

# Whatever happened to the Britcom?

## - Part 2

In issue 36 of *ScriptWriter*, Joseph Reaney discussed the change in sitcom production and form, and looked at how the American market influenced British sitcom trends. In this issue he looks at how British sitcom has changed more over the last fifteen years than ever before in its history, and speculates on what the future holds for situation comedy.

### Multi-channel environment

'Sitcom has become a form actively used by minority channels to target specific audiences.' (Brett Mills, *Television Sitcom*)

Since the launch of ITV in 1955, television has been a competitive medium. However, while there was unerring competition between the BBC networks and ITV, the two companies also had pacts, such as an agreement never to go head-to-head on their popular Soap operas. All this changed, though, with the launch of a fourth channel towards the end of 1982.

Channel 4 began with an immediate intention to shake up British comedy. On the

opening night, *The Comic Strip Presents...* showcased many up-and-coming alternative comedians such as Dawn French, Jennifer Saunders, Rik Mayall, Adrian Edmondson and Alexei Sayle. The first night also showed the popular Australian import *The Paul Hogan Show*. Channel 4 continued to gain a reputation for comedy with American imports such as *Cheers*, and released its first sitcom *Little Armadillos* in 1984.

More competition arrived in 1986 with British Satellite Broadcasting. It was a failure and was haemorrhaging millions of pounds a week when it merged with Sky in 1990. The now re-branded British Sky Broadcasting (BSkyB) gradually turned its

fortunes around with flagship programmes like *The Simpsons* and exclusive rights to several sports broadcasts including the football Premier League. Terrestrial television in the UK was severely threatened for the first time in its history.

With the gradual launch of digital television services from 1998, minority channels began to pop up across the television landscape. Classic sitcoms were shown on UKGold, and American shows that weren't otherwise on British television were now shown on enterprises like The Paramount Channel, MTV UK & Ireland and E4. Sitcom was suddenly becoming a minority phenomenon, though few new British sitcoms were developed on these



Blackadder II, BBC

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Woof!

channels. BBC Choice then began to show new sitcoms like *Two Pints* and used this success to launch BBC Three in 2003, with a large remit for producing new comedy. BBC Four also began to produce new 'high-brow' sitcoms like *The Thick of It* and *Lead Balloon*, as well as importing US sitcoms like *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

BBC Three manages an average audience of one million for new programmes, so has been forced to experiment with new money-saving ideas and techniques. *The Smoking Room* was recorded on a single set, while *The Mighty Boosh* used back-projection to achieve many of its shots. Dan Sabbagh (*Claims of the Sitcom's Death are Laughable*,

*The Times*) states that the BBC 'quickly grasped the idea that BBC Three and BBC Four can [sic] incubate material' and so began to use these channels as a middle ground between radio and terrestrial television. In this way, a programme could reach a small, cult audience and, through publicity and word-of-mouth, grow this audience to a suitable level as a basis for its release on terrestrial television. The most successful example of this approach so far has probably been *Little Britain*, which moved from BBC Radio 4 to BBC Three to BBC Two (re-runs) and finally to BBC One. The progression from radio to mainstream television took almost six years.

Sitcoms are notorious for needing to grow and attract an audience, and this began to cause problems for commercial channels. When *Men Behaving Badly* came out on ITV in 1992, it was dropped after two series of disappointing ratings. However, the BBC picked up the programme - without having to worry about attracting advertisers - and the show ran successfully for a further four series plus specials. Nowadays, this type of programme would probably be 'bred' on a minority channel until audiences were large enough to guarantee a good start on terrestrial television. With some programmes, there may be no intention for a move to a mainstream slot so they can ▶



Smegheads

consequently be more risqué or divisive than would be viable for mass consumption (such as *Nighty Night*). For some viewers, the fact that they are in a minority is part of the appeal.

Despite this new climate, mainstream comedy is still very much in demand. It achieves large audiences and successfully enters the national consciousness (with the possible exception of *The Office*). Continued attempts at mainstream comedy, such as *My Family* and *The Green Green Grass*, show that there is still a demand from broadcasters. However, the number of sitcoms shown in 'mainstream' slots has fallen dramatically in the last five years, with commercial networks tending to favour minority sitcoms. Paul Mayhew-Archer argues that writers are increasingly wary of going into mainstream comedy 'because they know they are going to be very exposed'.

Sitcoms are difficult to create and most fail, and with so few currently being produced, any attempts will be scrutinised by audiences and critics alike. Armando Iannucci (co-creator and writer of *The Day Today*, *I'm Alan Partridge* and *The Thick of It*) backs up this argument by saying that minority sitcoms give writers a chance to create shows that allow them to comment on certain aspects of society, rather than having to create broad comedy for mass appeal. With minority comedy offering the opportunity to win critical success and loyal, niche audiences, will writers really want to return to the mainstream?

### Computing and the internet

**'Have you tried turning it off and on again?'** (Roy in *The IT Crowd*, *Yesterday's Jam*, 2006)

Although the internet had been around as a university system in America for eight years, it was only in 1991 that CERN and Tim Berners-Lee gave it a public face and, ever since, the technology has had a profound influence on television ratings and content. Children are being drawn away from television and towards the varied choices of entertainment that computers now offer. The CITV slot on weekday afternoons, which began in 1983, was discontinued in early 2007, and Michael Grade recently conceded that there would be no more weekday afternoon children's programming on ITV1 in the foreseeable future.

The launch of broadband in 2000 allowed the internet to embrace new forms of entertainment. Previous technologies - from computer games to music to video to live radio/television - became available through PCs, as well as new and updated media such as interactive novels and games, shopping and even online gambling. This new wealth of entertainment means that television audiences are in serious and perhaps irreversible decline.

Broadcasters, rather than trying to go head-to-head with this new threat, have tried to utilise it by launching sitcom websites featuring clips, quotes, pictures and interactive games/puzzles. The BBC began a 'See It First' campaign, with new

episodes of sitcoms like *Extras* and *Two Pints* shown online a week prior to the television broadcast. BBC Three also launched an exclusively online sketch show called *Cowards* to rival the UK's first online sitcom *Acting Up*.

Broadband has brought about a huge surge in illegal downloading, which as well as being a significant threat to film and music, was also a threat to television. Despite applications like iTunes making downloading generally more legal, the price of these is still a considerable worry for broadcasters. At the end of 2006, Channel 4 attempted to hit back with the launch of 4oD, which allows customers to buy programmes for download from the archives of Channel 4, E4 and More4. There is some free content available but the standard charge is 99p per programme, which means that a sitcom series can usually be purchased for under £6 (compared to a new DVD release for a cost of between £10 and £20). This was also a means to combat the new online rental concept, where customers can have unlimited DVD rentals per month for as little as £9.99. Channel 4 has also embraced the growing phenomenon of podcasting by offering free clips of *Garth Marenghi's Darkplace* to advertise the sitcom's imminent DVD release and the BBC is due to launch their iPlayer to allow radio and television content to be downloaded and viewed for seven days.

The internet has dealt a big blow to commercial channels. Plummeting ratings mean that they cannot justify charging the same amount for advertising space as they did fifteen years ago. Advertisers also need to spend money selling their products on the internet (through pop-ups and banners) so less of their budget is put aside for television. If this trend continues it is likely that commercial channels will have to give up on expensive and risky formats like the sitcom.

**On Demand: Gimme Gimme Gimme**  
**'Watch what you want, when you want.'**  
(4oD slogan)

The release of the Video Home System (VHS) format in 1976 posed a big threat to television. However, rather than sweating about its audience-sapping potential,

television decided to embrace the new technology and release programmes (including sitcoms) on the format. The arrival of the Digital Versatile Disc (DVD) in 2000 continued this tradition, and it will almost certainly carry on with the next dominant home-video technology - whether it is Blu-ray Disc (BD), HD DVD or Holographic Versatile Disc (HVD).

Another potential threat to scheduled television is the Personal Video Recorder (PVR), which is gaining popularity in the UK and abroad with brands like TiVo and Sky+. This technology allows programmes to be recorded and stored on a hard drive for later viewing. It has the potential to revolutionise television completely and make schedules a thing of the past. Advertisers are already concerned about viewers fast-forwarding through recorded programmes and are looking at product placement as the future of television advertising. However, because the PVR is a relatively new technology and still only present in a minority of households, there have currently been no widespread surveys that would indicate how much the technology could affect future sitcom production.

The traditional schedule is already changing with channels like Sky Movies offering feature films that begin at fifteen-minute intervals throughout the day. On Demand services (like the aforementioned 4oD) also let you have some programmes when you want them. Interactive services offer new 'virtual channels': BBCi during World Cup 2006 offered coverage of games not shown on television through the red button. The live football show *Score/Final Score* is shown every Saturday for two and a half hours but only about 30 to 45 minutes are shown on BBC One, with the rest available through interactive. Mobile devices such as phones and MP4 players (like the iPod) mean that audiences can watch what they want, when they want and where they want.



NEW TECHNOLOGY: DVDs, PVRs and MP4 players are all affecting how we watch sitcom.

### Who's watching?

**Social commentary: *Are You Being Served?* 'Sitcom plays a critical part in reflecting our national culture and the way we live now.'** (Mark Thompson)

Television has always been a means of representing national attitudes and customs to outsiders. As previously mentioned, it is the Soap opera in Britain that is seen to hold this important role but the sitcom has often captured the *zeitgeist* of the nation throughout the decades. This is apparent by how passionate audiences are about sitcoms, and how much debate is given to social and cultural representations within them.

In 1962, *Steptoe and Son* outlined the level of poverty still prevalent in England, and Harold's yearning for individuality typified the feelings of many against the background of the 'swinging sixties'. The programme became so popular with the working classes that Harold Wilson reputedly requested that the BBC did not broadcast the programme on the 1966 Election Day as he believed many supporters

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would stay in to watch it rather than turn out to vote.

As society changed, so did the British sitcom. *Till Death Us Do Part* reflected a society split over Enoch Powell's immigration policies, *The Likely Lads* depicted a man's attempts to move up the class system and *The Good Life* showed a couple getting away from the strikes and union unrest of Thatcher's Britain. The 80s gave us the punk-culture anarchists of *The Young Ones* and the self-made men of *Only Fools and Horses*. The 90s had two emasculated *Men Behaving Badly*, and the white-collar new millennium was carefully documented in *The Office*.

Sitcom has a history of reflecting Britain and in recent years there have been further attempts to represent the diversity of the country. As mentioned in part 1 of this article (*ScriptWriter* issue 36), comedy written by members of the working class, women and ethnic communities has become more prominent. However, there is still a gross under-representation on television, as much through stereotyping as a lack of voices in the industry. While one would hope that we have moved away from the representation of black people in *Love Thy Neighbour* and *Till Death Us Do Part*, *Desmond's* does remain the only 'successful' black sitcom to have appeared on British television.

There have not been successful sitcoms from other ethnic communities either, though comedies like *Goodness Gracious Me* and *The Kumars at No. 42*, as well as recent comedy films like *East is East* and *Bend It Like Beckham*, show that there is a great deal of British Asian talent available.

There has been a very stereotyped representation of homosexuals in British sitcom, from Gloria in *It Ain't Half Hot Mum* to Mr Humphreys in *Are You Being Served*, though it wasn't until Lieutenant Gruber in *'Allo 'Allo* that a sitcom character was openly gay. Homosexuality and 'campness' have always gone hand in hand; *The Thin Blue Line* was criticised for the characterisation of Kevin Goody who, despite being overtly camp, spent much of his time pursuing WPC Maggie Habib. Recent sitcoms like *Will and Grace* in America and *Gimme Gimme Gimme* in the UK have begun to include homosexual characters in their leads but according to Mills, they still 'draw on camp in order to be funny'. Despite drama comedy series like *Queer as Folk* at the end of the last millennium, it seems that Britain is still waiting for its first sitcom with a positively-represented homosexual lead.

The gradual decline of the nuclear family over the years has been represented by sitcoms moving from the home to the workplace. Those that have remained in the old setting, like *The Royle Family*, have shown a new 'dysfunctional' dynamic in home life. Sitcoms like *The Office* only show the professional lives of characters, and

*Coupling* presents the idea of the surrogate family. This latter idea is most obviously reflected in the US sitcom *Friends*, which reflects a general trend in both British and American society. Young men and women no longer leave home to enter married life but often spend a period of their working-life living with friends. Harold Steptoe no longer exists in the 21st century.

Jonathan Day (Objective Productions) argues that social commentary is a natural occurrence in situation comedy, and that cultural signifiers are a necessity in order to create '... a collusion between audience and material'. While mainstream sitcoms used to have to play to the lowest common denominator, more recent sitcoms are appealing to niche audiences and can therefore comment on highly specific cultural phenomena. Caricatures and broad social critiques are no longer satisfying audiences. Day cites *Nathan Barley* as an example of minority appeal in that it is a cult hit that has gained new audiences since its DVD release despite the fact that only a small minority of these viewers has first-hand experience of the media world.

In *Narrative, Comedy, Character and Performance*, Jim Cook argues that social commentary may be a traditional aspect of

the sitcom but it rarely makes an actual difference to everyday society. Sitcom is a reflection of social changes and not an intervention in them. Carla Lane sitcoms like *Bread* may make an audience think that things could be better but not that they ought to be. *Yes Minister* makes us laugh at bureaucratic incompetence but it does not

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make us rise up against the system. Cook argues that in this way, 'our laughter is tolerant rather than indignant'.

### Audience trends

'Comedy has begun to alter its relationship with its audience.' (Brett Mills)

The relationship between television and its audience has changed dramatically over the

last fifteen years. The major revolution has been the way that audiences are consuming television. Despite a growing population, audience figures are in decline as more time is spent on other mediums. Technologies such as Sky+ and the Internet mean that television is available on demand through many mediums so it's no longer a communal activity. Audiences are dispersing across different technologies and multiple channels, and television has become a minority entertainment. The majority of sitcoms on television in 2007 are on minority channels or late at night on mainstream channels. *Peep Show* is a critically acclaimed BAFTA award-winning British sitcom, yet series four ran through April and May 2007 in a scheduled 10.30pm Channel 4 slot.

While there have been mainstream ratings 'successes' like *My Family*, *The Green Green Grass* and *My Hero*, these have been critically panned. The term 'success' has also had to be redefined as the days of regular viewing figures of 17 million for 'Allo 'Allo, or 24.35 million for the 1996 *Only Fools and Horses* Christmas special are long gone. With mainstream sitcom now offering little audience reward and receiving critical hostility, it's hardly surprising that new sitcom writers are choosing to create comedy for small but devoted minority audiences.

According to Micheal Jacob, Creative Head of Mainstream Comedy at BBC Television, the organisation has three comedy tariffs that can be summarised as 'expensive', 'moderate' and 'cheap', and shows are developed to fit whichever slots and budgets are available. These tariffs are in place for each BBC channel, though the actual budgets are set differently: a cheap BBC One budget may be an expensive BBC Four budget.

Because sitcom is still a reasonably expensive form and failure with audiences can now be very costly, other types of programming have taken much of their previously scheduled time. In 1984, the number of hours dedicated to original comedy on terrestrial television was 264; in 2004 (and despite an extra channel) it was 172. The documentary was the dominant form on television in the 1990s, with reality taking over in the new millennium. Both of these types of programme are cheap to



Bugged

One Foot in the Grave: BBC

produce and popular with audiences. However, reality television's stranglehold over mainstream and minority scheduling seems to have diminished recently and perhaps sitcom can reclaim its place at the top of the billing.

Comedy has always been important in Britain and 'has often played an important channel-defining role'. (Peter Keighron, *The New Mainstream?*) Sitcoms were the cornerstones of television channels and often gave them distinct identities. For example, fifteen years ago BBC One and ITV were known for mainstream hits, BBC Two was known for experimental comedy and Channel 4 had built a reputation for alternative comedy. Keighron argues that new sitcoms no longer reflect the channel they're shown on, but arguably BBC Two has now become known for new, laughter-track-free comedy and BBC Three for sketch shows and working-class hits like *Ideal* and *Two Pints*. BBC Three has built its identity and subsequent youth-oriented output around *Two Pints*, although the series actually began on BBC Two.

Television ratings have had a huge impact on the multi-channel and new technology environments. Fifteen years ago, an average of 14.7 million people watched the top five sitcoms on television but five years ago this had slumped to 6.9 million. With the exception of Christmas/New Year specials of *The Vicar of Dibley*, sitcoms have barely featured on the top-rated shows of the week of the last few years. Some of the most successfully rated sitcoms have been repeats of classics like *Open All Hours* and *Men Behaving Badly*. During the summer of 2006, the BBC showed back-to-back 1970s and 1980s comedies in a prime-time Thursday slot, and *The Return of 'Allo 'Allo* aired in 2007 in a prime-time 9pm slot. Both of these outings garnered higher-than-expected ratings, which suggests that there is still a market for quality, mainstream comedy.

The biggest comedy show of 2007 so far is *Harry Hill's TV Burp* while the biggest sitcom has been *Benidorm*, and though ratings slumped by the millions after episode one, it has been commissioned for a second series, which seems to be a positive move by ITV1. After all, comedy does take time to bed down; according to BARB, *Dad's Army* didn't enter the top 20 programmes of the week until the final episode of the first series,



I'm Alan Partridge: BBC

#### Broadly speaking

which garnered 4.85 million.

Iannucci believes that the change in viewing habits is because 'audiences are more alert and daring than we give them credit for', which is shown by their acceptance of such wide-ranging sitcom formats as *The Office*, *The Mighty Boosh* and *Green Wing*. He believes, however, that sitcom needs to evolve further to keep up with other forms of television. Most of all, episodes of series need to be produced faster and in greater quantity. He has attempted to achieve this in many of his series by working with multiple writers (Steve Coogan and Peter Baynham on *I'm Alan Partridge*; Simon Blackwell, Tony Roche and Jesse Armstrong on *The Thick of It*) claiming that the new on-demand environment means that the six-part sitcom series is too short and the long wait for new series is unacceptable.

#### The future Is the sitcom dead?

'Situation comedy has proven to be the most enduring and resilient of all television entertainment forms.' (Darrell Hamamoto, *Nervous Laughter*)

In recent years, both Victoria Wood and ex-Director of Programmes at ITV David Liddiment have declared that 'the sitcom is dead'. However, this is not without precedent and Mills claims that 'the death of the genre is announced every few years'. At the end of the 1980s, there was certainly much discussion about the demise of the sitcom. The alternative movement had come

and gone and broadcasters had nothing to take its place. Despite concern spreading throughout television and the media, it only took one big hit to quash all talk of the genre's end - *One Foot in the Grave*.

So why has this dispute reared its head again? Is it merely something for theorists to discuss when there is a dry spell in British comedy? A similar debate raged in America a few years ago when long-running series *Friends* and *Frasier* ended to be replaced only by reality television shows. Now, however, it is generally considered that new offerings like *The Office* show a future for the genre. Also, the recent surge in comedy drama such as *Desperate Housewives*, *Ugly Betty* and *My Name Is Earl* has shown that there are other comedy forms that can be just as popular and socially aware as the sitcom.

Taking this into account, perhaps it will need only one huge, mainstream hit in Britain to silence the debate for another few years. Michael Grade, executive chairman of ITV, has claimed that the channel is making a concerted effort to bring back the prime-time Britcom. *Benidorm* has been commissioned for another series and with the arrival of new Director of Entertainment and Comedy Paul Jackson, Grade promises that there will be more mainstream comedy to come. BBC One also continues attempts at the 'modern' traditional family sitcom with *My Family* and *After You've Gone*, and Channel 4 has even attempted a return to the studio system with *The IT Crowd*.

Even if all of these attempts at reviving ▶

the traditional family sitcom fail, does this mean that the sitcom is dead?

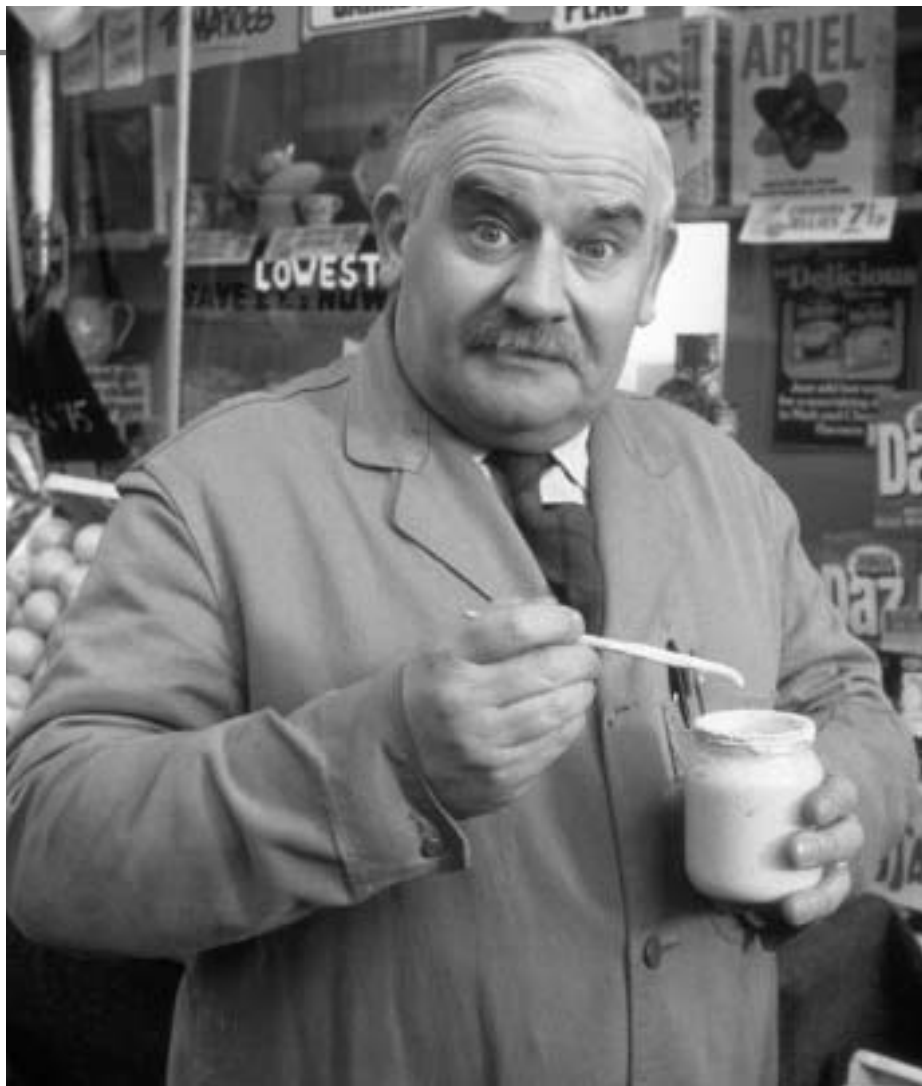


MAINSTREAM SITCOM IN 2007: *After You've Gone* on BBC One and *Benidorm* on ITV1.

### What now?

Iannucci claims that the days of 'big shows with big audiences' may be gone but the British sitcom is here to stay. Though sitcom production may have slowed in recent years, he argues that it is not in as bad shape as many seem to believe. The statistics certainly seem to support his argument as the number of sitcoms produced has been growing again since 2003, with 2006 offering over twice as many new sitcoms as four years previously. There is still a great demand for comedy from audiences, as the revival of panel shows and the once 'dead' sketch show demonstrate. Sitcoms from yesteryear still perform well at peak times on mainstream channels and the genre is more varied and representative of society than ever before.

So perhaps the sitcom merely needs a little redefinition. It has grown and spread in a way that seems to be irreversible, and it is difficult to imagine that all sitcom will now return to strict sets, live audiences and the 'three-headed-monster'. Also, it is unlikely that, having experienced a wealth of variation in British sitcom, audiences will accept the form returning to purely mainstream outings. However, that does not mean that these techniques will not be used on sitcoms if it seems appropriate as in the case of *The IT Crowd*, which is now in its second series. After all, early television drama was filmed using single sets and limited cameras (it was essentially filmed theatre) and despite its development since, this former technique is still employed in dramas when suitable, such as in Harold Pinter's *Celebration*. Single-camera comedy does not have a laughter track because it would sound unnatural (as proved with programmes like *KYTV* in the late 80s) but a sitcom in limited interior settings filmed with static cameras may seem just as unnatural without an audience.



Open All Hours: BBC

Priced out

### Conclusion

**'Sitcom has moved to a place where a more acute level of reality is demanded.'**

(Marc Blake, 2006)

So, why has the British sitcom changed so dramatically over the last fifteen years? Perhaps it was simply a natural evolution, after all, sitcom conventions have always been challenged with comedies like the historical *Blackadder* and sci-fi *Red Dwarf* redefining the genre. Then again, the sitcom has changed more in the last fifteen years than ever before in its history. The basic cornerstones of the genre have been adapted or removed altogether. The nanny state is a thing of the past and British television has revised the 'inform, educate and entertain' remit to simply 'entertain'. Television is now dispensable, something that audiences do in their leisure time when they are not going to gyms, restaurants, cinemas, pubs or using other media. Modern television is market-led; audiences have autonomy and if socially-relevant minority comedy is what they want, then that's what they'll get.

The situation has changed because

society has changed. It has had to adapt to survive in a new media landscape. It took cues from the US and found new ways of keeping a diminishing audience's attention. It utilised technology to promote its newest programmes. It embraced the minority phenomenon and created new sitcoms with relevant comments to make on modern Britain. For the near future, at least, it seems that there will be more of the same. Purists may refuse to title new hybrids 'sitcom', so the genre may be evolving to extinction. The words 'situation comedy' may leave the lexicon altogether to be replaced by 'mockumentaries', 'comedy dramas' and 'warmedies', but does it really matter? The most important thing is that these shows make audiences laugh and, if this is the criterion, the future looks very bright indeed.

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