

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Why a daily satire TV show is so difficult to get right

March 14, 2017 2.21pm GMT

Up in lights. ITV

Why a daily satire TV show is so difficult to get right

March 14, 2017 2.21pm GMT

It was a bold scheduling move on the part of ITV, the UK's main commercial television channel. Shifting the nightly news programme to make way for Britain's latest attempt at a US-style late night talk show was always going to be risky. And so far, critics and viewers seem united in their response to *The Nightly Show*: they can barely watch.

Taking ITV's 10pm slot on weeknights, *The Nightly Show* has a 40 episode run with a revolving array of hosts, starting off with comedians David Walliams and John Bishop in the opening two weeks. (Mel and Sue, the duo who presided over *The Great British Bake Off*, have apparently changed their minds about appearing.) Recorded "live" at 6pm each day, the 30 minute programme aims to mimic American shows like CBS's *The Late Late Show* with a mix of topical monologue and satire, celebrity chat and entertaining sketches.

But this is a demanding format which is difficult to get right. Achieving successful year round high profile chat shows requires huge resources, commitment and funds.

Ahead of the ITV's version's debut in February 2017, Peter Davey, the channel's head of comedy entertainment said: "We're really excited about launching this bold new show, and delighted that David [Walliams] will kick off what will be an eight week entertainment treat for viewers."

But it would appear to not be such a treat. Ratings dropped sharply from 2.8m to 1.2m in the first week. Even worse hit were the viewing figures for the rescheduled news bulletin, which went to a record low.

Author



Lyndsay Duthie

Programme Leader for Film & Television,
University of Hertfordshire

Despite occasional interventions, ITV's nightly news programme has been a staple of British TV screens for nearly 50 years. Other channel controllers have previously tried to move its slot in the schedule, leading to it being mockingly dubbed the "News at When?". But there is a good commercial case for the schedule change. ITV is desperate to appeal to younger viewers and wants to create a clear alternative to BBC's own news programme, which also airs at 10pm and has a far larger following.

As Kevin Lygo, ITV's director of television, explained to the Guardian newspaper: "The truth is that when you're up against a 50 times resourced juggernaut of BBC1 news, you won't get more viewers."

So one can understand ITV executives looking at the success of British presenter James Corden in his nightly show on American TV, and thinking, why not do the same here? But while the late night chat genre has long been a staple of the US schedules, it is a format which has always been hard to translate in the UK.

So far, The Nightly Show has tried to stick to the formula of the successful American versions, opening with a host's monologue, before moving on to celebrity interviews. But producing a daily program which reacts to news events every 24 hours is tough. It requires big writing teams if it is going to appear slick and effortless.

Famous presenters Jonathan Ross and Graham Norton have both been at the top of the talk show tree in the UK for many years. But they host short series of weekly programmes. They are not performing five days a week, 52 weeks a year. Nor do Norton and Ross try to mimic the US model of David Letterman and Jay Leno model. Instead, they stick to the chat and concentrate on the guests.

US late night talk shows are executed to perfection, and have a large pool of potential Hollywood A-list guests to choose from and keep viewers watching. It is much tougher for ITV to find high profile guests five times a week. After the first shows aired, some commented on Twitter that the guests all seemed to be merely publicising their own latest ITV shows.

Show time

Perhaps The Nightly Show is getting off to a rocky start because it is trying too hard to be too many things. Why experiment with different presenters every week? Wouldn't it be better to stick with one big name host and let the audience develop a relationship with them? According to author and

historian Joe Moran: “Part of the problem is that in the US there’s a complicit way in which the host interacts with the audience to give an almost conspiratorial mood that doesn’t quite translate over here.”

So is it just a matter of finding the right tone and the right host? CBS gave Corden time to develop in his new role. The channel bosses also understood that although ratings were important, the impact of what Corden was able to do on social media, with viral hits like Carpool Karaoke, gained them water cooler moments and talking points which helped develop the brand globally. But Carpool Karaoke would probably not have worked any where near as well if not for the quality of celebrities (including then first lady, Michelle Obama) taking part. It is barely conceivable that ITV would be able to deliver that sort of impact on a daily basis.

The question now is whether ITV will be brave enough to keep going with this genre, and to let it bed in. I don’t think the News at Ten will be back anytime soon. But I think viewers of the channel at that advertising peak time of 10pm will soon be enjoying the return of expensive 90 minute dramas. For now, the television cliffhanger is whether the faltering The Nightly Show will last its full eight weeks. It’s hard to put it better than Walliams himself, who turned to the camera during one broadcast to comment dryly: “And they moved the news for this ...”

 TV ratings  ITV  David Letterman 

Help combat alt-facts and fake news and donate to independent journalism.

[Make a donation](#)