

The Palgrave Macmillan Broadcasting and the NHS in the Thatcherite 1980s

The Challenge to Public Service

Patricia Holland, with Hugh Chignell
and Sherryl Wilson



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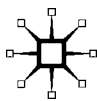
A study of the ways in which changes to the public services and shifts in the concept of 'the public' under Margaret Thatcher's three Conservative governments were mediated by radio and television in the 1980s.

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Prologue: Echoes of the 1980s

Echoes of the 1980s

This is a book about the 1980s, the decade of the three Conservative governments led by Margaret Thatcher. It is generally accepted that ‘Thatcherism’ brought a significant shift in the political, economic and ideological climate in the UK. As broadcasting historians, our aim is to trace that shift – in all its conflicts and contradictions – through the radio and television programmes of the decade as they both reflected and mediated the changing climate. Our argument will be that there is a significant, but not straightforward, relationship between the broadcast output and the political climate. To elucidate this, we will seek to map the changes in the important political concepts of ‘society’ and ‘the public’, both within the programmes and within the political discourse. Our focus will be on the public services; in particular, on the National Health Service (NHS) and on broadcasting itself.

The book was conceived at an extraordinary moment in political history. Almost 30 years after the election of Margaret Thatcher’s radical Conservative government, a devastating ‘credit crunch’ hit the global markets and, for a moment, it seemed that an era was coming to an end. The market-oriented economic system promoted by the Thatcher governments was in crisis, and the public acceptance that market-centred politics together with their social consequences were necessary, inevitable and, indeed, beneficial, was questioned. As the credit crunch laid waste major financial institutions and threatened the international banking system itself, it seemed that the confidence of the 1980s had been misplaced. Prosperity was built on an illusion; it was nothing but a house of cards. The individualism, personal ambition and get-rich-quick ideology which had pushed out a commitment to social and collective responsibility had simply not worked. In the autumn of 2008, the *Daily Mail* newspaper, a powerful supporter of Thatcherite economics, headlined ‘Free-market capitalism lies shredded’ (18 September 2008). It was ‘Corrupted by the culture of greed’ (10 February 2009).

In planning a book about the 1980s, it seemed that we would be illustrating the emergence of a political consensus just as it was coming to an end – or, at least, being radically transformed. Events were forcing

a revaluation of Thatcherism's social and cultural assumptions, as well as its economic ones. By mid-2010, however, the election of a right-of-centre coalition government in the UK, dominated by a Conservative Party with a complex relationship to its Thatcherite heritage, made such assertions seem premature. On the one hand, Prime Minister David Cameron espoused what he dubbed a 'big society' as a contrast to Margaret Thatcher's notorious rejection of 'society'; on the other, the aftermath of the banking collapse was used to justify a renewed programme of cuts and privatisation. Many of the changes fought for in the 1980s were reasserted, with a remarkably similar rhetoric.

For the new government, the recession and the credit crunch were to be remedied, not by reshaping a market-based, neo-liberal economic system, but by reinvigorating it. The public sector came under attack, together with the very concept of public service. Within weeks of taking power, the Conservative/Liberal-democrat coalition issued new challenges to the status of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the NHS, the two institutions we will be focussing on in this book. 'In his first 100 days Cameron has gone further than Thatcher – and much faster, too', wrote the *New Statesman's* then political editor Mehdi Hasan (9 August 2010). And Conservative MP Greg Barker claimed, 'we are making cuts that Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s could only have dreamed of' (George Eaton *New Statesman* blog 4 April 2011).

So, it seemed that our book would be tracing the rhetoric of the 1980s at a time when it was being rehabilitated. Yet, as we put the final touches to our work in 2012, several European countries have fallen into crisis, the banking system is once again destabilised by major revelations of fraud, and there is a demand for a change in the 'culture'. The upheavals of the 1980s are still working themselves out.

Programmes of the 1980s

By focussing on programmes concerned with health and the NHS, the research project from which this book has grown sought to explore the complex and shifting relationships between politics, everyday attitudes, lived experience and broadcast programming in the 1980s. It was an era of broadcasting which John Ellis has characterised as 'the age of scarcity', with only four national television channels, but these, together with four BBC radio channels and many more local radio stations, put out hundreds of hours of programming every week (Ellis 2000:39–60). To trace shifting attitudes towards 'the public' and 'public service' across

the breadth of this output is a daunting task. It was tempting to pluck out specific examples which appeared to illustrate our argument, but we wanted to give a more secure grounding to our survey, so we compiled lists of programmes across the genres – dramas, documentaries, current affairs programmes, comedies and others – which dealt directly with issues of health, public service and Thatcherite policies.

There were, of course, limitations to this approach – in particular, the very scale of the enterprise. It was impossible within the scope of our study to note every single relevant programme, so we focussed on certain key dates and on specific policy issues, indicating the ways in which programmes related to government initiatives and policy changes. The lists are available on our website. The second problem was the availability of the material. In the case of live broadcasts, such as BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*, very few recordings or transcripts were made. But despite its limitations, our 'listing' exercise meant that we have been able to give an indication of which topics were chosen by the broadcasters, and to map out the competing discourses as they developed across the decade. In this book, we have highlighted a variety of significant programmes for detailed discussion, selected from across the genres because of their particular relevance or their prominence in the schedules. We have also included a chronological selection from our lists, charting the ways in which programme output related to public events. These chronologies, found before Chapter 1 and between Chapters 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 6 and 7, and 9 and 10, are, of necessity, brief and highly selective. Nevertheless, they indicate significant political events in relation to programme output, and they form a background to our review.

Introduction: Thatcherism, the Public and Writing Broadcasting History

I Thatcherism and writing broadcasting history

Mediatised history and the mythology of Margaret Thatcher

The 1980s mark a pivotal decade in British history, heavily laden with cultural as well as political significance, and at the centre is the figure of Margaret Thatcher. Elected in 1979 as the UK's first (and, so far, only) woman Prime Minister, Thatcher's personality dominated the political stage during her years in power, and her shadow has fallen over subsequent decades. Her tone of voice, her style of dress, her mannerisms have become fused in the popular imagination with her political views – declared with such emphasis and conviction. Her image has come to stand as a point of reference, a symbol of the decade, bearing the weight of its significance. It has become a 'cultural marker' threaded through the programmes; condensing within itself meanings, attitudes and ideas about the period; exciting because of its emotive pull. The 'Thatcher' mythology has continued to play a powerful role in facilitating an interplay between culture and politics, intertwining political judgement and cultural expression (Nunn 2002; Campbell 1987).

'History', as an account of the past, can never be innocent. As soon as a moment is gone, it may be told or communicated in some way. It then becomes a 'story' – his or hers, ours or theirs – enshrined in memory or in tangible record. In the totally mediatised society we inhabit today, we negotiate an increasing denseness of such accounts, echoing back and forth across a diversity of media (de Zengotita 2005). Contemporary accounts of the 1980s, like those of any period, come from many, often conflicting, perspectives, whether recorded by commentators, enshrined in official documents or told by participants. As time passes, these are followed by revisions of accounts, retellings,

reimaginings, reinterpretations and fictionalisations. Revised readings and rereadings of familiar documents are circulated; new batches of archives become available to scholars and material is published for wider access through online media. (As we write, the archives from Thatcher's first government are being released and studied by historians.) Consequently, any account of a historical moment must also take into account the *histories of* that moment; the accumulation of myth and symbol. It must also pay attention to popular memory and popular forms, in what the historian Raphael Samuel described as *Theatres of Memory* (Samuel 1994; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Possibly the most powerful in creating and circulating such overlapping narratives are the broadcast media.

For broadcasters, revisiting previous decades is partly a way of exploiting the archives, and programmes range from serious historical exploration (BBC4's *Time Shift*; Radio 4's *The Archive Hour*), to various forms of historical tourism built on a fascination with retro fashion, gadgetry, interior furnishings and popular music. (A couple of my 1980s favourites are *Supersizers Eat... the Eighties* in which comedians Sue Perkins and Giles Coren consume piles of expensive dishes and lurid cocktails (BBC 15 June 2009); and the programme in which a 21st-century family is restricted to the technology available in the decade – and struggle with that wonderful new invention, the video-cassette recorder (*Electric Dreams: The 1980s* BBC4 13 March 2011). In this spirit, the visuality of the 1980s has become a familiar part of the television of the 2000s. Its colour, high fashion and general excess are echoed in drama series such as *Ashes to Ashes* in which the glamorous protagonist is mysteriously transported back to the 1980s (BBC1 February 2008). The 'new romantics' glam their way into retrospectives, while anniversaries of major events, such as the Falklands War (1982) and the miners' strike (1984–1985) are reassessed and re-evaluated. The myth of Margaret Thatcher – as a camp icon and a gift to the puppeteers of *Spitting Image*, as well as a political force – finds its place among this output.

The fascination of Thatcher, both reviled and revered, has been reworked and reviewed on numerous occasions in the decades since her resignation. An outpouring of television dramas and documentaries marked the 30th anniversary of her fateful election, and an Oscar-winning film re-evoked her career in big-screen style.¹ Such images carry

¹ *The Iron Lady* directed by Phyllida Lloyd with Meryl Streep as Margaret Thatcher (UK 2011).

out cultural *work*. As Graham Murdock put it, ‘images do not walk in straight lines. They do not wait to take turns. They work by association, denoting a collision of connotations. This sets up a permanent tension between the pleasures of the image, and the ripples of memory and identity it activates, and the search for explanations that offer a purchase on circumstance and power’ (Murdock 1999:14). The effect of the Thatcher image could not be more graphically described.

In this book we are focussing on the imagery, the narratives and the representations produced during the 1980s, both to evoke the cultural aspects of the politics and to illuminate the politics itself. We are concerned with political history, but more importantly we are concerned with the ways in which politics was transmuted into culture and common-sense opinion. As we move back and forth between politics and programmes, the image of Margaret Thatcher will be threaded through them both, and her name will reverberate as a recurring theme. Also, in exploring a mediated history, we will be identifying some of the *mythologising* practices which characterise the public discourse – and we should make it clear that when we speak of a ‘myth’, we do not mean that this is a fiction or is untrue, but that an ‘image’, a story or a cluster of ideas has gained a particular resonance. We will endeavour to unpick the ways in which meanings and emotions can be condensed into such a central symbol – or ‘image’ – and can be evoked to mark out political opinions, attitudes and allegiances – and can themselves become the centre of a contest over meaning.

The media complex

In the following chapters we will be tracing changing attitudes towards the idea and practice of public service, as we look at those two quintessentially British and frequently compared institutions, the National Health Service (NHS) and public service broadcasting. Although we take later interpretations into account, we are chiefly concerned with the ways in which events and ideas were represented and developed in the 1980s themselves. We want to capture an impression of the ‘media complex’ in a decade which saw dramatic changes in the technologies and structures of broadcasting, as well as in its politics. By exploring the broadcast output we will demonstrate how certain key ideas were worked on and modified. Factual information and shifting ideologies were embedded in interweaving debates, impressions, opinions, jokes, narratives and emotional attitudes. In ways which were sometimes direct and often oblique, programmes related politics to the experience of everyday life.

This means that our approach is different both from studies of representation and from accounts of broadcasting institutions, although we draw on both. We argue that, by viewing and listening to the programmes of the time, and attempting to understand them as far as possible within the social, political, institutional and cultural contexts in which they originated, we can observe a cultural and ideological shift *as it was happening*. We can endeavour to experience the programmes in real time, close to how they were seen by their original audiences – recognising, but leaving to one side, the accumulation of knowledge which has transformed them for later audiences. By observing the ways in which political and organisational changes were commented on and turned into popular expression and entertainment, we can follow the political project of the 1980s as it entered popular culture and became a new common sense (Hall and Jaques 1983).

In order to get some sense of the changes of the decade, we will look across the broadcast output, and point to the interrelations between different channels and different genres. We take the position that *all* broadcast programmes are potentially of importance, not just those with a high profile or those which have entered an academic cannon. By accumulating examples and making comparisons across the genres, by viewing each programme in the light of the others and when necessary reading between the lines, we will trace how the political ideas of the 1980s circulated, consolidated and took hold. ‘Mediated politics goes well beyond the news coverage,’ write Kay Richardson and her co-authors (Richardson et al. 2012).²

As we highlight case studies from different genres, we will bear in mind that the relations between politics and the media were themselves undergoing a radical change in the 1980s. We will be taking account of the ways in which broadcasting policy impacted on the programme output.

Therefore, we will be giving an account of the challenge to public service in broadcasting and the NHS in several contexts:

- We will consider shifts in *political philosophy*: shifts that were contested as Margaret Thatcher became more influential in the Conservative Party, and developed under the Thatcher governments. In particular, we will look at the concept of ‘*the public*’ and the ways

² Quoted from the publicity for Kay Richardson, John Corner and Katy Parry, *Political Culture and Media Genre: Beyond the News* (Palgrave Macmillan 2012).

in which it was mobilised in relation to the public domain and to the public services. We will be looking at ways in which the broadcast media themselves responded to and contributed to the renegotiation of the concept, and we will be looking at the debates within academia and other public fora commenting on, contesting and intervening in the changes.

- We will consider the output in the context of *government policy* – particularly in relation to ‘public service’ in broadcasting and health provision. As the challenge to the concept of ‘public service’ became stronger and was embedded in official policy, changes in broadcasting legislation influenced the range and content of programmes in important and sometimes unexpected ways.
- Against the background of the broad scope of the broadcast output, we will be making a *close study of selected programmes* and series which illuminate the changing political climate, in particular, programmes related to issues of public health and the National Health Service.

We will be moving back and forth between these three themes in the following chapters.

II ‘Public service’ in the 1980s

‘No such thing?’ ‘Society’ and the public domain

I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand ‘I have a problem, it is the government’s job to cope with it!’ or ‘I have a problem, I will go and get a grant to cope with it!’ ‘I am homeless, the government must house me!’ And so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing!

(Margaret Thatcher 1987)³

As we think ourselves back into the mood of the decade, this book takes its cue from Margaret Thatcher’s notorious declaration that ‘there’s no such thing as society, only individuals and families’ made with emphatic confidence just after she was elected as Prime Minister for a third term. We take up the *political* implications of that statement, but our aim is

³ The quotation comes from an interview with *Woman’s Own* magazine (23 September 1987). The texts of Margaret Thatcher’s speeches, interviews and statements are available through the Margaret Thatcher Foundation at <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/default.asp>.

also to explore its tone and its *cultural* provenance as it came to act as a sort of pivot, a useful shorthand which pulls together aspects of cultural attitudes and social policy in the Thatcherite 1980s. Thatcher's denial of 'society' rapidly entered folk myth. It has been used as the title of programmes, exhibitions, books, articles and photographic projects, and has come to express the uncaring aspects of the free-market policies which Thatcher promoted.

The statement has multiple strands: there is the narrow conceptualisation of 'society' and its responsibilities; the over-simple elision of 'government' with 'society'; and the evocation of mythical 'families' who honour their responsibilities (Nunn 2002:95–133). And it implied a major shift in the grounds of ethical behaviour and practical relationships. In the interview with *Woman's Own*, from which the statement is taken, the Prime Minister moved on to elaborate the place of 'people' within the social structure: 'No government can do anything except through people, and people look to themselves first.' That image of individual men and women who 'look to themselves first' became the ethical centre of Thatcherism.⁴ 'No such thing as society' came to encapsulate what David Marquand described, in his reflection on the changes of the 1980s, as a 'hollowing out of citizenship' and a shrinking of the public realm. The public realm, he wrote, is

the domain of citizenship, equity and service whose integrity is essential to democratic governance and social well-being... In it citizenship rights trump both market power and bonds of clan or kinship. Professional pride in a job well done, or a sense of civic duty, or a mixture of both replaces the hope of gain and the fear of loss... as the spur to action.

(Marquand 2004:1–2)

By contrast in the 1980s, legislation and economic organisation moved away from public provision and public responsibility towards individual choice and individual responsibility; away from public ownership and

⁴ Unusually, Downing Street issued a clarification of Thatcher's position, published in *The Sunday Times* almost a year later (10 July 1988). It stated that 'society as such does not exist except as a concept. Society is made up of people. It is people who have duties and beliefs and resolve. It is people who get things done... Her approach to society reflects her fundamental belief in personal responsibility and choice. To leave things to "society" is to run away from the real decisions, practical responsibility and effective action.'

the concept of public service, to private ownership and the promotion of finance. The result, according to Colin Leys, in his study of the BBC and the NHS in the 1980s, was that the UK was moved definitively towards

not just a liberal-market economy, but a liberal-market *society* and *culture*, based not on trust but on the most extreme possible exposure to market forces, with internal markets, profit centres, audits and 'bottom lines' penetrating the whole of life from hospitals to playgroups.

(Leys 2001:34, my italics)

In the following chapters we will consider the ways in which these political and ideological changes were reflected in the broadcast media. Debates about 'the public' and 'public service', both in the political and the academic context, frequently deal in abstractions. This is something broadcasting cannot do. On our screens and through our radios we hear and see actual people, and we encounter stories, images, investigations, conversations, situations and personal accounts. These may be 'real' or 'fictional'; they may reveal important new truths, or may circulate common myths, but all involve embodied individuals. 'Society' and the 'public' appear in these accounts as sets of specific instances. It is through these examples that we will trace the changes in the reality of everyday lives and, at the same time, in the ideas and concepts which influenced those lives. If 'the character of a man depends on his connections to the world' (quoted from Horace by Sennett 1998:10), we can explore possible ways in which those connections may be lived through in dramas, comedies, documentaries, news reports and others. Programmes help to make sense of ways of being in the social world. This is what media theorist John Ellis described as 'working through'. 'Any individual programme has to consider itself part of a larger process,' he wrote (Ellis 2000:72). Moving chronologically through the decade, the book will explore how the concept of 'the public' was worked on, modified and mediated, at a time when the broadcast media themselves were subject to pressures and changes.

We do not begin from a neutral position. We support the view expressed by David Marquand that public service entails an important approach to citizenship and the public domain, and that this was attacked and shrunken during the Thatcherite era (Marquand 2004). We agree with Nick Couldry on the importance of 'voice' in a public space, so that every individual may give meaningful expression to their sense of individuality and selfhood (Couldry 2010); with Colin Leys that

a true public service is incompatible with 'market-driven' politics (Leys 2001) and with Richard Sennett that abandoning a live notion of 'the public sphere' has led to a 'corrosion of character' (Sennett 1998).

III The NHS and the medical encounter

'A more onerous citizenship'

Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify with the citizens of that other place.

(Sontag 1979:1)

Issues of health and sickness demonstrate in a powerful way the manner in which public life is lived out at the very point when the vulnerability and interdependence of individuals becomes unavoidable. This is when the question of whether 'society' exists and what form it takes, matters most. On the personal level, health is a sensitive issue which affects every individual regardless of status. In terms of politics, concern with the nation's health is central to a national public domain, and, in the UK, the publicly funded NHS has been at the heart of political debates. Despite its many imperfections, the NHS has been seen as a reliable and highly respected touchstone of 'public service'. Thus, the challenges which were mounted in the 1980s were particularly significant.

It is notable that Susan Sontag, in her extraordinary book *Illness as a Metaphor*, called on the notion of citizenship rather than the idea of dependency that Margaret Thatcher would evoke. Ill health inevitably creates dependency; dependency on medical knowledge, on expertise, and on the available structures of care, whether from public or commercial health provision, or from family and friends. It is a time when people have no option but to 'cast their problems on society', to use Thatcher's disapproving words. However, Sontag's formulation takes it for granted that a form of citizenship is retained. Citizenship implies a contribution to the social world, as well as a communality of need (Marshall 1950). Yet, as we will see, in the 1980s, the concept of 'citizenship' was disputed and pushed aside. Instead, the users of the service would be invited to see themselves as 'consumers', taking part in a financial transaction.

Attitudes to health care were contested across the 1980s in ways that were not always clear cut, but which had practical effects on the lives of

the population at large. We will be tracing changes in the tone and cultural resonance of broadcast programmes about health under the three Thatcher-led governments. We will look at the representation of those citizens who are workers and professionals within the service, as well as those who, of necessity, 'cast their problems' on the NHS. We will observe the language of illness and pain in what we describe as the 'medical encounter': that crucial interaction between medical provision and sick people.

Medical programmes

Doctors and nurses, hospitals and accidents, birth and death have long been attractive as a setting for entertainment media – if only as a source of ghoulish or risqué humour. Some of the most successful comedies of the British cinema have included the staggeringly popular *Doctor* series (1954–1986) and the *Carry Ons – Nurse* (1959); *Doctor* (1967, 1969); *Matron* (1972). The childish naughtiness of these films, with their hints about forbidden body parts, the ever present possibility of nudity and sexual misbehaviour, as well as the comic helplessness of patients at the hands of professionals, is part of a specifically British cultural history. This raucous, disrespectful tradition recurred on television in a somewhat milder form.⁵

Medical dramas have long been a source of fascination on the small screen, from *Emergency Ward Ten* (ATV 1957–1967) and *Doctor Finlay's Casebook* (BBC 1962–1971) to the American *Doctor Kildare* (NBC 1961–1966) and the feistier M.A.S.H (CBS 1972–1983) (Jacobs 2003; Hallam 2000). And medical fantasy, humour and fiction have been paralleled by, and interact with, an equally rich tradition of news, documentaries, current affairs and other factual formats. In the late 1980s, the fictional *Casualty* for adults (BBC1 1986–) and *Children's Ward* for children (Granada 1989–2000) were matched by the life-as-it-is-lived docusoap *Jimmy's* (YTV 1987–1994), and by current affairs reports such as *This Week's* observation of a real casualty department (25 May 1989). Viewers may move easily between these genres. They may watch – and may well compare – both fictional and real medical staff as they cope with daily problems against the background of changing government policies. In the 1980s, as now, viewers will have compared the representations on the screens with their own lives, and will frequently have seen experiences similar to their own reflected, as programme makers

⁵ Two series of *Doctor in the House*, inspired by the films, ran on London Weekend Television (1969–1970).

sought out 'ordinary people' and everyday examples to incorporate in their programmes (Philo and Henderson 1999).

In the late 1980s, Anne Karpf carried out a detailed analysis of media presentations of health and medical issues, tracing them back to the earliest days in the 1920s (Karpf 1988). Her experience as a researcher on medical programmes gave her an extra insight, and the programmes she describes range from health advice, to news reports and hospital dramas. She observed the possible viewpoints which may be represented in any of the genres: those of doctors, health educators, media critics and the broadcasters themselves; and she charted the delicate relationships between producers and a frequently suspicious medical establishment. As she surveyed the changing styles across the decades, she identified four different approaches:

- a *medical* approach – which stresses medicine's curative powers;
- a *consumer* approach – which challenges the doctor/patient relationship from the patient's point of view;
- a *look after yourself* approach – which encourages changes in personal behaviour;
- an *environmental* approach – which stresses the social origins of illness. This was an approach which, she argued, had significant political consequences and was much more rarely found.

Although this is a schematic classification and there are many hybrids, Karpf argued that these four represent attitudes current in the wider culture. We have found them very helpful in our own analysis.

IV Analysing the programmes: Performance and genre

Populating the programmes

An important function of broadcasting – in both factual and fictional genres – is to represent certain members of 'the public', as they appear in specific, clearly defined roles or situations, to the broad, undifferentiated 'public' at large, the viewers and listeners. In our discussion of the programmes of the 1980s we will be considering who appears and on what terms. We will ask which roles are made possible by a given format, and question how each programme constructs the relationships between those individuals who, for that moment, inhabit those roles.

Bill Cotton, who retired as Managing Director of BBC TV in 1987, notoriously stated that 'television [is] a performers' medium and news and current affairs [are] the side show' (Gray 2008). That may well have

been tongue in cheek. Cotton was the first BBC MD to come from the Light Entertainment department and everybody knew that his father was the celebrated cockney band leader. Yet, in a different context, the observer Krishnan Kumar noted that, in the 1970s the BBC was beginning to see itself as ‘the “great stage” on which all the actors... parade and say their piece. [As] the ‘register’ of the many different voices in society’ (Kumar 1977:246).

There is a sense in which the idea of *performance* – of the ways in which people or groups adopt particular personae or styles in their interaction with each other – runs through many discussions concerned with the meaning of a *public* presence. Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) deals with performance in face-to-face personal interactions, and Richard Sennett’s influential *The Fall of Public Man* (1975) is an extraordinary exploration of the shifting ways of performing publicness in Western society. Sennett describes ‘performance’ as a public display, characteristic of the 18th century, different from the more recent focus on interiority, personality and selfhood. The coming of a mediatised society, he argues (although he does not use that word) led to a move away from the performance of ‘publicness’.

However, as we review the programmes of the 1980s, we shall evoke the spirit of Cotton, as well as that of Sennett, and will bear in mind the different ways in which public life is *performed* on the broadcast media. We would argue that communication through broadcasting depends *entirely* on performance. Radio and television are above all stages for public performance. Across the different genres a platform is offered for performances of various types. Professional performers range from stand stand-up comics through to skilled professional actors, journalists, celebrities, television ‘personalities’, ‘experts’ and increasingly to media-wise politicians, like Margaret Thatcher herself (Cockerell et al. 1984). Non-professionals, ‘ordinary people’, are invited on to the airwaves to represent social roles, to illustrate a point, or to take part in an event. In each case they must adopt a suitable persona. Every programme is some form of performance, but each genre poses its own particular demands and has its own generic conventions. This is how the programmes are populated.

‘The medical encounter’ provides a structured set of roles which we will explore in the following chapters. Programmes open up a space for (at least) three distinct groups of people to appear on the national airwaves, two of them defined by their jobs and status within the service, the third an almost random selection from the public at large. The first group consists of *health professionals and experts*. In factual programmes

these tended to carry prestige and respect, and were regularly invited to offer their opinions and share their expert insights. (Although in fiction, and especially in comedy, this established position of power was frequently challenged or mocked.) However, as the 1980s progressed, the authority of doctors, surgeons and consultants was seen to be challenged by a different type of expert; the managers, economists and efficiency specialists who were brought in to restructure the service (Chapter 6).

The second group is made up of others employed by the NHS, such as ambulance staff and *ancillary workers*. Their jobs are crucial to the smooth running of the service, but they are neither authoritative nor of high status. They were frequently presented as militant and appeared most often when they were on strike or taking part in a dispute. Even then, they were rarely invited to offer an opinion, and in fictional programmes they were rarely at the centre of the narrative.⁶ *Nurses* held an uneasy position between these two groups. On the one hand they were seen as dedicated to the professional ideal, but they were also low-paid staff, pushed around and taken advantage of (Hallam 2000). Sometimes, they were shown to be as militant as the frequently demonised ancillary workers (Chapter 4).

The third group which populated the programmes is made up of members of the public – random individuals at the point at which they fell sick or became directly affected by health issues – in Susan Sontag's words, at the moments when they take on a 'more onerous citizenship'. These are 'ordinary people', anybody, as they became patients or clients. While the first two groups deliver a public service and carry the weight of that service on their shoulders, this third group has a right to claim the benefits of that service. It was their situation which became the rhetorical focus of the changes of the 1980s as questions were asked about the nature of that right (Chapter 5).

In the real world, there were changes to the limits within which these roles could be performed, as each of the groups came under pressure. The upheavals were reflected on the screen: workers, who had established an assertive militancy in the 1970s, were pressured to become compliant and their jobs became less secure; professionals were challenged by a managerial culture; users of the health service moved from being conceptualised as 'patients' to becoming 'consumers' or even 'customers'. The changes were reflected – and acted out – across the genres.

⁶ One exception was *The Cause* (BBC *Play for Today* 3 February 1981), in which an elderly union official is called in to deal with a 1980 hospital dispute.

Political pressures affected the ways in which each group was defined, and those changes in definition themselves had a deep effect on actual relationships within the health service and beyond. We will observe ways in which those assigned to a given role – whether as nurse, or surgeon, ambulance worker or patient – increasingly needed to balance their understanding of that role with the expression of a personal ‘voice’. In all three roles we will observe attempts to hang on to one definition while being pressed to adopt a different persona.

Among those who populate the programmes there are two groups of shadowy figures who are present, but not necessarily visible. These are the writers, producers and others who create the programmes, and also the invisible audience – those who watch and listen. We will be discussing the roles of writers, directors, journalists and others, and we will also be aware that each genre builds up its own expectations of its audience. It has a view about who they are; an awareness of their presence. A genre-based relationship between programme creators and their audience is of great importance and itself came under stress with the changing policies of the 1980s. We will observe how changes to the structure of broadcasting, as well as ideas about public service in broadcasting, were led by a changing conceptualisation of who the audiences were; what they had a right to expect from the broadcast media; and how they were expected to respond (Chapters 5, 7 and 12).

Genres: Centripetal and centrifugal

To use John Corner’s formulation, broadcast genres are both centripetal and centrifugal, they ‘ingest’ ideas, attitudes and events current in society, then ‘project’ them out towards the audience. And each genre does this in its own particular way (Corner 1995:5).

Jeremy Tunstall, who carried out a survey of the working lives and professional ethos of television producers in the early 1990s, observed that ‘each genre has its own specific goal or goals: it has a characteristic style of production ... its own internal system of status and prestige, its own values and its own world view’ (Tunstall 1993:3). Of course, over the half-century of broadcasting which preceded the 1980s, there had been boundary disputes, reorganisations and forms of hybridisation (and these have continued apace). Nevertheless, in the 1980s, the major genres inhabited relatively separate worlds and, in the intertwining narratives of illness, health and public service, each broadcast genre offered a platform of a specific type. However, as restrictions on broadcasting hours were lifted and more spaces became available, there was increased opportunity for new genres to develop. Many of these new formats