

What Do We Learn from Television Quizzes?

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There is no doubt that the quiz show is a 'major television genre' (Fiske, 1991:265) . Viewing figures substantiate this belief with a registered 12.10 million viewers watching *Mastermind* on 3rd April 1984. (*Annual Review of BBC Broadcasting Research Findings*, 1985:393). To put this into context, the most popular show on BBC I during that observed quarter was *The Grand National* with 12.95 million viewers. Although dated statistics, the principle remains the same, quiz shows must be considered capable of maintaining sustained audiences, their popularity is unquestionable.

However, there is not one archetypal quiz show; the range of types of show varies immensely - perhaps this is one of the attractions. From on the one hand a show such as *Family Fortunes*, predominately populist in style and yet marred with a 'low cultural status' (Whannel and Goodwin, 1990: 104), or an intellectually based show on the other such as *Mastermind* or *University Challenge*. There are no means of generalizing these game-quiz shows and thus categorization of style within the genre is necessary. There are the more academic shows such as *Fifteen to One*, *Blockbusters*, *The Krypton Factor*, *University Challenge*, *Mastermind* and the non-academic, consumerist programmes; *The Price is Right*, *The Generation Game*, *The Wheel of Fortune* - all possessing American origins. These quizzes have been attacked for being a 'celebration of consumption, glorifying consumer goods' (Whannel and Goodwin, 1990:106). Their British counterparts such as *Blankety Blank* or *3-2-1* are restricted by the IBA In terms of quality and value of prizes but the treatment is similar - they aim to be 'Ingenious enough In their construction to maintain Interest and yet ... not ... so complicated that the audience has difficulty following what has happened' (Chester, Garrison and Willis, 1971: 393). In short, the quiz show must aspire to combine knowledge and entertainment, this knowledge or skill may subsequently be traded for prizes - whether these prizes are consumer, status, sexual or intellectual reward, they are still the motive force.

Such a wide selection of quiz shows available on the television must pose the

question 'Why?' Is there such a demand for this type of transmission? Is it the audience's natural quest for knowledge? Is it their desire to be continually enlightened? Or is it merely a route of escapism? In this essay I plan to analyse what can be discovered from the television quiz show. I aim to consider educational, personal, psychological and social areas of the learning experience. Clearly there is an impartation and reception of knowledge and it is this entire concept of knowledge and learning from the television show that I want to examine. I also intend to evaluate Individual shows and relate my experiences of these to the central question of what can be gained from quizzes.

A 'quiz' can be defined as follows: 'a test of knowledge especially between individuals or teams as a form of entertainment' (C.O.D. 1992:983). However a quiz can also be educational and informative. In fact the quiz show often mirrors the school classroom and in this respect both the academic and nonacademic shows boast many links and similarities to the common educational environment.

Television quiz shows evolved from old radio productions such as *The Quiz Kids* (1940-1951) and were subsequently converted into the television format. The transformation was notable, the competitive consumerism is clearly illustrated by the surge in jackpot prize money. On American radio *The \$64 Question* was broadcasted, yet the television show was modified to be entitled *The \$64,000 Question*. Therefore it can be said that there is a learning process divulged, connected and related to affluence, materialism and consumerism. The increasing, escalating jackpots and prizes on American television led to a general criticism and disregard of the genre. One authority called it the 'cynical exploitations of middle class greed' (Himmelstein, 1984: 271) another added that the quiz show 'promises instant salvation' (Barris as cited Himmelstein, 1984: 270), this in the form of blatant glib consumption of money. Quiz shows provoke an understanding and reflection surrounding the materialistic notions of today's consumer society. Shows such as *The Generation Game* or *The Price is Right* exemplify the materialistic values and cravings of the masses, they are as Peter Conrad states, 'Incitements to the romance of consumerism' (Conrad, 1982: 88) but from an obscure angle, we can investigate and learn from this.

Not only do we gain a greater understanding of the concept of wealth and greed but we can also learn about the notion of comedic misfortune. The idea of social humiliation is clearly seen in many television quiz shows; occurring on many

different levels. Viewers may find comedic appeal at the expense of the contestant. For example Bruce Forsyth is renowned for his humiliating methods of communicating with contenders. Game and quiz shows 'pillory people into self exposure' (Conrad, 1982: 93) they can trap and trip contestants purely for entertainment. Ridicule can be achieved through many means; probing of sexual habits on *The Dating Game* or *Blind Date* for example, sarcasm by the smug, condescending host, or amusement from the 'losing factor' - whereby the viewers indulge in a perverse sense of humour activated by the failings of the contestant. This may perhaps result in the 'boobie' prize, the prime example here being 'Dusty Bin' on the *3-2-1* show. The contestants are judged as fools because of their inadequacies and this is seen as amusing. Humour is also apparent in the so-called 'prizes' some shows offer. Les Dawson made many references to the 'expense' the BBC had gone to, to provide prizes on *Blankety Blank!* These devices employed by quiz shows provides some of the appeals and attractions

Peter Conrad's comments on the quiz show are worthy of reference: 'television's glory is the belittlement of people and trivialisation of data, and the game shows are one of the medium's most playfully vicious institutions' (Conrad, 1982: 93). I believe it is this combination of playful and viciousness inherent in the genre which makes quiz shows exciting and entertaining. Therefore quiz shows could be said to improve the understanding of sociological matters; humiliation and humour at the expense of the contestant for example.

Central to the whole question of what can be learned from quiz shows is knowledge. It may be factual statements or deeper issues relating to social understanding and personal experience. The basic quality of knowledge which a quiz show commands is the relationship between the 'acquisition of prizes or status through a possession and performance of knowledge' (Goodwin and Whannel, 1990: 104). They may be general knowledge shows such as *Fifteen to One* or intellectual quizzes requiring a 'specialized variant of knowledge' (Goodwin and Whannel, 1990: 104) such as *Mastermind*. Some require an understanding of consumer items, seen in *The Price is Right*. Others stress the importance of memory and recall - *The Generation Game* for example. Physical and mental skills are tested in *The Krypton Factor*, and in shows such as *Family Fortunes* or *Blankety Blank* the contenders must be able to empathize with the 'None-hundred people surveyed' or the celebrities. As illustrated, the variety and requirements of quiz shows vary substantially. However the common element is

the knowledge factor. Each show requires specific skills or abilities concerning knowledge. As an audience we may learn for example, historical facts from *Mastermind* in a specialized subject round, but we are also offered the opportunity to gain greater understanding of social discourse; what other people think, their attitudes and opinions in shows such as *Blankety Blank* and *Family Fortunes*. Mill and Rice argue that it is this 'everyday common sense' (as cited Goodwin and Whannel, 1990: 105) which enables success.

John Fiske categorized knowledge into four groups, these being:

- a. factual/academic
- b. common social experience and interaction
- c. knowledge of people in general
- d. knowledge of people specifically

The factual knowledge as represented by shows such as *Sale of the Century* or in the more 'elitist form' (Fiske, 1991: 267) of *Mastermind*, aim to combine academic knowledge with a showbiz sense of excitement and suspense. The latter achieves this in a subtle way, the solemnity and seriousness of the entire show formalizes the concept of quizzical razzamatazz, yet still evokes all the qualities of its more glittery counterparts. Len Masterman describes the show with perception, he states 'the programme's homage to knowledge apparent from its university setting and that quasi-tutorial engagement of Magnusson and contestant' (Masterman, 1984: 44). The formal, inquisitorial testing of isolated individuals under pressure (especially the interrogatory spotlight) provides a whole new dimension to the quiz show. Knowledge is offered in its most dehumanized, oppressive form, with little attention paid to emotion or feeling, the process is a clinical examination requiring a recollection of facts at high speed. Although scholarly and impersonal *Mastermind* relies on the competitive nature of the contenders and their objective to succeed, the reward in this case being status. An understanding of knowledge can be gained through quiz shows.

Fiske's categories 'knowledge of people generally and specifically' whereby contestants are invited to predict social norms or individual responses is an example of how the quiz show promotes an appreciation of popular opinion.

Family Fortunes for instance rewards 'conformity rather than originality' (Masterman, 1985: 204). It is the notion of guessing and prediction which is judged by the quiz show. As one authority stated 'quiz shows emphasize mind reading' (Kaplan, 1983:68). The contestant will only succeed if they are capable of perceptive thinking. These quiz shows enhance audience participation and broaden viewer's understanding of society.

I believe that quiz shows encourage the viewer to be critical. Television is not only an entertainment device, it is also a persuader and influencer and we must therefore be cautious. I quote:

Most of us look at television without ever seeing it. Few of us think about what we look at, therefore are easily manipulated. The solution? to be critical' (Newcomb, 1982: 3). Quiz shows often provoke a critical mind through irritable performances and activities, or through shows considered insulting to the intelligence. In my experience shows such as *The Newly Weds* and *Going for Gold* epitomize this notion. Thus the common quiz show can teach the viewer to be analytical, inquisitive and most of all, critical.

Educational values are transmitted through the quiz show. The essential link between the schools and quiz shows is the learning experience. Whether trivial knowledge or specific, highly intellectual information, the process is fundamentally linked to the schooling process. Some shows emphasize the relationship more than others, for instance on *Fifteen to One* a Victorian classroom scenario is apparent. Host Mr W. G. Stewart (teacher) fires questions at the fifteen contestants (pupils). Elimination results with failure until the one winner remains. It is a 'competitive hierarchical format' (Goodwin and Whannel, 1990: 107) and clearly bears many resemblances to the educational experience.

Quiz masters are seen as school masters, the competitors as the students, questions are asked and their correctness is judged correspondingly. Responses are rewarded or punished, for instance by progression or exclusion from a round. John Tulloch sees knowledge as 'deriving its legitimacy from an education system that broadly promulgates the same view of knowledge' (as cited Alvarado et al. 1993:114). The comparison between schooling and quiz shows is unique and perhaps one of the appealing factors, with recollections and subconscious memories stimulated by the show.

An understanding of concepts such as luck and reward can be gained from the genre. Each contender has an equal chance of winning yet only the best can ultimately succeed. Contestants are rewarded in terms of prizes relevant to the nature of the particular show. For example, *The Krypton Factor* rewards status and prestige, whereas *Celebrity Squares* offers a material luxury in the form of cars. Every show involves a certain element of luck and chance, an appreciation of these notions can be acquired via the quiz show, hence a further learning process established by the genre.

The active viewer theory is demonstrated by the quiz show. Not only does the audience often compete with the contestants, but occasionally invited to participate as well, the populist show *Play Your Cards Right* illustrates this point clearly. Audiences both in the studio and at home are encouraged to offer advice in the form 'higher' or 'lower'. This active participation dispels the belief that viewing is merely passive, John Fiske talks of the 'pleasures of engaging' (Fiske, 1991:97) and this I believe is further evidence to support the argument that quiz shows are strongly related to learning.

In a highly specific sense, it could be said that we learn of similarities between the quiz show and the soap opera. John Fiske stated six comparisons, these being that both genres are widely devalued, excessive, have a high degree of viewer participation, validate normally invisible everyday life skills, are primarily a day time genre and that both appeal to the socially powerless. (Fiske, 1990:274) The strong association between the two types of programme is apparent and another connection between quiz shows and learning is seen by this link.

Finally, the entire issue of quiz shows could not be fully examined without reference to the work of theorists McQuail, Blumler and Brown. Their studies in the early 1970s on the uses and gratification doctrine gave headway as to why people watch television and what they gain from doing so. Evidence was collected through questionnaires circulated in Leeds. The investigations resulted in emerging 'Clusters' of viewer gratification. The results showed that quiz programmes wield 'multiple appeal' (McQuail, Blumler and Brown as cited Morley, 1982:149) and confirmed the fact made thirty years earlier by innovator Herza Herzog. In 1942 a study was conducted on the uses and gratifications of radio quiz shows entitled 'Professor Quiz - a gratification study', Herzog concluded that 'different aspects of them appeal to different people' (as cited

McQuail, 1979:149). The findings of McQuail, Blumler and Brown were categorized into four main sets or clusters as they were termed. The first was entitled 'Self-Rating Appeal, whereby gratification and need is satisfied by the viewer being able to find something out about him/herself. Responses such as 'I can compare myself with the experts' and 'I laugh at the contestant's mistakes' were noted. Further studies showed a high correlation between this cluster and low socio-economic groups. The second main cluster was termed 'Basis for social interaction'. The quizzes offer a 'shared family interest' (McQuail, 1979: 150), where the entire family can work together and share a common experience. The third grouping 'Excitement' in regard to the competition itself, in the form of projection and forecasting of winners. This cluster is perhaps escapist, the audience enjoy the quiz shows because the various pressures and tensions are blanked out, it is a time to 'shed everyday cares' (McQuail, 1979: 151). Finally the last (distinguished) category of 'Educational Appeal'. This cluster refers to the ways quiz shows help stimulate thought and inquiry. It is regarded as a process of self-improvement where people can test and judge their skills in relation to the contenders. Those from higher socio-economic groups, who have probably had better educational opportunities use quiz shows to check and test their knowledge whilst those from lower groups use them as proof and evidence that they are equally, or as clever as the contestants. McQuail, Blumler and Brown's studies of the uses and gratifications depict the range and variety of material found appealing by the audience from quiz shows. Therefore this genre can be seen as a prime example available to theorists working on uses and gratifications doctrines. The quiz show forms a 'distinctive and popular category of television with a ... diversity of associations' (McQuail, 1979: 146) and therefore is central to knowledge development. The quiz show enables us to learn more about why television programmes are appealing and what active roles the audiences play.

British television offers a broad range of programmes. Much of the output, according to Tunstall is a compromise between 'highbrow and lowbrow, educated and uneducated tastes, and informational and entertainment' factors. (Tunstall, 1983:32) This bears truth in relation to the quiz show, yet the quiz show expands the boundaries of these beliefs further. From a very serious show such as *Mastermind* to the purely fun and exuberant format of *Blankety Blank*, however there is one common element; the manipulation of knowledge and as an audience we learn from this display.

Quiz shows basically combine the notions of 'knowledge and entertainment' (Tulloch as cited Alvarado et al. 1993:108) in such a range of styles and formats that the normal conventions of learning are stretched to an extent which allows all types of viewers to enjoy and relish in. It must be regarded therefore, that the quiz show is an influential learning device through a variety of methods and means.

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