‘Moments and Opportunities’: On-air promos and the popular imagination of BBC iPlayer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal:</th>
<th>Critical Studies in Television</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript ID</td>
<td>Draft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Original Article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keywords:</td>
<td>BBC iPlayer, interstitials, on-demand television, paratexts, promos, public service broadcasting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

This essay examines the promotion of the BBC’s online streaming and download service, iPlayer, as it has been presented to audiences through broadcast television. Analysing transitions in the BBC’s representation of iPlayer, it consider the popular imagination of iPlayer within on-air promos during the 2010s, a period when the Corporation was striving to communicate its role as a digital public service broadcaster ahead of charter review. Examining the paratextual function of iPlayer interstitials, the essay considers the vernacular move from portals and platform mobility in the early 2010s to narratives increasingly based on the ‘need-states’ of audiences.

Keywords: BBC iPlayer; interstitials, on-demand television; paratexts; promos; public service broadcasting

On 16 April 2014, the BBC launched a new marketing campaign for its on-demand iPlayer service. This comprised a series of ten-second scenes depicting the British Easter vacation. These ranged from portraits of travel delay on motorways, in airports and at ferry ports to rain-battered tents and remote hamlets, both without access to wi-fi. Each vignette ended with the pink logo of BBC iPlayer and the strapline ‘download something good before you go’. Emphasising TV viewing as something mobile and portable, the trailers presented BBC iPlayer as a travel companion, a device ideally suited to the behaviours and rituals of individuals, couples and families on the move during a national holiday weekend. Appearing in the junctions of the BBC’s linear schedule, the promotional address of the trailers worked to reconstruct the ephemerality of broadcast television. Short in length, and functioning in TV’s interstitial space, these promotional texts focused on fleeting scenes of non-domestic
British life; they dramatized a digital media environment where the ephemeral nature of television, and its contexts of viewing, were being recast by asynchronous forms of media distribution and consumption.

This essay examines the promotion of BBC iPlayer as it has been presented to audiences through broadcast television; it considers how on-air promos have been used in the linear TV schedule to invite viewing behaviours beyond it. iPlayer branding and promotion became increasingly ubiquitous within the ‘flow’ of BBC television in the 2010s, consonant with the platform’s centrality to the broadcaster’s digital strategy. Launched on Christmas Day in 2007, BBC iPlayer initially provided access to broadcast television through a seven-day catch-up service delivered through personal computers. By the time of the ‘download something good’ campaign, however, iPlayer had developed across four screens (mobile, tablet, PC, television) and over 1200 devices, and was receiving ten million user ‘requests’ per day in the UK (BBC 2014). While BBC iPlayer accounted for just 2-3 percent of all BBC audience viewing in 2014, reflecting the endurance of live broadcast television in the UK,¹ the Corporation’s on-demand service had developed a powerful brand presence in British media life. Indeed, its promotional presence was such that a YouGov poll named ‘BBC iPlayer’ the UK’s number one brand in terms of consumer perception in 2013, ahead of Samsung (2nd), John Lewis (3rd), BBC.co.uk (6th), YouTube (7th) and Marks & Spencer (8th).

I seek to explore the promotional imagination of BBC iPlayer since 2010, the period when, according to James Bennett and Niki Strange, the product emerged as the ‘predominant strategic innovation of the Corporation’ (2014, 67). In doing so, this essay builds on a growing body of scholarship that considers how promotional and advertising materials contribute to the social construction of new technology. This incorporates work in film and television studies that examines how industrial discourses associated with digital delivery have produced vernaculars around media technology and consumption practice. In New Media and Popular Imagination, William Boddy suggests that ‘ephemeral television commercials can illuminate some of the wider issues involved in the take-up of new domestic electronic media since they typically enact dense and affective scenarios of socially embedded technologies’ (2004, 24). Boddy is concerned with examining how changes in the forms and uses of electronic media in the home during the twentieth century, principally in the US, have ‘served to incarnate and condense wider social tensions around the shifting
definitions of public and private space, the roles of men and women inside and outside the home, and the construction of personal and national identity’ (ibid, 4). Promotional materials become a key resource in this context, a vernacular site for examining how ‘strategic fantasies of consumption’ have taken hold in specific historical junctures, and in ways that have come to affect the meanings and fortunes of new communication technologies in particular markets.

Analysing developments in convergence culture, Chuck Tryon turns similarly to promotional materials, considering how advertisements by US cable television companies and mobile media firms ‘imagined platform mobility’ in the 2000s. Examining tropes of mobility, flexibility and convenience, Tryon considers how promotional texts helped ‘to naturalize new viewing platforms, while also showing how they will enable users to transcend the limitations of current media technologies’ (2012, 294). Focusing on the same period, Max Dawson (2014) examines commercials for digital video recording (DVR) platforms such as TiVO in the 2000s; he identifies linear TV ads as one of a number of discursive sites that helped develop the proposition of DVR technology ‘rationalizing’ the act of watching television, making it more efficient and productive as a leisure activity. While Tryon suggests that audiences were given representations of how digital screen technologies could be incorporated into daily life as a way to minimise their potential disruption to traditional viewing habits, Dawson sees a more extensive ideological project in DVR advertising at the turn of the twenty-first century; he suggests that digital television technologies inspired fantasies of watching television ‘faster’ and ‘better’, something he connects with neoliberal social ideals. In different ways, Boddy, Tryon and Dawson examine the discursive function of ephemeral advertising materials, something that Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson (2015) develop more broadly in their study of the way that promotional screen content imagined transformations reshaping media culture across the connected fields of mobile communication, television, film and live events in the late 2000s and early 2010s.

This essay’s focus on the promotional imagination of BBC iPlayer between 2010 and 2015 corresponds with a moment when the BBC was navigating its role as a digital public service broadcaster. Responding in 2009 to a government report called Digital Britain which laid out plans for developing digital infrastructure and participation in the UK, the BBC
described its role ‘not just in developing digital technologies, but in making them an
everyday experience for tens of millions of Britons’ (BBC 2009, 3). In the context of
government policy measures to develop and enable the social and economic potentialities
of ‘being digital’ (Carter, 2009), technologies like iPlayer were positioned by the BBC as
strategic in helping drive broadband take-up and the market of mobile and online TV. Of
course, iPlayer was not the only development in the nascent field of online television
distribution. While major networks in the free-to-air (ITV, Channel 4) and pay-TV (Sky, Virgin
Media) markets all developed catch-up and video-on-demand services in the second half of
the 2000s, hybrid digital television and broadband services such as BT Vision and standalone
providers like Netflix and Amazon became powerful new players in the subscription video-
on-demand market. Between 2006 and 2015, the BBC’s share of the broadcast market fell
from 40 to 25 percent (Higgins 2015, 223). This gave rise to searching questions about the
meaning and identity of public service broadcasting in a digital world. For Tony Hall, the
BBC’s Director-General from 2013, BBC iPlayer was central to the Corporation’s digital
future. Rather than a catch-up service offering extended windows for linear broadcast
content, iPlayer was increasingly conceived by BBC managers in the 2010s as an
entertainment destination in its own right, a personalized on-demand service described by
Hall as ‘the front door to many people to the whole BBC’ (Hall, 2013). It is my contention
that the BBC’s identity as a digital broadcaster - what Hall would call ‘an internet-first BBC
which belongs to everyone and where everyone belongs’ (2015) - would be performed
within TV thresholds and junctions, and through iPlayer logos and promos specifically.

Considering the BBC’s move to become a ‘digital destination’ in the 2000s, Niki
Strange (2011) notes the multitude of messages and calls to action that began to appear in
programme end-credits in the mid-2000s. Drawing attention to end-credit ‘windowing’ and
the use of interactive graphics such as the BBC’s Red Button, she examines the way that
online and interactive appeals in the ‘screen real estate’ of end-credits envisaged a
transforming audience, one inclined to pursue onward journeys to others types of (digital)
content. Similarly, Catherine Johnson demonstrates how television junctions reveal a
change in the ‘communicative ethos’ of broadcasting in the late 2000s (2013, 26).
Specifically, she points to the increasing significance of spatial, as well as temporal,
metaphors in the way that broadcast flow has been structured and presented through BBC
television junctions, visually representing ‘the parallel journeys that the viewer could take to watch television programmes across different channels or platforms’ (ibid, 31). Since 2007, the iPlayer logo and ‘play’ symbol has become part of the BBC’s spatial and temporal address; it has been used in end-credits as a reminder of programme availability through catch-up but also as a call to action, encouraging audiences to engage with content extensions and interactive services as part of the BBC’s digital offer. If, as Daniel Chamberlain contends, media interfaces ‘have offered personalization and control as a challenge to liveness and flow as the dominant ontologies and ideologies of contemporary entertainment media’ (2011, 251), the heightened visibility of the iPlayer logo and web address on terrestrial screens has become a mark of this ‘challenge’; it draws attention to a process where the ontology of television has been promoted as moving between broadcasting flow and digital database.

The popular imagination of BBC iPlayer is not simply shaped by the logos and promos that sit in television junctions but also by the very design of iPlayer as a media interface. Indeed, the architecture and look of iPlayer all help frame user experience in ways that contribute to iPlayer’s sense and meaning as a product. My interest, however, lies in the media paratexts (Gray 2010) that surround iPlayer and that create interpretive frames for the service. This brings to the fore bespoke promos that have appeared in the BBC’s broadcast schedule. Forming the basis of marketing campaigns which have been developed and extended through digital media, iPlayer interstitials range from fleeting 10-second teasers (such as ‘download something good before you go’) to 30-40 second trailers that enact or offer tutorials in iPlayer use. In addition, minute-long promos have been used to tell a brand story (‘always there when you need us’, ‘if you love something let it show’). In the remainder of this essay, I look at four interstitials shown across BBC channels in the 2010s which demonstrate transitions in the BBC’s representation of iPlayer. It is not my intention to provide an exhaustive account of the creative genesis of these promos, or provide a detailed discussion of their production history within and between BBC marketing teams and the promotional intermediaries such as Red Bee Media that have made them (see Grainge and Johnson 2015, 66-76). Instead, I want to provide a portrait of the BBC’s construction of iPlayer through the fleeting, but ubiquitous, form of on-air promos.
Pink portals, mainstream mums and recommendations of love: iPlayer interstitials

The history of BBC iPlayer is tied in policy terms to the review of the Corporation’s charter that took place between 2003 and 2006, the government process that reviews the role of the BBC and its right to collect the license fee from the British public. Following proposals in 2003 by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport that the sixth ‘core purpose’ of the BBC was ‘building digital Britain’, the 2006 charter review gave the Corporation responsibility for ‘helping to deliver to the public the benefit of emerging communications technologies and services’ (DCMS 2006, 3). iPlayer became a key BBC service in this context, and expressed the BBC’s public service role as a ‘trusted guide’ within the potentially disruptive world of digital distribution. According to Elizabeth Evans and Paul McDonald, BBC iPlayer and Channel 4’s equivalent on-demand service 4oD (redesigned as All 4 in 2014) are the most common platforms for digital distribution in the UK. They note that ‘during intense industrial change, the established broadcasters act as a signal of consistency and predictability in a moment of upheaval in the way that audiences can engage with media texts’ (2014, 167). In a period of connected viewing, iPlayer became, and to a large extent remains, the most prominent embodiment of television’s interface with digital in the UK. It is not in the scope of this essay to address the various techno-cultural debates that stem from this, from iPlayer’s formalization of streaming technology to questions of whether iPlayer should be available internationally or fall within the scope of the licence fee. Rather, I seek to trace vernacular shifts that have occurred within iPlayer interstitials since 2010 that encapsulate the BBC’s attempt to broaden the service within mainstream use. These shifts reflect the BBC’s development strategy for iPlayer, known internally as the ‘three beyonds’ - ‘beyond PC, beyond catch-up, beyond the early-adopter’ (Dan Taylor-Watt, interview. 16 December 2014).

Reflecting on the challenges of marketing iPlayer, the BBC’s audience research manager for the service, Alison Button, would comment in interview,

iPlayer is extremely difficult to market because if you show what it does, it looks like you’re trying to advertise Doctor Who and EastEnders - people get hung up
with the visuals of the content [iPlayer] has got - and if you try and focus on the features it sounds like a geeky advert for a website with a lot of technical lists and that is not what it is either. So it is really hard to get across. (interview 16 December 2014)

Button’s point of reference in making this observation was a marketing campaign in 2010 that wedded the visuals of BBC content to images of technological wonder. Developed on the cusp of the multiscreen explosion associated with tablets and smartphones, this campaign used the motif of the digital portal to enact the discovery of iPlayer’s ‘next level’; the campaign depicted people (mostly in their twenties and thirties) stepping and jumping through a mystical pink gateway that hovered magically in city streets, across the face of buildings, and in a forest outside a tent.

*Insert Fig. 1. iPlayer as portal: the ‘Next Level’ campaign (2010)*

In metaphoric terms, the depiction of iPlayer as a ‘pink portal’ was of its time. Indeed, Will Brooker suggests that the representation of digital platforms within popular narratives in the late 2000s often used the imagery and language of portals as a means of ‘training us in the uses of digital technology and emphasizing the social mastery that results from understanding the world as data, and learning to read it, navigate it and manipulate it’ (2010, 554). By this account, the pink portal trailers imagined the BBC as a world of data, an environment that could be read, navigated and manipulated by jumping through iPlayer’s digital threshold. Foregrounding the facility of iPlayer to recommend programmes to friends online and remember personal favourites, iPlayer was portrayed as an electronic cosmos. The promos depicted pink auroras containing the literal stars of the BBC’s primetime schedule - digital constellations that could be touched and shared by anyone stepping into the BBC’s online universe. Reminding audiences of the public service value of this digital experience, the promos finished with the strapline ‘your very own BBC’. The ‘next level’ campaign was the first to position iPlayer as an entertainment destination, a portal that had multiple functions that enabled new ways of encountering BBC content (favourites, recommendations, downloading, parental lock) rather than as a simple device for catch-up. However, Button notes that the ‘next level’ campaign didn’t ‘cut through’ in marketing
terms, either in the way that it sought to convey iPlayer in experiential terms, or in communicating with audiences beyond early-adopting (male) users. This led to alternative vernacular strategies in the way that the BBC sought to ‘get across’ iPlayer in the design of on-air promos.

The popular imagination of iPlayer would shift in the early 2010s as managerial discourse at the BBC focused on the ‘three beyond’ strategy. This would correlate with the extension of iPlayer as a multiplatform device, but also with attempts to expand mainstream usage, tenets of the BBC’s public service remit to drive new digital platforms and consumption patterns among a wide-ranging demographic. In 2012, a 40-second trailer was broadcast in the BBC schedule called ‘beyond the computer’. Moving away from the imagery of portals, the promo represented the ‘play’ logo of iPlayer descending onto screen devices being used in buildings and spaces across the UK. Set to a ballad with the lyric ‘I’ve been searching all my days’, the play logo dropped quietly onto buses, beach huts, canal boats, office blocks, bus stops, holiday homes, windmills, council flats, terraced houses, even portable toilets. Contemplative in tone, the trailer ended with a shot of a twinkling urban night sky with multiple pink logos falling to the ground.

Insert Figure 2, ‘Beyond the computer’ (2012)

Released in the year of the final switchover from analogue to digital terrestrial television in the UK, ‘beyond the computer’ depicted iPlayer as something existing in the national ether. In the same period that households in the UK were being trained through government information leaflets and TV campaigns to prepare for digital switchover, the promo vernacularized the discourse of ‘digital Britain’. One of a number of images of platform mobility developed by television and telecommunication companies in this period (Tryon 2012), ‘beyond the computer’ gave mobile digital culture a public service imprimatur. Promoting the ability to watch ‘your favourite BBC programmes wherever and whenever you want to’, the ad mapped the BBC’s world of data onto British spaces and spectrums. Although bearing out Chuck Tryon’s observation that ‘media mobility promotes a more fragmented, individualized notion of spectatorship’ (2012, 288), iPlayer promos conveyed digital connectivity as a project of collective national bearing. According to the BBC, ‘a fully connected digital Britain could be a nation in which everyone, irrespective of income or circumstance, could benefit from the social, cultural, economic and practical benefits of the
new digital environment’ (2009, 3). ‘Beyond the computer’ offered spatialized images of these ‘practical benefits’, audiences empowered to access BBC content according to their own schedules in a port-a-loo if they so wished.

The promo did not contain images of BBC content or focus on technical features. Instead of representing iPlayer as a luminous gateway that people jumped through, the promo accentuated the effortless portability of the service on tablets and mobile phones. Meanwhile it depicted users ‘beyond the early-adopter’, moving away from twenty-somethings and gadget-loving men and towards camera-shots and close-ups of women, the last image of the promo showing a middle-aged woman viewing her tablet alone, smiling contentedly in bed. If, as William Boddy argues, digital technology is often inflected with the rhetorical project of remasculinizing the television apparatus through fantasies of power and control (2004, 73), ‘beyond the computer’ mapped this sense of control more overtly to the public and private needs of female users. This gendering would continue in subsequent iPlayer interstitials, the female user becoming a discrete lens used in BBC marketing to imagine and drive mainstream take-up of the service.

Expanding mainstream usage of iPlayer was a key objective for the BBC in the 2010s. For those responsible for iPlayer strategy at the BBC, the fact that iPlayer accounted for under 3 percent of all BBC audience viewing signalled a problematic gap between high brand awareness and actual use among mainstream audiences. While rebutting claims that iPlayer’s audience had plateaued in 2015, the Head of BBC iPlayer, Dan Taylor-Watt (2015), remarked in a blog post, ‘the challenge for us is to get everyone using iPlayer – whether that’s to make the journey to work better, the holiday in the middle of no-where in the rain more enjoyable or just easily catch-up on what you’ve missed from the comfort of your sofa’. This rhetoric was also used by Victoria Jaye (‘Head of TV Content, BBC iPlayer’) who, at the time of writing, leads the ‘product development group’ for iPlayer within the BBC along with Taylor-Watt. As early as 2012, Jaye explained her view that getting everyone to use iPlayer meant communicating the relevance, rather than simply the availability, of iPlayer to audiences. She commented,
I have always said that to get mainstream audiences into iPlayer, we have to answer a need for them . . . we have got to solve their entertainment needs rather than present them with new, clever technology . . . Brand awareness of iPlayer is very high in the UK, but large sectors of the population still don’t use us regularly, so why is there the gap? They (mainstream audiences) just don’t think it is relevant to their entertainment needs and I think that is the thing we have got to crack. We want iPlayer to be a daily habit for audiences. Promotion is a key part of getting audiences to think iPlayer is the place where they want to go first, for the best entertainment (interview. 2 July 2012)

By Jaye’s account, ‘beyond the computer’ was a brand awareness trailer. In this respect, it was significant in reminding broadcast viewers about the availability of the service but not as focused on communicating relevance, of helping ‘big television audiences understand the value that is delivered to their viewing television, how it transforms it and enables it on more of their terms’ (ibid). The next major campaign focused more purposefully on what Jaye calls the ‘need-states’ of audiences (interview, 16 December 2014). Rather than a ballad to platform mobility, the on-air promo that accompanied the launch of a redesigned iPlayer in March 2014 identified ‘moments and opportunities’ where iPlayer could fit into people’s daily lives. Focusing on what the BBC audience and marketing team for iPlayer referred to as ‘mainstream mums’, the campaign would enact a vernacular shift in iPlayer promotion in the mid-2010s, the service framed in relation to ephemeral moments in everyday British life.

The focus on mainstream mums developed from audience and marketing analysis by the BBC that used questionnaire data to identify six main demographic segments of the iPlayer audience. These were based on life stage and included the segments 16-24, 25-39 (with and without children), 40-55 (men and women), and 55+. Mainstream mums became a key target group within this breakdown and described females ‘in their thirties and forties who have probably got some kids, have the least time because they are juggling work and children and families and everything. And they often have no control of the remote because either dad has got it or the kids have got it’ (Alison Button, interview. 16 December 2014).
As an audience personae, ‘mainstream mums’ were seen to represent a group ‘who just think it [iPlayer] is not for them . . . because they think it is a bit geeky or they think they have to be a super user on the phone’ (ibid.). This provided the context for a sixty second television promo called ‘always there when you need it’ which developed a sense of BBC iPlayer as a tool, friend and form of support. Focusing on the 25-39 segment (with children) - with the 16-24 segment figured, in marketing parlance, as ‘the halo’ - the promo used The Smith’s accessible, up-tempo hit ‘This Charming Man’ to code a depiction of bustling, on-the-go, iconoclastically British life.

_Insert Figure 3. ‘Always there when you need it’ (2014)_

In narrative terms, ‘always there when you need it’ enacted a range of scenes corresponding with prospective iPlayer ‘moments’. These included, to name just four, ‘half term when you need to get things done’ (depicting a mother on the phone with children running noisily around the table), ‘the breakroom where no-one talks to each other’ (two colleagues of different generations uneasily sharing lunchtime), ‘waiting for your mates to wake up after a sleepover at his house’ (a young boy gazing wistfully out of a bedroom window), and ‘Dad’s total domination of the remote’ (a father wrestling the TV remote from his three young daughters). While the trailer played on linear television, other moments more relevant to 16-24s (e.g. a Sunday morning hangover) were extracted and played through digital media. Following on from the ‘download something good’ teasers described at the start of this essay, ‘always there when you need it’ connected iPlayer with scenarios of social and familial need. Unlike ‘beyond the computer’ which dwelt on individualized images of platform mobility, ‘download before you go’ and ‘always there when you need it’ imagined scenes where iPlayer could fit into the time-pressed lives of people negotiating hectic, harassed, occasionally hungover and sometimes socially awkward moments of the day. Without showing a single screen device, the promo focused on iPlayer’s capacity to meet entertainment needs and become a ‘daily habit’ within fleeting moments of the day.

According to Max Dawson, digital television technologies in the US became linked in the 2000s to prevailing discourses of attention management. He suggests that digital video recorders, in particular, were ‘reimagined as a time-management tool, a defence against distraction, an educational instrument or parenting aid, and the DVR owner as an enterprising investor in her own time and attention’ (2014, 225). In many ways, ‘download
before you go’ and ‘always there when you need it’ accurately fit this description in their various depictions of dead travel time, and situations where children need occupying.

Where Dawson connects promotional discourses around the DVR to wider neoliberal ideologies, however - notably the reflexive project of learning how to allocate attention profitably - I would argue that the promotional imagination of iPlayer is parsed differently in these and other trailers. In discursive terms, iPlayer promos have been used to make an argument for the public value of the BBC. As Alison Button suggests, echoing comments by Victoria Jaye, the tactical purpose of ‘always there when you need it’ was to focus on ‘the people who have all the right kit and are easily competent to do it and yet they’re not seeing that they could get value from the BBC and catch up on the programmes they love’ (interview. 16 December 2014). The language of value invoked here was widely used at the BBC between the charter reviews of 2006 and 2016. According to Niki Strange, ‘public value’ was adopted wholesale by the BBC in the 2000s ‘as a notion for achieving efficient public management’ (2011, 135). In one sense the managerial goal of maximizing the efficient delivery and consumption of BBC content can be seen to connect with the ideology of neoliberalism mapped by Dawson. At the same time, what Strange calls the BBC’s attempt to ‘reframe notions of public service as “public value” in the digital age’ (ibid.) develops from wider attempts to rationalize and protect the BBC from the assault of hostile commercial rivals and a Conservative government seemingly intent on reducing its size. Indeed, attacks on the BBC became acute in the years leading up to charter review in 2016, and in ways that had a bearing on promotional discourse around BBC iPlayer.

This was especially marked with the publication of a government green paper in July 2015 that acted as a post-election, pre-charter broadside. In what can be seen as an early attempt by the newly elected Conservative Party to diminish the BBC’s role and operations as a public service broadcaster, the green paper presented a number of proposals designed to narrow the BBC’s scope. This included the suggestion that the Corporation no longer make popular entertainment but, instead, restrict itself to highbrow programming supplied less readily by commercial broadcasters. It is in this context that a pan-BBC promotional campaign called ‘if you love something let it show’ took on particular discursive resonance, celebrating the BBC as a provider of popular entertainment for all. Released four months before the green paper, and broadcast through 2015, the sixty-second promo featured a
cover of The Beatles ‘All you need is love’ and conveyed BBC content in terms of affect. In narrative terms, the promo captured people in moments of happiness, pride, absorption, and joy. This included a father carrying his daughter to bed, a child cooking, siblings at play in the kitchen, a man avoiding football scores in a shop window, four twenty-something girls dancing in a bedroom, an elderly Afro-Caribbean man conducting music while listening to headphones, another pensioner sitting proudly on a lawnmower, and a grey-haired couple ballroom dancing. As the chorus of the song builds, a red heart appeared on screen with the name of BBC content relevant to the image - ♥ CBeebies storytime app, ♥ Bake Off, ♥ Doctor Who, ♥ Match of the Day, ♥ Annie Mac, ♥ The Proms, ♥ Gardeners’ World, ♥ Strictly. The campaign was accompanied by interstitial videos of celebrities explaining BBC programmes they love, and a website curating collections of ‘most loved’ programmes. These collections were based on ratings, online data and social media, but also interactive clicks made through a heart button included within programme information pages on BBC iPlayer.

*Insert Figure 4 ‘If you love something let it show’ (2015)*

The core purpose of the campaign was to facilitate practices of sharing recommendations through iPlayer. This was linked to an initiative called ‘myBBC’, launched by the Corporation in March 2015 to encourage audiences to sign-in when using BBC online services. At one level, ‘if you love something’ helped foreground the BBC’s focus on data as a mechanism of delivering more personalized BBC content. The prominent heart-shaped icon within the promo served as a ‘call to action’. By inviting viewers to use the love button and discover the associated website and hashtag, the campaign was designed to connect iPlayer to social media behaviours and an ethos of ‘public service recommendation’.

Situating the BBC’s place within a culture of connectivity, the promo was an articulation of Tony Hall’s mission statement for the BBC in the internet era, in particular the ambition to ‘reinvent public service broadcasting through data’ (Hall 2015). At the same time, however, the promo inscribed values of universality and mixed-programming in its symbolic inscription of BBC content. Set to a cover version of one of the Beatles’ most recognisable songs, the promo referenced programmes and enacted quotidian scenes that conveyed a sense of common ‘feeling’ for the BBC. Reminiscent of the BBC’s evangelical ‘Perfect day’ video in 1997 (Grainge 2010) - released in a previous election year to shore up popular
support for the BBC - the affectivity of the promo anticipated tempestuous political winds. With charter review looming, the promo would serve the BBC’s own political ‘need states’ in a moment when the Corporation’s public service identity - specifically the BBC’s role providing shared viewing experiences around popular entertainment – was being challenged by newly vituperative government attacks.

The on-air promos discussed in this essay form part of a lineage of marketing texts that have been used by the BBC to help justify the Corporation’s value and unique funding arrangement to government and the viewing public (Johnson 2012, 84-111). By examining four key paratexts between 2010 and 2015, I have traced shifts in the marketing address of iPlayer in a period when the BBC was striving to communicate its role as a digital broadcaster (Johnson and Grainge, 2018). Initially marketing iPlayer in 2007 through a focus on catch-up - captured in the tagline ‘making the unmissable unmissable’ - the BBC sought in the 2010s to extend the function and imagination of the service as a mainstream entertainment destination. In vernacular terms, this was signalled by a transition from the metaphor of portals and the rhetoric of platform mobility to a narrative emphasis on ‘need-states’ - promos that enacted the role of iPlayer within fleeting, everyday moments where the social practices of on-demand television (both real-life and networked) were seen to have value.

Considering the transition from analogue to digital television since the late 1990s, William Boddy points to ongoing uncertainty about television’s ‘role as signifier of national identity (and public service broadcasting’s political rationale in the UK and elsewhere), its ontology of liveness and photographic realism, and its place as a consumer product within the gendered household’ (2004, 124). In different ways, iPlayer promos articulate these questions of national identity, media ontology, and gendered domestic (and non-domestic) practice. Along with it, they express the attempt by the BBC to frame the Corporation’s public service rationale in a digital world. If, as Charlotte Higgins suggests, the BBC stands in the 2010s as ‘both beloved institution and cultural and political battleground’ (2015, 212), iPlayer promos help illuminate not only the social construction of on-demand television in the UK market, but also the ongoing negotiation of the BBC’s beloved-cum-battleground presence in British media life. As a cultural and critical resource, on-air promos for BBC iPlayer provide their own ‘moment and opportunity’ to consider how ephemeral TV
interstitials have helped to position the BBC’s digital relevance and social role in an age of public service media.

References


Bennett, James, and Niki Strange. 2014. ‘Linear Legacies: Managing the Multiplatform Production Process’. In *Making Media Work*, edited by Derek Johnson, Derek Kompare, and Avi Santo, 63-89. New York: New University Press


Tryon, Chuck. 2012. ‘Make Any Room For Your TV: Digital Delivery and Media Mobility’. *Screen* 53 (3): 287-300

http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/mcst
According to research by Ofcom, 89 percent of all television viewing was live in 2013 (Ofcom 2014, 141).

In 2013, for example, iPlayer logos signalled initiatives such as BBC Playlister, a personal music platform enabling audiences to create playlists from BBC radio and TV content. Similarly, in 2014, iPlayer was positioned as the gateway to BBC iWonder, newly launched interactive educational guides developed around programme-related themes.

The mobile app for iPlayer launched in 2011 and was downloaded 28 million times in its first three years (BBC 2014).

This redesign introduced new features within the iPlayer’s user interface such as smarter search and image-led navigation, online first commissions, and collections of curated programming, among other technological-editorial changes (see Johnson and Grainge, 2018).

Writing about the ‘culture of connectivity’, José Van Dijck suggests that ‘many of the habits that have recently become permeated by social media platforms used to be informal and ephemeral manifestations of social life’ (2013, 6). On these terms, ‘if you love something let it show’ foregrounds ephemeral moments in daily life as a means of promoting the ‘platformed sociality’ of iPlayer.
Fig. 1. iPlayer as portal: the 'Next Level' campaign (2010)
18x13mm (600 x 600 DPI)
Fig. 2, ‘Beyond the computer’ (2012)
21691x12192mm (1 x 1 DPI)
Fig 3. ‘Always there when you need it’ (2014)
21691x12192mm (1 x 1 DPI)
Fig. 4 'If you love something let it show' (2015)
32512x18288mm (1 x 1 DPI)