap opera, alongside news, as a major tool in the scheduling and, importantly, the *branding* of channels. Grade explained:

The primary function [of the soap opera] is to distinguish your channel from other channels. There are a number of landmarks which you have in your channel. One is news, and your style of news and your news presenters give you a brand differentiation. The importance of the news for branding your channel is that it's there every night, and soaps really fall into that same category, they provide the same branding opportunity. Obviously there is the loyalty factor and so on if the show is successful, but just as *Coronation Street* brands ITV, so *EastEnders* brands BBC1 and *Brookside* is a very big part of the Channel 4 brand.

The importance of soaps is that they are fifty-two weeks a year. There are very, very few shows, other than news, which are on the air fifty-two weeks a year, in multiple episodes per week. They are the landmarks that distinguish your channel from others and, therefore, they are very, very important. Now they have to work to be successful and if they are, then obviously they are commercially very valuable.

In these extracts Grade highlights some of the major functions which the soap opera performs for the broadcaster – vital functions in the success of their business. Crucial is the role in the *branding* of the channel because it is to the brand of the channel that broadcasters think that viewers react. *Frequency and regularity* are also functions which are fulfilled by the soap opera and, like news, they are always part of the output of the channel. Some might say they are

omnipresent. What this means is that there is always a familiarity, there are programmes which the audience know and, as Grade says, these are ‘landmarks that distinguish your channel from others’. And the more distinctive your own brand, the more successful your channel.

The cost of soap operas

One of the benefits of soap opera for broadcasters is that they are a very cost-effective programme. While broadcasters do not give out detailed budgets of their programmes, they are willing to give ballpark figures to indicate the costs of different drama productions. Mal Young gave me ballpark figures for various BBC drama series and discussed the other relevant information regarding costs. Examples of figures are:

- *EastEnders* approximately £130,000 per half hour
- *Casualty* approximately £450,000 per hour
- *Holby City* approximately £370,000 per hour
- *Doctors* approximately £40,000 per half hour
- *Dalziel and Pascoe* approximately £700–800,000 per hour

Clearly *EastEnders* and the newly developed daytime series *Doctors* are the least costly of the series under Mal Young’s control, but there are other factors which affect the cost of production. Mal Young explained some of the differences in costs:

Shows like *EastEnders* or *Holby City*, which are high-volume, year-round productions can be made for less because the set-up costs can be spread over many years. Standing sets can be re-used, as opposed to short-run series or one-off dramas in which set-up costs have to be absorbed into only, say, three or four hours of television.

The more frequent the programmes, the more the costs can be spread across the number of episodes. Both *EastEnders* and *Holby City* are made at the BBC studios at Elstree, where they have their own sets which can be used for many episodes. A further advantage of the continuous series is that it enables broadcasters to strike deals with writers and actors for longer-running series. Mal Young explained:

Deals can be struck with acting and writing talent giving them a year’s contract, security and a constant wage. An actor in a shorter run may

be paid more per episode, but may do only five or six episodes. A long runner can be quite lucrative to talent, even though the individual slot cost to a channel is much lower than usual drama costs.

So the financial benefits of the soap opera and long-running series are experienced both by the television channels and by those who are involved in writing and acting in the series. Longer contracts and assured income are of great attraction to writers and actors whose income is so often precarious and spasmodic.

However, the impact of lower budgets is not necessarily obvious to viewers; its impact is on the work of the production teams in the production of the various series. Basically the more money that is available, the more time can be spent on each scene. Mal Young articulates the basic difference which budgets have on very different productions:

The biggest impact of costs and lower budgets is on time. *Doctors* have to complete around 15–20 minutes of screen time per ten-hour day. *Dalziel and Pascoe*, on the other hand, has to complete only 3–5 minutes, giving the production much higher ‘filmic’ production values. *EastEnders* is slightly different as 60% of it is in a traditional studio on multi-cam, so it’s difficult to compare. On single camera days (on location and on the exterior back lot) they can achieve around eight minutes per day and on multi-cam studio days it’s about fifteen minutes.

While different budgets may provide continuous 30-minute dramas like *EastEnders* and *Doctors*, or the 90-minute high-quality filmed single-dramas of the four episodes of *Dalziel and Pascoe*, according to Mal Young all series hold the same value to the BBC. *EastEnders* is different from both of these dramas because it is filmed in a different way, using both fixed studio sets and outside shooting on the back lot at Elstree.

Both *Doctors* and *D&P* hold the same value to the BBC and its audience. One provides the daytime audience with a quality five days a week lunchtime drama all year round. The other is a much loved ‘crime’ brand, seen as an ‘event’, a treat of 4 × 90 minute films per year, with top quality cast and locations.

The cost-effective nature of soap operas is a major factor in their appeal for broadcasters and the expansion and development of the genre makes it of vital importance to the future of popular broadcasting.

Public service and the soap opera – the broadcaster’s view

You can use soaps which are popular and accessible to connect BBC1 public service audiences with other genres which are sometimes a bit less accessible.

Peter Salmon, Controller BBC1

The notion that the soap opera is a form of public service television is one which would not readily be recognized. These are normally defined as the more serious programmes in the schedule, but there are a number of ways in which the broadcaster can perceive that soap opera is a genre which fulfils their public service brief.

Peter Salmon, Controller BBC1, identified the role of the soap opera in attracting viewers and leading them to other programmes:

On a practical level it is the way in which the largest number of BBC1 viewers connect with the channel. So the slots around it bask in the halo effect of a good soap. It’s where you hope in a mixed channel like BBC1 that you can connect large soap audiences to, for instance, the *Dinosaurs* audience. So you can use soaps which are popular and accessible to connect BBC1, public service audiences with other genres which are sometimes, perhaps, a bit less accessible, a bit more difficult for people to penetrate. Hence, the way I scheduled *EastEnders* and *Dinosaurs* this autumn, back to back, was on purpose. It was to help both programmes and they both benefited from it. So soaps are the ultimate access point for big audiences into mainstream channels.

During the autumn of 1999 BBC1 transmitted their science programme *Walking with Dinosaurs*, a programme which traced the story of dinosaurs and used computer-designed animatronics and filmed locations to tell the story of dinosaurs. Scheduled on a Monday evening, when *EastEnders* is transmitted 8.00–8.30, Peter Salmon scheduled it immediately afterwards so that it benefited from the inherited audience and, as Salmon said, ‘basked in the halo effect of a good soap’. He wanted the *EastEnders* audience to feel that there was something ‘good’ to watch after their soap opera had finished, and he believed that *Dinosaurs* would fulfil this role. Audiences have an intimate knowledge of the schedule, of the nuances of scheduling and of the ambience of the programmes which are offered by a good scheduler. Hence, if *Dinosaurs* was scheduled after *EastEnders*, it was reasonable to expect that they might be interested in it. Conversely, the team who made *Dinosaurs* used the theme of a series of family

sagas in their narrative structure of each episode. The first episode of *Walking with Dinosaurs* attracted audiences of 15 million viewers and the average audience over the series was 13 million, making it the highest-rated science programme on British television. As it was not a series that would normally have been transmitted on BBC1, it was vital that it attracted audiences which would justify the amount of money spent on it. I asked Peter Salmon if he had expected the series to do so well.

I knew it was original and innovative and I knew it had potential to be popular and I waited to schedule it until we had four or five episodes that week of *EastEnders*. It was a special week – it was the court case, the Steve Owen and Matthew case – so I waited until we had a very big episode and very big storylines and I knew there would be raised heat and temperature around *EastEnders*, and I thought that what I could probably do was make the heat greater and stronger by putting that block together. And I think that *Dinosaurs* being that successful owes an awful lot to a brilliant run of *EastEnders*. We launched a very important popular factual phenomenon by bouncing it, by kind of radiating it out of some of the strongest storylines on *EastEnders* for years.

However, at the same time as the strong storyline with Steve Owen and Matthew Rose, the series was about to lose perhaps its most popular star, Ross Kemp who played Grant Mitchell. The build-up to Grant leaving had been going on throughout the summer and the popularity of the actor and the character was such that his loss to the series was likely to be very serious. Planning for this loss was also important, but is here played down a little by Peter Salmon. As he spoke of the importance of the court case, I brought up the storyline which was to result in ‘losing Grant’. He explained his strategy:

I knew it was a big autumn. I had been running up to a very big autumn for six months. I obviously knew the talent [viz. Ross Kemp] was moving on and that’s sad on the one hand, but it is an opportunity. You know that departures are often the most dramatic moments in soaps. It’s like losing a member of your own family, or a twenty-first birthday party or a wedding, it’s those high spots. So I had been planning, we had been planning a great marketing campaign behind *EastEnders* for six months; it was a very cunning strategy, where we knew we had got a good team, good talent, good writers, good storylines to bring people back to *EastEnders*. You know, people who had been defectors, to get people literally talking about *EastEnders* again, so we managed that campaign some way out, which came to a climax this autumn with the biggest storylines for years. And I decided I would launch *Dinosaurs* in the heat of all that.

The campaign to which Salmon refers was a concerted advertising campaign which centered around the lines ‘*EastEnders*, everybody’s talking about it’. It worked on the basis of simulated ‘real life’ observation of ordinary people talking about the storylines running in the series. This explanation from Peter Salmon brings together many of the elements involved in the planning of the soap opera storylines – the planning of the advertising campaign, the capitalizing on a strong storyline as an actor leaves the series, and the careful scheduling to enhance the potential audience of a popular factual series and give it the benefit of the high and committed audience.

So a popular drama series can act as a *conduit* leading the audience to a programme which they might not have known they wanted to watch. And for the controllers of popular mass audience channels that is a vital asset to help them achieve their aim to reach the largest number of viewers, or to gain the biggest share of audience.

Soaps then have a value over and above their own intrinsic value to the broadcaster, and they have a vital role in the armoury of the channel controllers as they plan their scheduling strategy right across their channel.

Soaps, social issues and the channel controllers

Although the television executives have similar views on the role which the soap opera plays in their schedules, their attitude to the content of the programmes can differ and in that difference can be detected some of the elements of public service which is more specific to the BBC. Peter Salmon articulates the role of the soap opera in its relation to current society. He sees the series as reflecting social conditions which exist in society and which are then *re-presented* to the audience in the series.

I think they are a wonderful way of taking the temperature of channels, but also a way of taking the temperature of your society. . . . *EastEnders* is a social barometer; it’s not just a soap, it’s a way of taking a health check on society and its issues as well. And it is absolutely the weave and life-blood of *EastEnders*, probably more than any other soap. It’s not there as graphically as *Brookside*, where you feel people walk through the door with labels on them saying ‘Issue of the week’. *EastEnders* is that sort of pivotal thing which is both imaginary and comforting but also relevant and topical, and I think we on BBC1 see it as a showcase for good performance, cracking writing and stories of the day. Not ‘issues of the day’. I think we are very careful not to overload it with issues, it’s always got to be story and character led.

For Salmon it is recognizable that the series carries social issues but that they always follow naturally from the characters and the stories; however, he also sees the series as having a social role in acting as a 'social barometer'. Mal Young, on the other hand, sees the series as carrying a much greater force of social relevance and operating as a vehicle for handling relevant social issues and stressing the accessibility of the genre:

I think that any form of popular drama is a very good access point for your audience. An access point for the channel. They speak to the widest possible range of audience from an 8-year-old to an 80-year-old, because of the themes which they explore. I do say that they have become the replacements for *Play for Today* because when you look at some of the plays for today . . . *Cathy Come Home* was basically an issue, a homeless issue, that would fit directly into *Brookside* now or *EastEnders*, and probably has been done.

The ability to attract an audience right across the age range and right across the demographics is one of the unique qualities which the soap opera has. And in this sense Mal Young correctly identifies the genre as being the vehicle which handles many of the social issues which were the domain of the single play in former years.

Soap opera connects directly with the audience.

David Liddiment, Director of Programmes, ITV Network Centre

'Connecting with the audience', from Peter Salmon; 'connects directly to its audience' expressed by David Liddiment; and from Mal Young 'a good quality soap can serve as a great entry point for the viewers, when coming to a channel' – this shows that all controllers see the function of the soap opera as connecting the channel with its audience and providing points in the schedule around which they can build an evening's viewing. They are crucial in their strategy to bring viewers to a channel and to lead them to other offerings. Television executives *need* soap operas.

Saving the channels

It may seem far-fetched to suggest that the strength of a channel's soap opera is integral to the well-being of the channel and is part of the planning for the future. The importance of *EastEnders* to the BBC may have been perceived as simply being necessary to provide a soap opera for the channel. But its role was much bigger. *EastEnders* was

launched in the midst of the 1980s Conservative government, which prowled like a stalker looking for prey to be devoured. The BBC was, once again, under attack from the government. Michael Grade, who was at that time Director of Programmes at the BBC, articulated the importance of the serial to the future health of the BBC when I asked him how important it was that *EastEnders* was successful when it was launched:

To have failed with *EastEnders* would have been absolutely . . . The government were paying for the BBC. You had a market forces driven government who believed in privatizing and taking all of the great institutions and confronting them. The BBC had been through a bad time which is why they bought me back from America, because they were going through a terrible time and any excuse to bash the BBC, and a very hostile right-wing press and so on. To have had a high-profile launch for *EastEnders* and then to have failed would have been very, very difficult.

Defining the show – the business view

While the academic definition of a soap opera, including my own (see Introduction) may strive to include all elements of the genre to ensure that nothing relevant is left out, practitioners have much more succinct definitions, which reveal their own particular interest in the genre. Their opinions on soap opera are always related to its role in the schedule, and the role that the genre fills in the broadcasting business. A selection of views can be condensed into a relatively simple formula. In answer to the question ‘Do you have a definition of soap opera?’ the following answers were given.

- *David Liddiment* ‘Continuing story, continual story, it just goes on forever.’
- *Michael Grade* ‘I think it’s frequency. I think it’s the permanence in the schedule. It has to be fiction and it has to be permanently in the schedule – that’s soap.’
- *Peter Salmon* ‘It must be multi-episodic; I think they must be on several times a week. It feels to the viewers like you’re on all the time, and I don’t mean in the sense of being ubiquitous. I mean in the sense of being one of the few things that gives their lives some rhythm, regularity, stability, loyalty and you can’t do that once a week.’

What is obvious, from all the professional programme makers and executives, is that it is the frequency of transmission which they see as the prime ingredient in the make-up of the soap opera. This is not simply a cynical business definition, because they *need* the programme for their schedules; behind it lies a far more complex reason which unites the channel, through the soap opera, with their audience. The audience is needed both for the soap opera and for the channel itself. It is the soap opera and its frequency and permanence which gives the audience an anchor point within the schedule and provides the broadcaster with, in their own opinion, their most valuable scheduling tool.

Learning the trade – soaps as a training ground

The continual process involved in the production of soap operas means that there is always the opportunity for creative staff to work on the programmes, both trainees and experienced programme makers who wish to spend a short time on a specific soap. When *Crossroads* was in its first incarnation, and from its inception, it took actors from the Birmingham Repertory Theatre to provide the first cast members for the programmes. Now soap operas often take young actors straight from drama schools, and their apprenticeships are played out in full view of an audience of 15 million. Executives also see that the turnover of actors in soap operas can be beneficial. Of course, they are unlikely to admit that losing an actor is a real body blow to a production. However, with the huge turnover of actors from the soap operas, there is always an opportunity to bring in new characters and established actors are often more than happy to join the cast of the ongoing series. Michael Grade spoke of the creative opportunities offered by the seemingly difficult situations when established actors/characters are lost to a series.

Where soaps score is that ultimately actors get tired of doing it so you have to refresh. I don't know how many cast changes *Coronation Street* has been through or *EastEnders* or *Brookside*, and you think, 'Oh, my God, when they have gone it will be the end', but it isn't. When Den and Angie left *EastEnders* you would have thought that was it, and when Elsie Tanner and Ena Sharples left you think that is the end of it, but it isn't, and that is because it requires you to be inventive by restoring and creating new characters.

When Phil Redmond created *Brookside* he also used a number of young unknown actors, taking some from the theatres in Liverpool

and Oldham and mixing them with experienced actors. Not all the inexperienced actors were young: Ricky Tomlinson, who played Bobby Grant, was a building worker who also had experience as a night club entertainer, but he immediately made the role of Bobby Grant and created a major character. When *EastEnders* began they also used young actors from some of the stage schools as well as a number of actors who were relatively unknown. The series provides vast numbers of jobs in a very unstable industry. To get a role in a soap opera means that if your character is successful and you choose to stay in the series, you can have the rare luxury of job security in an acting job. The genre has also been a training ground for actors, and many have gone on to star in other series after they have left soap operas.

For writers and directors the genre is also seen as one where they can practise their skills. For writers the structure of the soap opera provides the characters, the set, the locations, and new writers can concentrate on writing the dialogue to already created characters and situations. Directors also have learned from and progressed through their experiences working on soap operas. At Granada there has always been a tradition of their trainee directors wanting to work on '*The Street*'. Some of those directors have gone on to become world famous television and film directors. David Liddiment emphasized this aspect of the value of the soap opera to the broadcaster.

Young directors have always and still are queuing up to go on the *Street* at Granada and everyone knows, of course, about Mike Apted and Mike Newell and Charles Sturridge, but actually we now have got the next generation. People like Julian Jarrold, who made the film on Sunday night with David Jason, *All the King's Men* (BBC1). He came to Granada from being a trailer maker like me and he did some wonderful *Coronation Street*. Also Richard Sydney and Julian Ferrino, both are now making their names as leading drama directors in British television and film and they all came through the *Street*. It's a wonderful learning process for people because it provides them with a format and a structure and the sets are a given; so you don't have to think of everything from scratch, your characters are given, so you can concentrate on your craft and what these guys bring, the ones who go on to be brilliant directors, what they bring is an eye that the *Street* benefits from, because they try things. They have a particular imagination that they bring to bear on the show and the *Street* benefits from that.

It was remarkable how each of the executives to whom I spoke gave almost identical answers to all the questions about the role of

soap opera in the business of broadcasting. In the following extract, Jonathon Powell, Controller of Drama at Carlton, encapsulates all the elements of the soap opera which are important to the broadcaster.

I think they have got two, maybe three, things of major significance. They have a function and their function is to deliver ratings on a consistent basis and that's why they are in the schedules and they can deliver those ratings at a relatively low cost, particularly for drama. The cost of producing a soap opera once you have got it up and running is minimal compared to the cost of producing a standard hour of drama. . . . And once you have drama into your schedules in a very cost-effective way, you've hooked an audience in and they become involved in the lives of the characters; soaps do provide something that is ever present in the schedules, they guarantee the audience will turn up week after week and that is particularly important to any scheduler in the early evening, 7.30–8.00. Because that starts generating the audience for the channel throughout the rest of the evening. Now there is a lot of stuff talked nowadays about audience inheritance and stuff, and yes the audience do have a lot of choices but they are very sophisticated and they won't stay with a channel if the programme following is a bad programme. They will just turn off and go somewhere else. However, if you put a good programme that they really like after a soap you can really increase your audience. You can increase your audience by 25–30 per cent with something very strong. So they have a very strong functional purpose.

Jonathon Powell identifies the first value of the soap opera as *functional*, to bring an audience to the channel and to deliver that audience for other quality programmes and to do this on a regular basis. His next comment articulates why soaps have this ability to work for the broadcasters:

Also the audience's connection with the characters is an emotional connection and that gives them an emotional relation with the channel and they become symbolic of the channel. All channels have programmes which represent them to the audience, where if you say to people 'What do you think of that, what is your favourite programme? Why is ITV better?' And they say, 'Oh, because of *Heartbeat*, *Coronation Street*, *Emmerdale*, *The Bill*.' Those programmes will always be at the top of the audience's mind and there really aren't any other kinds of programmes that generate the kind of perception in the audience's mind that drama does. And there are strong subsidiary reasons why they are important to broadcasting organizations, and that is to do with talent. On-screen talent, and behind the scenes talent, directors, writers, increasingly a lot of writers. . . . Increasingly you are

looking for writers who have learned how to and wish to engage emotionally with the audience in a kind of head-on way.

What Jonathon Powell goes on to explain is the emotional relationship which soaps engender with their audience and how the ability to create that emotional relationship is increasingly needed in the demands of a multi-channel era. What is interesting is that the soap opera as a form is working in a practical sense for broadcasters by forging an emotional link with the audience. What Jonathon Powell and the other executives show is that they have a deep understanding of the value and range of functions which the soap opera performs for the broadcaster. Their responses were all similar; from the point of view of the different channels they all articulated that the soap opera was of vital importance to each channel.

Soap opera and the docusoap

People were getting a bit bored with documentary styles and they learned that character and narrative are two powerful factors in any television show, so that was a direct steal from popular drama.

Mal Young

In the late 1990s a new form of television genre developed which was directly influenced by the soap opera. The so-called 'docusoap' started as a small bubble which lathered across screens on every channel and seemed to be ubiquitous. This form (discussed in chapter 7), had a crucial function for television executives and television schedules. It also meant that the soap opera was influential in the creation of another television form. While it may have been seen by critics as a retrograde step, for the executives searching for new ways to attract audiences the emergence of the new genre was seen as beneficial. From the perspective of the soap opera executive, the influence which the genre has had on other dramatic forms is perhaps more important. While executives from the drama department saw one of their genres having an influence on another area of television, they also saw it as a way of revitalizing other forms of drama. So a reciprocal set of influences took place. Mal Young explained the symbiotic relationship:

I think we have seen it [soap opera] influence other areas, particularly over the last few years, in that 'documentaries' [the department] real-

ized that people were getting a bit bored with documentary styles and they learned that character and narrative are two powerful factors in any television show. So that was a direct steal from popular drama and now we have seen some fantastic documentaries because of it. Oddly enough I am now pushing a lot of my producers and writers to steal back. I think documentaries stole ahead of us and I think maybe the audience think ‘well hold on, I can see “real”, “real life”, you’re telling me that your soap opera is “real” and I can watch the “real” thing’.

The ‘reality’ which was taken from soap opera to documentary was the concentration on using ‘ordinary’ as a feature in the content of the form. To necessitate the illusion that the programme was being filmed in a natural way, light-weight cameras were used to take shots which gave the impression of unmediated production. The documentaries were to appear as if they simply caught the action as it happened. The use of this technique was brought into other forms of drama, but rarely used in soap operas. What was important was that the personal nature of the storylines and the ‘reality’ of the characters were seen to be related to the soap opera. In fact, the docusoaps were as constructed as the real soap operas. The genre had variations and while some programmes imitated the best of the soap opera, much of the output was shallow and sensationalist.

A soap too far . . . away! The *Eldorado* story

The vital importance of the soap opera to broadcasters has been illustrated by the comments which controllers have made. While the form is essential for the broadcasting business, if a soap opera does not meet the necessary requirements of the broadcaster and the audience, then it can have a spectacular demise after a high-profile launch. The story of a soap opera which was born and killed off within a period of nine months threw into high relief the importance of the genre and its political as well as creative role in the broadcasting industry. In July 1992, amidst a blaze of publicity, the BBC launched its new soap opera *Eldorado*. ‘Welcome to Eldorado: a coast of golden dreams and deep dark secrets; a world of hedonism, hope and heartbreak – and the sun-drenched setting for BBC-TV’s new three times a week drama serial’, enticed the BBC’s glossy publicity brochure. On 12 March 1993, nine months after its launch, *Eldorado* was axed by Alan Yentob, his first major act as the newly appointed Controller of BBC1. The story of what happened in the nine months, and indeed in the six months prior to the launch, brings together a number of business and creative elements which need to be present to make a

successful soap opera. It did not fulfil any of the requirements of the soap opera, as identified by the executives above. It was vital for the health of the BBC, but it did not deliver what was required of it. *Eldorado* was not successful, but it was not only the content and the characters which caused problems; a number of issues of wider broadcasting policy and planning eventually all combined to effect the demise of the programme. Indeed, some of them could be seen as built-in self-destruct mechanisms, which were almost certain to destroy the programme. By examining the way that the programme developed and the problems which it experienced, it is possible to see the elements necessary for successful soap opera. In the case of *Eldorado* too many of them were missing. At first sight it may have seemed that *Eldorado* had many of the ingredients necessary to make it a success, but the overwhelming power of the other factors meant that it was impossible for it to succeed.

The BBC wanted, indeed needed, a programme, which would take over the seven o'clock slot which was to be vacated three nights a week by the axing of *Wogan*. The viewing figures for *Wogan* had dropped and Jonathan Powell, Controller of BBC1 and producer of the prestigious drama series *Testament of Youth* and *Soldier, Sailor, Tinker, Spy* was determined that any new soap opera after *EastEnders*, would need to be 'different', to prevent criticism that the BBC was only copying ITV by having more soap opera. The BBC were required to take 25 per cent of their programmes from independent producers, and the offer of a soap from one of the leading independent producers seemed to present something completely fresh and different. Powell wanted a permanent set and a soap which would tackle contemporary issues. The magic formula was offered by Verity Lambert through her independent production company, Cinema Verity. Lambert was a respected producer with experience in popular drama over thirty years. She offered a package which must have seemed irresistible. The programme was to be set in Spain, on a purpose-built set, in the mountains, with spectacular scenery and sea, and offering the bright light and sunshine which was one of the ingredients which had attracted viewers to *Neighbours* and *Home and Away*. Although its characters were to be mainly British, it offered the opportunity for a European cast and potential overseas sales. Seemingly best of all, it had Julia Smith and Tony Holland, the team who, as producer and storyliner, had created *EastEnders* and many other popular drama series. The series had potential – experienced executive producer, independent producer, experienced and successful producer and storyliner, interesting and visually appealing location, varied cast of characters. Only the latter was an unknown quantity.

The commission was awarded to Verity Lambert at the beginning of 1992 and at first it was expected that the series would be needed for an autumn launch. According to Julia Smith, in the BBC publicity brochure:

Someone said very casually one day that the new serial would be going out three times a week rather than twice. Tony Holland and I just said, 'Forget it then, we don't want to know, we are resigning'. We had been concentrating on a bi-weekly soap. When they told us they wanted half as much again our initial reaction was that it was not possible. (BBC Enterprises 1992)

Not only did the soap need to be created but the set had to be built from scratch on a hillside in Spain. The decision to launch in July caused many of the problems which the series was about to experience. The whole production had to be moved forward at a frenetic pace, and it would appear to have been inconceivable that the earth could be moved from a mountain side, a complete set built, story-lines and episodes written, actors cast and technical equipment installed, tested and operated. All this happening 1,000 miles from the known production base in London, and the whole production to be ready for transmission by early July.

After the supreme effort the decision to launch a soap opera in July was seen as a major scheduling mistake by some, including the arch-scheduler and ex-BBC Controller of Programmes Michael Grade, who wrote to confirm my assertion in a *Guardian* article that the problem with the launch of the programme was that it was at the wrong time of year (Hobson 1992). We agreed that it was the most significant feature in the problems which the series experienced. To launch a new soap opera in July is madness. The audience is moving into a time of disruption on many levels. A large proportion of the potential audience was on holiday or would be over the next few weeks. Three weeks after the launch they were watching the Olympic Games, from Barcelona. The schedules were interrupted. There was no chance to get into the habit of watching a new programme. If they had time for a break in the early evening at 7 p.m., they were sitting in their garden enjoying the sun. They were certainly not watching television and they did not have the available time, nor the inclination, to get involved in a new soap opera.

July is a period which is also known as 'the silly season' in press terms. There is so little happening which can be constituted as 'news-worthy' that journalists will jump on any story that becomes available to fill their column inches. In the case of *Eldorado* they had been

courted by BBC publicity, and a number of them had been taken to the location in Spain. They were well informed about the series and they were vicious in their attack when it did not deliver what the publicity had promised. However, there was more to the attacks than a simple criticism of a new soap opera. This was a period when the BBC was itself under scrutiny. In November 1992 the government published its Green Paper on *The Future of the BBC*. Everything they did in the months leading up to the paper and in the months after its publication was subject to press comment, and the criticism of *Eldorado* was part of that adverse publicity.

The criticism of *Eldorado* as a programme was not without cause. The enthusiasm and energy which carried the production team through the early period suffered a blow when the early episodes fell short of the standard which any of those involved would have wished. A rescue package was put in place when the Executive Producer, Verity Lambert, brought in a new producer to replace Julia Smith. Corinne Hollingsworth had worked with Julia Smith on *EastEnders*. When she joined the production the series had recorded up to episode 27 and sixty further scripts were completed. She took radical action and virtually scrapped everything that had not been recorded and had the scripts rewritten. Characters were written out, not necessarily because of the actors but rather as a rationalization. Thirty-one characters to start a new soap opera is far too many for any series. Further changes were made and the programme was considerably strengthened by these changes.

Once all the changes took hold, the series began to improve considerably. Viewers were watching with more interest and the storylines were vastly improved. However, in the end the series was axed, more because of matters of BBC politics than to do with the performance of the programme. It had not fulfilled any of the needs of the broadcasters, and it had not provided a contribution to the building structure of the schedule because it did not bring enough viewers to BBC1. It did not connect with the audience because, for the most part, they did not have experience of living permanently abroad and had no points of reference. It is, of course, a different matter to be spending time abroad on holiday and that was the reason that the idea seemed attractive to the programme makers, but the reality was not there for the audience and they did not have any empathy or shared knowledge with the characters. The programme was a victim of many mistakes on the part of the executive: too little time to remedy shortcomings was given to the production team, and the programme did not have the necessary ingredients to connect with the audience. What its spectacular failure illustrated was the importance

of the genre to broadcasters and the high-profile criticism to be aroused by every problem which such a programme encountered. Michael Grade told of how the introduction of *EastEnders* had to be a major success and how it was crucial to the BBC, at the time of the launch of *Eldorado* to be seen to be delivering a successful programme. Jonathon Powell, one of the most talented executives and drama specialists, left the BBC.

As has been shown by their comments soap opera as a genre is important to broadcasters. How the genre has managed to develop over forty years as a major part of the broadcasting industry is the subject of the rest of this book. The story of the soap opera is as fascinating as some of the storylines which hold the audience and continue to bring them back to the programme, however many additional programmes they are offered. The genre has retained its position at the top of the ratings by reflecting the issues of interest to its audience and consistently delivering high audiences. How has that been achieved and what is the future of the genre for broadcasters and for their audiences?

