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*After Dark*: Channel 4's innovation in television talk

**Abstract**

This paper explores the significance of the late night British discussion programme *After Dark* (Channel 4, 1987-1997) in terms of the production contexts of the time and its distinctive form and structure as television. *After Dark* emerged during a period of significant transition in the political economy of British broadcasting, with a major factors being the creation of Channel 4. As part of its extension of the possibilities of television as a cultural form, Channel 4 attempted to break the prevailing temporal frame of television output and this was most evident in the open-ended nature of *After Dark's* transmission, with the programme running into the early hours of the morning with no fixed end-point. Critical attention to it serves among other things to place in sharper perspective the variety of alignments possible between the discourses television produces and those in play more broadly across the different spaces of the political and social. In particular, it highlights the distinctive forms of speech and deliberation (and therefore the distinctive modes of viewing and listening) informing the programme's design.

Keywords: talk television; Channel 4; television production; innovation; political debate

In this article, we explore the late night British discussion programme *After Dark* (Channel 4, 1987-1997) in terms both of the production contexts of the time and of its distinctive form and structure as television. The setting into which *After Dark* emerged was a period of significant transition in the political economy of British broadcasting, with major factors being the creation and emergence of Channel 4, the development (largely on C4) of new and innovative forms of factual programming, and the early signs of the importing of television formats from non-domestic territories (Harvey, 1994; Born, 2003; Sparks, 1995). In terms of the form and structure of the programme, *After Dark* is indicative in part of wider cultural and ideological shifts in broadcasting towards increased representations of 'everyday' non-elite contributors and engagement with 'sensitive' themes. It also shows that exploration of the further possibilities of television as a cultural form which Channel 4, in particular, was seen to champion. There was a determined focus to break the traditional temporal frame of television output and in the case of *After Dark* this was most evident in the open-ended nature

of transmission, with the programme running into the early hours of the morning with no fixed end-point. The main analytic interest of *After Dark* lies neither in its development of approaches from earlier British broadcasting (although precursors are apparent) nor in any direct influence on what came later. It lies, rather, in its exploiting for a few years the possibilities of a particular phase in British television's economy and culture to create a programme of high originality, not least in the political and social relations of the kinds of speech it generated.

It is important to note that although we wish to place *After Dark* in its production context and in the larger setting of the television industry at the time, in this article we place considerable emphasis on how the programme looked and sounded. We do this especially, in relation to its distinctive use of talk, by developing a scheme of analysis with examples. So this is a case-study in media form as much as it is a study in television production history.

**After Dark and Channel 4: the context of indie innovation**

*After Dark* first aired on British television in 1987 on Channel 4, and subsequently ran on the channel until 1997 although from 1991 it ceased to be a regular slot and appeared in the form of an occasional 'special', a transition which some commentators regarded as the effective 'death' of the original idea.[1] Channel 4, which began broadcasting in 1982, is widely credited with revitalising British factual television in the 1980s, with the creation of a range of series including the often controversial current affairs series 'Dispatches', 'Diverse Reports' and 'The Friday Alternative', alongside an extended news programme (Channel 4 News, 1982 - ). As Georgina Born has argued, the focus was on 'aesthetic and political invention' during the 1980s, and on challenging the 'prevailing norms of British television' (2003: 778). *After Dark* can certainly be seen within this innovative, risk-taking tradition. Mark Duguid notes of it:

> One of the most successful innovations was also the simplest: a late-night, open-ended discussion programme treating a single topic in detail, with no filmed reports, aggressive interviewers, studio audience, political soundbites, computer graphics or video effects. (Duguid, n.d.).

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[1] The show was dropped by the then Channel 4 Chief Executive, Michael Grade, in 1991, leading to a campaign for its reinstatement by a range of public figures, with this programme of occasional specials seen as the 'killing off' of the series (Wells, 2003).

The idea for the weekly series (transmitted on Friday nights beginning at 11 pm) was pitched by Sebastian Cody, a producer with a background in talk show production at the BBC, to Jeremy Isaacs (now Sir Jeremy Isaacs), the first Chief Executive of Channel 4 from 1982-1988. Cody had worked on the chat show *Parkinson* (BBC, 1971-82), which dominated the talk show landscape at the time, alongside the political talk show *Question Time*, the 'twin pillars' of prevailing talk broadcasting (Cody, 2015). After Dark was based on the principle of broadcasting live, and letting the guests decide when the conversation was finished, a combination which, according to Cody, 'produced, as if by magic, chatty grenades, exploding first in central Europe and then the UK, disturbing the smooth efficiency of the schedules and the peace of mind of the broadcasters with happy regularity' (Cody, 2008, no pagination).

The format for *After Dark* was derived from the Austrian discussion programme *Club 2*, which had run with significant success on Austrian television since 1976.[1] Cody acquired the rights to this show for his production company Open Media, and then convinced Channel 4 to commission the programme on a trial basis. By all accounts, Cody found a highly receptive buyer for his idea in Jeremy Isaacs, as among other things, it involved broadcasting into the early hours of the morning under the newly commissioned Channel 4 *Nighttime* scheduling slot, introduced as competition to the ITV companies provision of late night content (Isaacs, 2015).

*After Dark*, following the Club 2 model, had several features which marked it out from other talk-based discussion programmes of the time. Most notably, as indicated above, there was no set running time for an edition (The *Nightime* strand ran until around 3am three days a week). Instead, the approach to the programme's length was made clear at the start of the first ever edition of *After Dark* by the show's host Anthony Wilson, when he said 'essentially we will run until the discussion reaches a natural conclusion'. Other strongly original factors included a non-confrontational host (chairing the conversation in a manner more akin to a seminar discussion), and a mixture of social elites (largely drawn from politics, aristocracy, academia and industry) and unknown 'ordinary' people, albeit people often with extraordinary experiences to recount. The programme prided itself on its ability to get contributions from types of individuals who did not normally appear on mainstream television and who were socially positioned outside of the radar of mainstream journalism. Its format encouraged dissent and openness, as Helena Kennedy (the host for the second series) has written:

I was attracted to the format because it offered guests an opportunity for frank discussion, freed from the need for soundbites, and from the need to cut off the flow of frank talk midstream. The programme was liberating for participants, and I liked that the host was really a facilitator and not an interviewer. (Kennedy, 2003)

At the heart of *After Dark's* 'contract' with the viewer was its liveness. It was broadcast live with no delay, although Channel 4 had the ability to cut to a commercial break or mute the sound if it was felt that something legally controversial was being broadcast. *After Dark* was framed and distinguished from much other contemporaneous television output by this double focus on lateness and liveness. Its lack of a scheduled endpoint was an essential element of its offer to the audience, as was the inherent risk (legal and social) involved in the interactions and claims which emerged from the individual editions. Sarah Andrew, an early Channel 4 lawyer, notes:

A Channel 4 lawyer was always on hand to explain the handling of particularly sensitive areas to guests, informally warning them of dangers ahead… It was especially important to give guidance on contempt of court as guests risked a criminal offence if they committed contempt. The Channel 4 duty lawyer sat up in the gallery to spot problems as they happened. If disaster struck the lawyer would speak to the host at the earliest possible (commercial) break. If the host had not already responded by making it clear that a guest's libellous views were his or hers alone, that is. (Andrew, 1991).

The inherent risk of *After Dark* was clearly a key attraction following from its 'live' transmission, in a way that prefigured the more controlled risks of live reality television, such as *Big Brother* in the 1990s.[2] The show acquired high levels of audience appreciation, with something of a cult following and widespread testimony to the difficulty of switching off once sat in front of it. Given its channel, character and slot, the show was never made in expectation of a large audience in terms of British television in the late 1980s. Nevertheless, market researchers for the channel noted that "around three million saw some of *After Dark* in its first slot."(Matthews, 1987). One year later, an audience survey found that the show was viewed by 13% of all adults, with 28% of young men having watched at least one edition. (BMRB survey, 1988). This perhaps surprising sense of a programme inserting itself into the culture through irregular (and often partial) viewing contributed to the programme's national profile being stronger than a straight indication of viewing figures would suggest and has to

be recognised when considering overall impact. An anecdotal indication of the kind of presence of the programme in national life, and the audience connections it could make, is given in a piece by the author James Rusbridger in *The Listener* magazine: "When I appeared on a Channel 4 *After Dark* programme recently my postman, milkman and more than two dozen strangers stopped me in the street and said how much they'd enjoyed it and quoted verbatim extracts from the discussion".

That viewing was often rather more 'accidental' rather than 'planned' (a circumstance captured in the comic alternative name for the programme 'After Closing Time') is suggested, also in The Listener, by Milton Shulman, who noted:

….I never plan to watch *After Dark* and usually am surprised to see that it is on when I return from some social occasion on Saturday night and switch on the box at one o'clock.... (June 1988).

That the critics were largely so strongly positive about AD from the beginning (for instance, the Evening Standard described it as 'totally compelling viewing") either in general or in relation to specific programmes, was also a factor in its more general visibility, at least for a particular demographic. [3]

### *After Dark* in Broader Context.

As well as being related to shifts in the production and form of television at the time, *After Dark* also needs to be understood as a product of its broader socio-cultural contexts, which included a period of heightened cultural opposition to forms of 'the conventional' during the 1980s, finding its modes of counter-cultural expression more sharply on early Channel 4 output than elsewhere. The 1980s (in particular the early 1980s) is often remembered in the UK as a time where an early versions of neoliberal consensus was forming in relation to the New Right and the Thatcher government (Hay, 2004). While this is true of the main narrative of Westminster politics, it is important to note that the Conservative government was highly unpopular amongst a large swathe of the British population.[4] *After Dark*, and Channel 4 more generally, therefore need to be seen within the terms of the tensions caused by this

combination of 'strong' governmental direction and crosscurrents of cultural and political dissent.

By positioning its more 'ordinary' figures in direct discourse with a range of those from the political or cultural 'establishment' *After Dark* enacted a certain questioning and disruption of a status quo which was largely reified in British talk shows such as *Parkinson* and *Question Tim*e. We are now far more habituated to the appearance and sometimes the prominence given to 'ordinary' citizens in contemporary media culture, particularly in the wake of reality television and access based documentary (Corner, 2002; Hill, 2005; Dovey, 1998), but in the mid-1980s this was a significant media shift, and one which prefigured later shifts in broadcasting with the emergence of the BBC Community Programme Unit and epitomised in projects such as 'Video Nation' (BBC, 1993-2011).

The *After Dark* team promoted their 'outsider' status in seeking to project themselves as producing an excitingly different and politically adventurous kind of programme. Interviewed in 2015, Cody returned to this narrative of distinction from mainstream television production. Much of this stance seems justified since the programme often involved a deliberate eschewal of TV production norms (including some which still dominate today). For example, *After Dark* developed a deliberate practice of employing those outside of the mainstream media production circuit. Cody described how they deliberately sought to employ researchers with backgrounds from beyond television production, including print based investigative journalism, magazine satire, and were particularly keen on maverick researchers with connections to the intelligence services and 'hidden' aspects of society. They even briefly employed a taxi driver. For Cody, this was key to the diversity of After Dark's agenda: 'There was no collective bias: the staff were a motley crew who fought hard to promote their individual interests. And with them came a motley range of contacts' (Cody, 2008, no pagination). Such hiring practices were possible for Cody in the transformed context of independent production in the 1980s (Lee, 2011), where 'freed' from the constrictions of the highly unionised employment practices of the BBC and ITV companies, Cody was able to hire a much wider range of researchers on short term contracts.

In the following sections, we turn to offer a closer look at the kind of talk which was generated, giving examples across a range of editions in order to see in more detail how the choices of subject emerging from the production culture and the broader social context were given their extended *After Dark* expression.

**Generic innovation and TV talk.**

The varieties of television talk have generated what is now a large literature of academic exploration (see, for instance, Scannell ed., 1991 Livingstone and Lunt 1994, Tolson 2001). Some of this contains analysis of a broadly sociological orientation and some of it relates with varying degrees of directness to the conceptual and 'technical' approaches of linguistics. The development of 'talkshow' and 'reality' formats as key parts of broadcasting output has produced great interest in these formats alongside the rather more established interest in the talk of the news and of the journalistic or documentary interview (as in Montgomery 2007).). The importance of talk to a programme's identity and its 'hearing relations' together with the complexity of its movement, even in programmes in which its function appears simple, have been a regular point of exploration. Here, we are more concerned with broader questions of programme form than with questions of close language analysis, but in examining a series where the originality and the appeal were so clearly a matter of its talk, assessment of how speech figures in that broader form are central.

The kinds of talk generated in *After Dark* connect back to earlier broadcasting and forwards to the development of newer formats. The connection back is to the types of necessarily 'live' serious discussion programmes which radio and then television developed, particularly the former, in which a small group of guests openly debated an issue (perhaps a 'pressing question of the day' or an item of current news) under the light management of a presenter/chairperson.[5] There is also some linkage to earlier and concurrent forms of the 'chatshow', although the focus in this mode on interview exchanges between celebrity host and celebrity guests before a studio audience as well as a viewing audience, make this a very different format from *After Dark*. The connection forwards is with aspects of the intensive growth of talk formats from the 1990s, ranging in the 'seriousness' of the themes, the size of the group from which talk is generated (which could be from an 'active audience' in a large studio gathering), the social mix of speakers (particularly the relative emphasis on expert, celebrity or 'ordinary' participants), the prominence of the presenter and the mix of chairing and questioning at work in the presentation. These later talk formats include some shows produced within the 'reality' frame, where a sense of overhearing, spontaneity and the potential for confrontation and shock are also to be found, albeit in very different kinds of programme design.

The framing conditions for *After Dark* talk can be seen as the product of three main factors, aspects of which we have noted earlier. First of all, there is the length of the programmes, often extending several times beyond the duration of earlier 'serious debate' and well past that of celebrity-based interview shows too. This spaciousness provides the conditions for the markedly relaxed movement of the programme in its turn-taking exploration of a theme and it is the ground for its special, expansive kind of late-night sociability, one which, as we observed, combines elements of extended after-dinner conversation, including the drinking of alcohol, with some of the contemplative focus of a seminar (both aided by the darkened studio set). By pushing through into the early hours of the morning as a live show (compared say, to a film or a repeat) the programme can be seen to have created a kind of break with conventional 'television time' at that point in the history of the medium in Britain, creating a special time within which a distinctively 'intimate' relationship, both between speakers and then between studio space and home space, was produced. This effect is, of course, strengthened by a point we noted above - the absence of a studio audience (whose presence becomes a key element of the bright and lively social projection of many later forms of talkshow).

A second, framing factor is the format of the programme, some aspects of the context and history of which we discussed above. A number of often very different types of person, placed at differing points socially, are brought together with the serious aims of offering testimony from their diverse experiences and exchanging opinion and judgement in a climate of deliberation and reflection, including self-reflection.[6] The 'guests' number about seven or eight, allowing for a wide range of input but also allowing for each guest to make if they wish several contributions of different length across the whole programme. The chair's role, although it varies slightly, is generally that of a restrained host rather than a vigorous questioner, much less still an interviewer. This involves getting things started by direct-address to the viewer (thereby creating a brief explicit link from the darkened room to the outside world before viewers start to 'overhear' what appears in many respects to be the 'private' talk). After the introductions, the talk of the chair involves opening up a first 'round' of testimony and comment from the guests, and lightly moderating the debate in its movement through various aspects of the issue and through points of contention. We say more about the phases of the programme below but the fact that the key dynamic of the talk is the relationship between the guests (and then the transformation of that into a parasocial relationship between guests and viewer) rather than a relationship between guest and chair or

a relationship between guest and viewers (as in the performative self-consciousness of many celebrity interviews) marks *After Dark* out as quite different from many programmes before and afterwards.

A third factor can be identified in the kinds of theme around which programmes were developed. Some selected themes across the whole run – pornography, intelligence, press freedom, drugs, money, alternative medicine, Princess  Diana, satanic child abuse – show not only the range but the nature of the thematic focus. It could be taken from recent news or it could be a longstanding issue in political and social life. Even when apparently quite narrowly focussed, it allowed for a multi-aspectual treatment, one which would be brought out gradually across the accounts and exchanges. It often displayed not only a diversity of first-hand experience, but also sharp conflicts of value. Importantly, it also allowed for the raising of questions concerning the 'facts' around which contrasting positions developed. The quiet search for points of confirmable factuality was a key and self-conscious project of the programme running alongside its interest in the exchange of views.

Finally, under this heading, it is important to note how much *After Dark* was a visual not just an aural experience. It presented a seen not just an overheard encounter, with facial expressions, postural changes and the physical disposition of the speech in the darkened space a key part of an attraction which was both sensory and cognitive, a 'live' night-time encounter which, in the very terms of its staging, as noted above, had about it some of the dramatic appeal of a play.

**Programme structure: phases and forms.**

As we shall show in the examples to follow, the kinds of talk employed in the programme vary considerably. There is a prominent role give to what we have called here 'testimony', that is the detailed description of a situation or circumstance of which the speaker has first-hand knowledge. This can take on a vigorously anecdotal turn, sometimes involving humour, or it can be soberly reflective, sometimes drawing openly on the biography of the speaker and sometimes offered within the terms of a more distanced 'matter-of-fact' exposition. These kinds of talk display strongly the speakers as 'people of experience', providing the whole programme with an embedding in a diversity of living. This counters any tendency towards the levels of abstraction which the exchange of views can involve when it is projected primarily as being between 'experts' (Livingstone and Lunt 1994 has a useful, early

discussion of this issue). The very variety of the kind of testimony talk produced, some of it markedly idiosyncratic, clearly contributes to the programme's interest in being about people as well as about topics.

A second kind of talk we can call 'propositional'. This involves the making of an argument for or against something, drawing on evidence which may be 'testimony' but may also claim the status of established fact. Speakers, again, vary considerably in their performance of propositional speech, age and background clearly being factors here, although competence in putting a clear point of view, however briefly, is a prerequisite for selection as a guest, with few exceptions. Propositional statements are usually subsequently expanded, either by direct invitation or through questioning and the offering of contrary views.

This leads into a third kind of talk we can identify, 'contestation'. This may be in defence of an account or view advanced earlier alongside differing views, or it may involve speaking directly in opposition to the comments of another member of the group. Clearly, the tones at work can vary greatly, from the cool through to the heated and from the polite to the intentionally rude. The host/chair's job is to regulate the 'temperature' here[7] while recognising that part of the viewing attractions of the programme lies precisely in moments of disruption and confrontation of this kind (just as, in rather different ways, it would for the kinds of reality programme that came later). The talk of contestation can finish in forms of 'concluding summary' (involving variations of relationship between guests, including points of convergence). We can see this as a fourth category of talk, although it draws on all the other modes. Final comments often involve the business of adjusting previous claims in the light of what others have said. They are thus different from the speech at the early stages of a programme insofar as they can show how the programme itself, *during its running-time,* may work as an agent of change on the perspectives of its participants. This may be more a matter of revised phrasings, nodded agreement with others and murmurs of approval rather than explicit shifts but it is still quite a rare thing for television to be able to show, especially given more recent constraints of format and economies of time. It is a key feature of *After Dark*'s profile that it could do this, with important implications for the viewing relationship and the way in which viewers themselves were thereby partly positioned as people potentially open to an adjustment of view, a reworking of attitudes. Nevertheless, the talk of *After Dark* is always part of a structure in which the non-linear, relaxed route taken by the journey is finally of more value than the destination, whatever levels of resolving cogency this may

possess. Some final agreed formulations around points of convergence might be offered but consensus is mostly impossible and not sought by the chair.[8]

It is important to note that all these forms of talk, here only loosely identified, can be active at various points across a programme and that most editions of AD include a mix of very different talk across a programme's length. However, the different phases though which an edition progresses tend to give priority to one or other mode. For instance, the opening sections of the programme generally allow each guest to offer some thoughts about the topic based on experience, leading to various kinds of testimony as noted above.  Accounts can be of different lengths but the nature of them as each guest's 'establishing performance' within the programme means that although they can be short, or tackled in separate stages, they can run to over 5 minutes continuous speaking. 'Propositional' speech is either developed out of this directly or follows on from it after an interval or, in some cases, is used instead of 'testimony' as a starting point. It can also be lengthy, although the movement towards shorter contributions as part of 'exchange' shows itself here, as it does more obviously still in the phases of contestation and of summary in the final sections of a programme.  Single sentence questioning or assertion, often involving interruptions and a clash of speech, starts to replace steady turn-taking, although this livelier pattern, as it develops, still allows room for lengthier, more considered 'testimony' or 'propositional' contributions to be given space.[9]

Some Examples

a) Openings

A better sense of key aspects of how the programme works as 'overheard talk' can obviously be got by the consideration of a few examples. We can start by looking at two openings from early in its run. The first one is from the very first edition of the programme, entitled 'Secrets' and broadcast on 1 May 1987. The presenter/host was Anthony Wilson.

*A very good evening and a warm welcome to After Dark, a new television programme, new not because it's the first time we're on the air, it's a new approach to a discussion programme in that er well it's live, I have 1 minute past 12, you check your watches you know we're live. It's also open-ended, a lot of people here can go on talking until such time as they wish to stop talking. This will result perhaps not tonight, but perhaps tonight perhaps*

*certainly anyway in Fridays to come in a chemistry which will make it worth your staying up into the after dark hours.*

The second introduction is from the edition on 'Money', broadcast on 23th August 1988, with the presenter/host Henry Kelly.

*Hello and good evening. Welcome to After Dark. Our subject for discussion this evening and tomorrow morning is Money. The lack of it, the desire for it, the things that people will do for it and the things that people are forced to do by it. I suppose you could think just to begin with that er throughout the ages men sometimes have used money to get power and maybe get sex, women on the other hand occasionally have used power and sex to get money.*

The first example, not surprisingly for the opening programme set out the offer that *After Dark* makes to viewers, including the allure of moving in real time into the 'dark hours'. It also interestingly refers to the programme's 'chemistry', that mixing of different elements to which we have alluded above. The second example plunges straight into the topic, using ideas of sex and power within the gender contrast as an arresting way of initially glossing the topic's rich and contentious character.

b) Testimony

We have noted how testimony can occur at different points in a programme, to varying lengths, but that quite often an initial stretch of testimony speech serves to 'ground' what arguments or judgements a guest wants to advance. Below, we give two examples of such accounts from the early part of their respective programmes.

1) The first extract is from the 'After Diana' edition, 13 September 1997, which explored some of the factors behind her 'iconic' prominence and the unprecedented nature of the national grief and mourning which followed her death on August 31, 1997. The chair, Helena

Kennedy, asks a disabled male speaker about his own visits over the previous week to Kensington Palace, Diana's home.

*Well I actually went there Monday and er I spent all day there which was quite a nice experience because er the people who were there they were grieving and they were there for all the right reasons.  People were very pleasant and as I say I spent the whole day there from early afternoon until after teatime. And I went back on Thursday with a friend who wanted to see the flowers that I described but at that time they'd started to remove the flowers quite a bit and it was a lot dustier.*

Helena Kennedy: Why were you there, what was it that drew you to it?

*I think em the way the whole thing came about was that I met Princess Diana quite a few years ago. I'd been injured about a year in an accident, I was paralysed. And I'd met her at a small function and we'd spent about 20 minutes just sitting and talking. The two of us.*

For this edition, which will question in different ways the 'Diana phenomenon', such an account is a very strong segment of opening talk, one in which this guest, with a little cueing from the host, positively recounts a personal experience of the kind of mourning behaviour that will be subject to exploration and questioning by some of the others.

2) In some contrast with the above, the second example is from the much earlier edition 'Open to Exposure', broadcast 4 June 1988, which discussed the invasion of privacy by the Press and how this might or might not be justified in specific cases. The chair was  Ian Kennedy, who, in the first round of contributions, invited the ex M.P. Harvey Proctor to discuss how Press stories led to his resignation and criminal prosecution for sexual offences and how much he recognised himself in the picture of him they portrayed.

*In the last three years the press has decided to label me as some sort of monster and they were going to try and write stories and find things out and if they couldn't find things out they would er invent them and make them up. So no, I couldn't recognise myself and nor could my friends I think. The people who really know you are the ones who are the most sympathetic because they say this isn't you.*

When did the press get involved with you? (Ian Kennedy).

*Well I suppose probably during the 70s when I was a parliamentary candidate. I suppose in some detail from 1979 when I became a member of Parliament*

Here, the testimony is of someone presenting himself as a victim, or at least partly a victim, of bad journalistic practice, one whose high-profile personal experience is being fed into the programme's more general deliberations.

c) Propositionality

In this category, again loose and overlapping at points with the others we have suggested, the primary emphasis is on a sequence of argument. Claims are made on the basis of judgements and the basis for these claims is very often much wider than directly personal experience.

1) Our first example is from the first edition of the third series, broadcast 13 May 1989. It was called 'Out of Bounds' and concerned the intelligence services at a time when the Conservative government were deeply concerned about breaches of official secrecy. This was immediately following the publication of Peter Wright's book *Spycatcher,* about the activities of MI5 (in which he had been a senior serving officer), including the suggestion that Harold Wilson had been under surveillance during the period he was Prime Minister (ref here). It was chaired by John Underwood, who early on invited the Labour MP and ex-Minister Tony Benn to say something about his wish to see the accountability of the intelligence services improved by new legislation. Benn accepted the invitation as follows:

*Well I think apart from the stories that no doubt will emerge this evening, the crucial question is a constitutional question. What we're discussing is the relationship between the government and governed and the present government have said you have a lifelong relationship of confidentiality to the crown. Who is the Crown… The crown is a concrete emplacement, a state within a state, surrounded by barbed wire, which is always in power. Happens to be sympathetic, as far as I can make out, to conservative views of society.... Now the question really is whether that is an acceptable thing to have at the heart of what we call laughingly a democratic society.*

This is an example of a type of talk which occurs quite often in the programme when figures with a strong background in public speaking participate, although this is not the only way such figures speak and Benn himself uses other modes, including anecdote and short, contesting interventions, elsewhere. What is offered is a clear sequence of claims about deficits in present democracy. These are offered with a cool, poised confidence as simply regrettable, self-evident truths, even though Benn knows that several guests will strongly disagree with his radical assessment. It would be constraining for the programme to have too much of this kind of talk but its high value for *After Dark* here lies not only in the status and reputation of the speaker but the uncompromising controversiality, laced with scorn, it injects into the whole proceedings. It is a kind of talk that is certainly guaranteed, whatever else, to 'get things going'.

A shorter example of a propositional claim can be taken from a 1991 edition 'Prisons: Which Way Out?, broadcast 23 February , examining the current problems of the penal system.  A female sociologist is invited after a largely male-centred discussion to say something about how women figure in the picture being developed:

*Well in many ways women suffer by being in a system which bad as it is was actually designed for men and for men prisoners and so the whole system of privileges and education and access to what might be going by way of services is not really there for women who tend to be there for a very short period of time. And there are all sorts of problem with the fact there are so few women in prison, although certainly I'm not arguing there should be more.*

This statement of an inequality within the system is less polemical than the earlier example but it serves within the debate as a new point of reference to which subsequent speakers variously connect.

d) Contestation.

Contestation occurs at points through most editions of *After Dark*, usually intensifying around the mid-point when basic positions have been established and divergences noted. Here is an example from a 1991 edition 'What should Teachers Learn?', broadcast 23 March, concerning the state of British schooling. The speaker is a Comprehensive School teacher with a strong position on the negative consequences of the Comprehensive system that runs counter to the position of several other guests.

To interrupting guest: *Let me just say what I want to say. You can then ask a question and I will answer it.*

*It all goes back, if I can pin the blame where it really lies [**the Introduction of Comprehensive Schools by the Labour Government reducing number of Grammar Schools**]..All of these wonderful schools have gone and we now have comprehensive schools where we have sunk in many cases to the lowest common denominator, where standards have deteriorated, where the traditions and loyalties that people had to the schools they went to have all gone.* (to widespread noises of dissent).

Other guest: *This is all poppycock*

Speaker: *It's not poppycock…*

Here, the speaker has to 'clear a space' for what he knows is a contentious statement against the interruptions of other guests. These interruptions continue underneath his speaking and, at the first available space, one guest dismisses his claims in the most vigorous terms. Many exchanges in *After Dark* reach this level of 'heat', if only briefly, sometimes requiring the intervention of the Chair, whereas others show disagreement in cooler terms.

An example of the latter, which is also an example of a form of 'closure', comes from another 1991 edition, 'After Rochdale', broadcast 9 February, looking at the actions taken by social services in cases of alleged child abuse (specifically satanic sex abuse) where questions

of evidence are contested. The speaker, the feminist author Bea Campbell, takes to task a manager of Nottingham Social Services who is also an evangelist and has just stated that abortion is the most prevalent form of child abuse and that Christian values rather than a reliance on social services offer the best way forward.

*Excuse me, you* **are** *social services actually. You are part of the management of Nottingham Social Services. And it worries me enormously actually that A, you have this view about decisions that women have taken where you live, decisions that they are entitled to take. It's not part of this conversation actually, it doesn't help the conversation…*

Anthony Wilson (Chair) …*Except it defines in this last half hour, because it is moving towards the dread hour of 3 o clock. It does define this fear. And the fear is about the evangelical movement….*

Here, Campbell puts a 'charge' against the earlier speaker, questioning his performance in his official role. She also suggests that by bringing in the question of abortion he has exceeded the bounds of the debate but the Chair intervenes to remind everyone of the time and the way in which the 'defining' of a certain 'fear' (around religious views) may in fact be useful in allowing the programme to engage satisfactorily with the broader issues in its final phase.

e) Concluding: the speech of closure

The example above show how a Chair steers a programme into its finish, not only tidying up stray comments but perhaps, as here, welcoming themes which have been under the surface for a while. In the 1995 'special' programme 'Lethal Justice', on the Death Penalty, broadcast 17th August  Chairman John Underwood attempts to bring things together in a more expansive way:

*I feel in a sense that our conversation is, is moving towards its last phase in a sense and I have a question which I would like to throw up to all of you and perhaps we can go round and everybody can have a go at trying to answer this one?*

*What lessons might those with experience in America, looking at the British system perhaps, a system that does not have capital punishment, what lessons might you take away either positive or negative and what lessons might those in Britain…take from the system in America?*

So a 'final round' is initiated, with quite specific, interconnecting questions that will lead to a summarising of core positions.

A last example can be taken from the very first *After Dark*, 'Secrets', the introduction to which we cited earlier. Towards the end of it, the then union researcher and later Labour MP and Minister Peter Hain puts an argument about the need for public scrutiny of earlier misconduct by the security services. This gets immediate agreement from T.E. Hutley, the Conservative theorist and historian.

Peter Hain: *I think we ought to give a message back to the government, to the people who'll make a decision on whether the events of '74 to' 75 particularly, and they'll have to go back a bit earlier than that, should be subject to a full public inquiry because I very strongly feel that they should….*

TE Hutley: *Can I make a point by saying that I also agree with you on that..*

Hain: *Oh excellent, terrific, we can march together on that.*

This is a little moment of almost formal, explicit agreement (quickly underlined by Hain's comment) which quietly illustrates some of *After Dark*'s 'drama of development', involving not only the play-off of differences but the formation of surprising alliances.

Attention to examples of the types of talk which *After Dark* generated goes well beyond an interest in television speech forms and their relationship to aspects of production design, important though this is. It illustrates how the programme *worked* as a distinctive forum for connecting the personal to the political, eschewing both professional interrogation and the performed sociability of host-guest formats for something that was more about *seeing what emerged* around a theme and within a group as it was about 'projecting' anything. As we observed, this softened the boundaries between programme and viewers in a way which clearly let many of the latter imagine that they were 'inside' the discussions.

**After Dark within critical perspective**

We have examined *After Dark* as a programme staging distinctive kinds of spoken encounter as 'event', working originally with the spaces and the times of television as well as with the forms of talk it allows and its capacity to explore public issues and differences of opinion. Its

pioneering character fits well within the broader profile of Channel 4 during its first decade or so, pushing out the political and social boundaries of the medium. We noted how some aspects of its approach to engagingly 'risky' encounters broadcast live have carried through, along with other precedents, into more recent programme forms but they have only done so partially. Its own relaxed and expansive late-night deliberations largely achieve their novelty of appeal against those specific temporalities and modes of 1980s broadcasting, which provided the conditions for its innovatory pleasures as a 'breakthrough' viewing experience. In that sense, it marks an experiment in the last phase of the 'limited supply' model of public service broadcasting, before extensive channel choice and multi-media patterns of use started to change both the aesthetics and times of television.

Shifting forms of interactive talk, with their connections to social relationships and to broader movements in what it is of public interest to talk about and how, are at the centre of the development of British broadcasting and of any adequate generic history. Critical attention to After Dark serves among other things to place in sharper perspective television's evolving (and then eventually weakening) ideas of 'schedule' and the variety of alignments possible between the discourses television produces and those in play more broadly across the different spaces of the political and social. As the political economy of Channel 4 moved away from its first phase of relative innovation under Isaacs (1982-1988), it was clear that the subsequent controller Michael Grade (1988-1997) held rather less loyalty to the franchise.[2] *After Dark's* ultimate inability to gain long-term traction as a mode of talk television also perhaps points to some of the limitations as well as the affordances of television as a medium of intensive deliberation. Starting out as an 'experiment', it successfully challenged those limitations as a regular slot for 5 years (displaced thereafter into occasional 'specials'), but the dominance of temporally confined format-driven talk was maintained and finally strengthened. Its startling 'difference', viewed both from the contexts of its launch and then, retrospectively, of the present, provides an instructive episode in television's long and varied attempts to combine novelty of form with seriousness of social engagement.

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[2] There is not space here to provide detail about the significant differences in approach between Isaacs and Grade. However, for those readers interested in exploring this further, it has been written about in some depth by Maggie Brown in her colourful account of Channel 4's early history (Brown, 2007).

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[1] Club 2 was an Austrian discussion programme that ran from 1976 to 1995 on the channel ORF2. The format of After Dark was directly modelled on that of Club 2, right down to the lighting and the set design. Cody visited the production team of Club 2 when he was developing After Dark for Channel 4, and even brought After Dark's director, Don Coutts, to Austria to study the visual and aesthetic design of the series on location (Cody, 2015).

[2] Sebastian Cody notes the extent to which Channel bosses wanted a risky programme without risks, a contradiction that meant that *After Dark* had to negotiate increasing problems of control from above, despite benefiting from its status as 'entertainment' rather than 'current affairs' (Cody, 2015).

[3] The first edition was called 'Secrets' and elicited this response from Nancy Banks-Smith in The Guardian: 'A bit of fun, a bit of excitement, and, quite the best idea for a television programme since men sat around the camp fire talking while, in the darkness, watching eyes glowed red'. Angela Lambert in *The Independent* also wrote effusively about the show when its Channel 4 run was ended, noting how it 'overcame the patina of artifice with which television habitually polishes and tidies up its speakers' (Lambert, 1991).

[4] See Benyon and Solomos (1988) for a useful sociological analysis of the urban unrest that characterised the early years of Thatcher's government, and which escalated into riots in economically deprived and racially divided areas such as Brixton, London and Toxteth, Liverpool.

[5] Examples would be programmes like 'The Brains Trust' (BBC radio 1941-4, and then Television 1955-6) and 'The Critics' (BBC radio from 1947). These both involved unscripted exchanges on serious themes although the arrangement was that of a 'panel of experts' rather than the more open and extended play-off of experiences and views from different social positions which *After Dark* offered.

[6] Cody remarks on the attention given to seating arrangements in relation to the likely dynamics of exchange Like Lancaster (see note below) he emphasises the need to plan for the dramatic shape taken by discussion not just its substance

[7] The Producer in the gallery had direct contact with the presenter and would regularly offer advice on 'management' of discussion, particularly when things became heated.

[8] A comment by David Lancaster, a member of the production team who joined after the programmes had become established, is relevant here: 'You could only plan for the first 45 minutes. So what was interesting about it was that you had to cast according to personality and not just merely what they were going to say' (Lancaster, 2015).

[9] Lancaster notes how 'the cutting rhythm is affected by the rhythm of the speech' (Lancaster, 2015) remarking on the way in which Don Coutts, the programme's director, generated the programme's visual style from the array of cowled cameras, extensively using 'very long, developing shots'.