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Holmes, Su

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Living with The Grove Family *(1954–7) and going* Face to Face *(1959–62) with television*

Su Holmes
University of East Anglia

ABSTRACT This article aims to contribute to historical knowledge about television's relations with fame, while simultaneously exploring the conceptual tools used to study this field. With this in mind, this article examines two case studies from the 1950s: the BBC's popular serial *The Grove Family* and the interview-in-depth programme *Face to Face*. A key aim is to draw out the different meanings which circulated around television's relations with fame. Television has always constructed its own 'personalities' (the Groves), while simultaneously circulating personae 'outside' of their primary public or media roles (*Face to Face*). The article suggests that returning to this earlier context raises important questions. Where do these later conceptual claims of television fame locate their historical roots? To what extent were the debates about television fame a continuation of those surrounding radio? And to what degree are concepts such as 'ordinariness' historical?

KEYWORDS *1950s television, celebrity, fame, privacy, public service, the BBC*

In 1955, and in relation to the BBC television's popular family serial *The Grove Family*, the *Daily Herald* asked its readers, 'Do you know anyone like Granny?':

> 'Isn't Grandma Grove always like Auntie Thelma!' … and maybe little brother Willie looks more than a little like Lennie Grove … And that good looking girl next door – *doesn't* she remind you of Pat Grove? And in that likeness there is the possibility of winning a prize. The *Daily Herald* will give £5.00 to [the] photo bearing the closest resemblance to Grandma Grove … And when the whole duplicate family is chosen they will be invited to spend a thrilling day in London as guests of the *Daily Herald* and the TV Grove Family. (*Daily Herald*, 1 October 1955)

The same paper also reported on the BBC's interview-in-depth programme, *Face to Face* (BBC, 1959–62). Discussing an interview with the television personality Gilbert Harding, it asked:

> Can he ever *look* the same to millions of viewers whose adulation and exasperation have helped to set him up as Old Crust, the nation's grumpy Uncle? Until Sunday, Harding sat securely encrusted in that armour – a suit made for him by his fans and his publicity… But now the armour has been pierced, and the public has seen the man within – sweating, lonely, vulnerable, afraid of dying. (*Daily Herald*, 20 September 1960; emphasis in original)

In the first quotation, television fame is imagined in terms of reflection. The audience is literally encouraged to see themselves in the Groves, complementing the wider emphasis on the family turning the television screen into a 'mirror, reflecting the lives of countless viewers themselves' (*Radio Times*, 25 April 1955). In the second article, television's relations with fame are far less reassuring. Imagined in terms of invasion and penetration, television makes an impertinent bid to snatch away the public mask, exposing an undesirable disjuncture between public self and screen.

Drawing on archival research,[1] the interest of this article is in exploring what these images can contribute to historical knowledge about television's relations with fame. This is a subject which has hardly suffered from a surfeit of academic attention, especially in the British context. While American scholars have built up a small but significant body of work on early television and radio stardom (Murray, 2005), as well as the shift of film stars to the home (Becker, 2005; Mann, 1992; Marshall, 1997), interest in the British context has been more limited and sporadic (for exceptions see Holmes, 2005; Medhurst, 1991). The focus has been primarily conceptual (Ellis, 1982; Langer, 1981) or contemporary, with the latter largely encouraged by the burgeoning interest in reality TV (e.g. Biressi and Nunn, 2004; Holmes, 2006). In view of the paucity of work on the historical foundations here, a return to the past now seems particularly important. After all, critics concerned in 1959 that 'celebrities crying in close-up is surely not the future of television' (*Evening News*, 20 December 1959) may have been very interested to witness the later development of celebrity reality TV.

Well-known interventions by scholars such as John Ellis (1982) and John Langer (1981) theorized the specificities of television fame at a time when television studies was just beginning to expand. The argument was that there was no such thing as a television 'star': television's rhetoric of familiarity and intimacy, the size of the screen, the perpetual presence of its flow and the domestic context of reception all militated against the paradoxical and enigmatic construction of the film star. Instead, television was seen to produce the 'personality effect'. Such paradigms were clearly also shaped by discourses of cultural value which, as Christine

Becker observes, effectively worked to 'denigrate the stature of television stardom' (2005: 9). Furthermore, while undoubtedly influential, it has since been suggested that the dichotomy offered by Ellis and Langer was somewhat essentialist, generalizing and ahistorical – unable to account for change or to recognize significant distinctions within television fame. In this regard, one of the aims of this article is to draw out the different meanings which circulated around the medium in the 1950s. Television has always constructed its own 'personalities' while simultaneously circulating personae from other domains, and these categories cannot simply be conflated. At the same time, and particularly with regard to the faces created by television, it is not the intention here to explicitly undermine the arguments offered by Ellis and Langer. Their claims undoubtedly resonate with the discourses in circulation in the 1950s, perhaps even more so given that there was a self-conscious emphasis on discussing the 'newness' and specificities of television fame (in relation to what were perceived to be the new specificities of the medium itself). But returning to this earlier context does raise important questions: where do these later conceptual claims about television fame locate their historical roots? To what extent were the debates about television fame a continuation of those surrounding radio? And to what degree are concepts such as 'ordinariness' historical? First, the fictional example of *The Grove Family* will be examined, before an exploration of the non-fictional contours of *Face to Face*.

'A real genuine family': the Groves

The Grove Family has achieved a certain visibility in British television history due to its status as British television's 'first soap opera'.[2] It first appeared on Friday evening at 7.40pm on 9 April 1954, clearly addressing itself to a family audience. *The Grove Family* was careful to include a cross-generational cast of characters, with the family comprised of Dad, Bob Grove (Edward Evans), Mum, Gladys Grove (Ruth Dunning), crotchety Granny Grove (Nancy Roberts), son Jack, 23 (Peter Bryant), daughter Pat, 21 (Sheila Sweet, later Carole Mowlam), and the two younger children, Daphne, 13 (Margaret Downs) and Lennie, 11 (Christopher Beeny). The Groves were a lower-middle class family living in the London suburb of Hendon, and the aim was to suggest an 'ordinary' family with whom the audience could identify.

There was a good reason for this. In its initial conception of the programme, the BBC placed an acute emphasis on the issue of class background with the apparent aim of 'reflecting' back an image of the families now buying television sets. Despite perceptions of the BBC's class élitism, the producer, John Warrington, regularly emphasized the need for 'more careful observation of the income groups around whom the series is based, and to whom we wish to appeal'.[3] The fidelity of its lower-middle class

representation was praised by critics and viewers alike, and as in the subsequent history of British soap opera, this was seen as central to the programme's conception of realism. Although *The Grove Family* offered a very particular image of family life, the power of which resided precisely in its claim to the 'homely' and the 'natural' (see also Thumim, 2004), what is significant in the context of this article is how this power intersected with, and impacted upon, the construction of the Grove family fame.

In his article 'Old and New Ghosts: Public Service Television and the Popular', Jerome Bourdon (2004) lists televisual fame as one of the six sites (along with other examples such as 'America', 'game shows' and 'seriality') which had a problematic fit with the ideals of public service broadcasting. Bourdon cites television fame as a key site upon which public service broadcasting negotiated the popular, seeking to find an uneasy compromise between its commitment to be an 'instrument of education and culture' (2004: 283) and the necessity of speaking to popular tastes and desires. Intended in part to meet the impending competition from commercial television in 1955 while aiming to address an increasingly mass audience, *The Grove Family* was itself a negotiation with the popular, and its relations with television fame were part of this process. Yet as Bourdon's framing of the topic suggests, these relations were also understood to be, from the BBC's perspective, a potentially disruptive presence.

The Groves: playing on/off-screen selves

In 1954 the producer made clear how the creation of off-screen identities for the Groves would be antithetical to the BBC's aims for the programme, particularly in terms of its investment in realism. Referring to its first billing in the *Radio Times*, Warrington angrily observed:

> From the beginning [the Head of Light Entertainment, Ronald Waldman] … has had … the idea to play down the actors' names and authors' names and merely display the characters so that the viewers would not think in terms of actors and written scripts, but of a real genuine family. This idea was first-rate. Now we have a billing describing the family that Michael Pertwee [the chief writer] *has created*, putting us right back to any ordinary domestic drama. (John Warrington, 2 April 1954, T12/137/20; emphasis in original)

This attitude contrasted with the perspective taken by the original creators of the programme, the film writers Roland and Michael Pertwee. With their sights set on the commercial exploitation of the Groves, the Pertwees would often write to the BBC with suggestions for comic strips and other extratextual ventures. A BBC memo from 1956, which detailed the protective rights surrounding the programme, noted the existence of:

(a) The Grove Family novel [*Meet the Groves*]
(b) The Grove Family Picture [*It's a Great Day*, directed by Michael Pertwee in 1956]

(c) Cartoons
(d) Mrs Grove's Diary (*TV Mirror*)
(e) Many sundry articles, *Good Housekeeping* and other kindred magazines. (John Warrington to Head of Light Entertainment, 8 October 1956, T12/137/4)

On one level, the BBC's initial hesitation about exploiting this framework – which they associated more with American broadcasting – registered a distaste for its commercial connotations. As Susan Murray's discussion of early American television outlines, hosts and actors were expected to 'embrace their roles as salespeople' (2005: 149), and it was precisely this commercial context which demanded that they maintain 'multifarious identities' within their circulation. They were not only an actor or a host, but also a spokesperson for a sponsor's product, a representative of a network, and 'a public personality and private individual' (Murray, 2005: 131). Murray's study aims to provide a more historical explanation for the 'ordinary' familiarity of television fame. Rather than an inherent or essential aspect of the phenomenon, she suggests that these discourses emerged from the particular industrial and cultural structures which shaped television as a medium (see also Becker, 2005). The economic need to promote an identification between star and product fostered an emphasis on the accessibility of the person, and viewers were 'encouraged to believe that they could actually locate the true personality of a television star somewhere within [their] … performance' (Murray, 2005: 129). In other words, the explicitly commercial persona needed to appear 'less aberrant in the context of the everyday', while it had to be engaging enough to capture an audience for the programme and to offer a positive image of the sponsor's product (2005: 130). This immediately suggests the differences between the American and British contexts, and thus the differences between commercial and public service television systems.

Rather than simply speaking to the BBC's identity as a non-profit making corporation, the reluctance to exploit the wider circulation of the Groves also reflected the ideological parameters of public service. The BBC was clearly also concerned to limit any framework which might multiply the semiotic base of the *The Grove Family*, and provide multiple points of entry into the text (cf. Klinger, 1991). This is highlighted by the producer's immediate resistance to a Grove Family strip cartoon, as he explained how a cartoon would 'wrongly suggest that there was something funny about being a Grove – the characters would become the Groves with "quotation marks" around them when viewers saw them again on screen'.[4] The struggle surrounding the family's off-screen existence was less a debate about the ownership of the Groves at the level of legal rights (the writers and the BBC held joint rights) than it was a struggle surrounding the ownership of their semiotic meanings.

As far as the BBC was concerned, this control operated across two spheres. First, there was the bid to police the moral identity of *The Grove*

Family cast, and thus by implication, the Corporation's own reputation. The producer stated that 'we've got to be careful with the Groves. The television family is supposed to be so full of virtues that the actors and actresses are expected to carry them into their private lives' (*Evening Standard*, 14 September 1955). Second, and related to the programme's claim to 'reflect' the everyday lives of its viewers, there was a bid to influence how discourses of class shaped the off-screen construction of the Groves.

In 1955, for example, the *Radio Times Annual* devoted a four-page spread to the Groves ('The Groves – Home and Away'), announcing its intention to explore the relationship between on- and off-screen selves. The article sets out extensive character biographies, and positions these in relation to the 'real' person behind the character. It quickly becomes apparent that there is an element of class disjuncture here, as the people who played the Groves enjoyed rather more privileged backgrounds and lifestyles than their on-screen counterparts. While eldest son Jack Grove professed to dislike 'any occupation which demands persistent concentration' and attends technical college as he 'failed to get into grammar school', the actor who played Jack, Peter Bryant, was 'educated at grammar school', and is 'the son of a secretary of a large London commercial company'.[5] Similar differences between actor and role recur throughout the article, but there is a clear attempt to *negotiate* this relationship – something which takes place at the level of taste or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). It is here that we can see a consistent attempt to lead the actor back to the character role. With respect to Ruth Dunning, who played Mrs Grove, we are told that her favourite meal 'varies with [her] … mood, but it can be anything from chicken with truffles to steak and kidney pud'. Similarly, Peter Bryant enjoys 'Italian pasta, steak tartar, and fish and chips out of a newspaper'. A similar structure shapes the mention of musical tastes and hobbies, and we are generally led to believe that the people who play the Groves may be different, but they are not so removed from the likes and dislikes of the homely, lower-middle class Groves.

In many respects, there was a similar structure at work in the wider press construction of the family, even if the bid to negotiate class differences was not as explicit. Four months after *The Grove Family* began, the *Evening News* featured an article on Mrs Grove/Ruth Dunning:

> Viewers know all about the domestic trials and tribulations of the contemporary Serial Queen, Mrs Grove … But so far they know very little about the woman who plays Mrs Grove – actress Ruth Dunning … [They clearly] have a good deal in common. Although … Mrs Dunning and her actor husband Jack Allen have no children, they are a good deal at home. Four weeks ago they bought their first TV set, which is now another inducement to stay in … Being a busy actress, Mrs Dunning does not do the housework alone … But [she] … and her mother do all the cooking, and she could hardly be more

> practical – much like the unflappable and tolerant Gladys Grove. (*Evening News*, 27 August 1954)

According to Ellis, the technological and aesthetic qualities of the medium, as well as the perpetual presence of its flow, foster a drastic reduction of distance between the circulated image and the performance: 'The two become very much entangled, so that the performer's image is equated with that of the on-screen role' (Ellis, 1982: 106). As a result, 'subsidiary material' is more concerned with 'discovering if there is a personality separate from that of the television role, than it is with the paradox of the ordinary-but-extraordinary' (1982: 107).

From this perspective, it is certainly notable that the article on Ruth Dunning promised to reveal her 'real' self, only to admit that there is little to see which cannot be gleaned from her on-screen role. The universality of this paradigm is problematized below, but it is true that the intertextual construction of *The Grove Family* played out a progressive blurring between on- and off-screen roles. In the *Evening Telegraph and Post* in early 1956, the construction of Mr Grove/Edward (Ted) Evans makes this apparent: 'As a home-loving man himself, fond of doing jobs around the house, Ted couldn't be happier in his role as [builder and decorator] Mr Grove' (*Evening Telegraph and Post*, 9 January 1956), and an image of Mr Evans with his wife at home was accompanied by a caption exclaiming: 'No, it's not Mr Grove with the wrong wife! It's Edward Evans enjoying a cup of tea with his real-life wife Pauline!' Other articles dwelled similarly on the apparent confusion surrounding the distinction between actor and role, with reports of how 'scores of children across the country have adopted Bob Grove as a kind of honorary Dad', writing to him as Bob Grove to ask his advice on homework, bicycle punctures or football skills (*Daily Sketch*, 17 October 1955).

Such articles appear to reflect on the 'newness' (and thus specificity) of television fame, particularly given their implicit nod toward a slightly confused audience, apparently unsure of the boundaries between text and reality. But the situation was more complex, as these discourses had circulated around the actors and actresses in BBC radio serials such as *Mrs Dale's Diary* (1949–69) and *The Archers* (1950–). In 1951 it is reported that 'Mrs Dale Will Stop Dieting' because too many women have written in to request her diet sheets for themselves (*Daily Herald*, 19 June 1951); meanwhile, when the famous Dale cat was lost, 'a woman telephoned to say that her little boy had found it in Portsmouth Road' (*Answers*, 13 January 1951). It is also difficult to assert that – simply because it visually identified the actor with the role – this intimate familiarity was greater where television is concerned. The BBC understood the audience to have their own 'definite picture' of the characters in their minds, so in the programmes themselves 'it was never wise to state the colour of their eyes or their hair' (*Good Housekeeping*, 11 March 1952).

But it is likely that listeners knew what the cast of the radio serials looked like – essentially because of their extratextual circulation in the press. In fact, this material dwelled self-consciously on aspects of physical appearance precisely because it could not be accessed in the programme itself. As the *Evening Standard* explained, Alvys Maben, who played Sally Lane in *Mrs Dale's Diary*, was a '28-year old blonde with blue eyes and a poodle haircut' (the image then confirms what is described; *Evening Standard*, 28 November 1951).

But it is important to emphasize here that this blurring was not simply articulated within discourses of a 'cosy' familiarity, reinforcing the sense that the famous *are* who they appear to be, and thus shoring up the concept of the individual (cf. Dyer, 1998). While contemporary television actors and actresses, particularly those in soaps, may articulate concerns about being typecast, in the 1950s this was discussed with a self-conscious note of alarm, expressed as an irreversible obliteration of the 'real' person by the role.

'Serialitis' and Sheila Sweet: 'I am *not* Pat Grove!'

In this respect, the implication of a slightly 'confused' audience, working through the boundary between fantasy and reality, shifts to the suggestion of a more menacing mass, voraciously consuming characters with such enthusiasm that it fixes and traps actors in their roles. In January 1955, for example, the *Daily Sketch* ran the headline 'Is Sheila Just a Dead-End Star?' and explained:

> The beauty of the family [Pat Grove] is suffering from Serialitis. Sheila Sweet … is catching one of the oddest ailments that radio and TV can threaten … [This] complaint has hit a few other people in their time. But Ellis Powell, who is radio's Mrs Dale, has long ago given up the struggle. She IS Mrs Dale. The cast of the Dales and their rivals, *The Archers*, have also given in. Sheila Sweet, however, means to fight. (*Daily Sketch*, 5 January 1955)

Sweet's bid to 'fight' – she had been seeking to forge a discursive gap between actor and role for some time – is explicitly apparent in a *Picture Post* article 'The Dream Girls Next Door'. As part of its new series of 'Teleprofiles', it featured an interview with Sweet and Patricia Dainton, an actor from ITV's rival serial *Sixpenny Corner* (ATV, 1955–7). After being asked the now ritualistic question of whether she is similar to Pat, Sweet exclaims:

> 'Good gracious no,' with a scornful laugh. She isn't like anyone in the world – at least nobody I've ever met, anyway. All that sweetness – she's so sweet it makes you sick. And *so* unsophisticated. For instance, I wish she would occasionally read a book, instead of endless magazines. And it wouldn't kill her to go to a concert, instead of to the pictures for a change.

> [Also] look at the way she treats her boyfriends. She leads them on and flirts like mad and then, when they try and make a pass at her, she is Not That Sort of Girl. (Murray, 1955)

When asked why her character is so popular with the audience, the actor replies:

> Well I suppose because she is what every mother would like her daughter to be like … so when their own girl gets out of hand, they can sigh and tell them to behave like Pat Grove. Personally, I would *loathe* to be like her, or have a daughter like her … I am not Pat Grove! (Murray, 1955)

In dismissing Pat's taste, Sweet disrupts the BBC's bid to collapse the identities of actor and role in a strategy of class realism. But her discussion of femininity does rather more. On one level, it implicitly critiques the parameters in which Pat must negotiate her sexual identity. The programme itself presented Pat as a popular girl with a string of boyfriends, but there was a clear bid to suggest that she was – in the words of the early press constructions – 'proper' (*Daily Mail*, 17 March 1954). Within the moral context of the programme, Pat has little choice but to insist that she is ultimately 'Not That Sort of Girl'. But in this respect, and in stark contrast to the 'lookalike' competitions through which viewers were meant to see themselves in the Groves, Sweet pointedly questions whether 'Pat' is in fact 'real' at all.

This takes on further implications in the context of the press interest in Sweet's real-life divorce in 1955. Still insisting on a conflation between actress and role, the *Daily Mail* ran the headline 'Pat Grove to Seek Divorce' (*Daily Mail*, 28 April 1955). Sweet had been married since 1949, and this clearly revealed the BBC's earlier publicity in the *Radio Times* (which asserted that she lives 'in London with parents, and spends most of spare time dress-making'; *Radio Times*, 25 April 1955) as false. The idea of a married and then divorced actress hardly supported the verisimilitude of Pat's 'girl-next-door' image, or the programme's bid to promote the 'family as the key to social life' (undated memo, circa 1953; T12/137/20) in an era of postwar reconstruction. This also returns us to the extent to which the BBC aimed to control the extratextual circulation of the Groves, collapsing the identities of actor and role, and offering an off-screen image which, in the words of the producer, was 'full of virtues' (*Evening Standard*, 14 September 1955).

Sweet left the cast in mid-1956, and asserted in the press that 'Sheila Sweet had disappeared … offers from agents [had] stopped, and [she] … was only known as "Pat"' (*Daily Mirror*, 28 June 1956). She was then promptly replaced by the new 'Pat', played by Carole Mowlam, and it is notably the far more compliant Mowlam playing Pat in the existing audiovisual footage of *The Grove Family*, appearing as Pat in extant BBC stills, and representing Pat in a subsequent documentary on the programme.[6] But buried among the stale press clippings on

The Grove Family, Sweet's 'Pat' draws attention to the fact that the programme's claim to the 'real' had different implications for different characters. The actor rejected her conflation with Pat Grove precisely because cultural constructions of femininity, and *The Grove Family*'s construction of Pat, demanded that she fashion her identity within highly constrained parameters ('I felt trapped'; *Daily Mirror*, 28 June 1956).

Although it indicates the need to edge the continuities with radio more clearly into the picture, *The Grove Family* suggests how canonical paradigms of televisual fame are relevant and revealing when approaching a historical case study. However, *The Grove Family* also foregrounds the difficulties involved in positing this paradigm as universal and essential. There is the need to consider the possibilities of what we might call public service television fame – something which is in part characterized by a reluctance to exploit forms of intertextual circulation in the first place. From the BBC's perspective at least, the constructions discussed here were primarily imagined as a strategy of fictional realism, intimately intertwined with the verisimilitude of the programme's class representation. In this respect, the significance of the 'ordinary' and the familiar takes on particular class dimensions. This then needs to be related to the specific institutional and cultural context of *The Grove Family*: the idea of 'reflecting' the 'ordinary', and thus positioning the Groves as 'everybody's next door neighbour' (undated memo, c.1953, T12/137/20), was central to the BBC's attempt to address the expanding class audience for television at this time. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that *The Grove Family* included the only television character who did not reflect a neat homology between the on- and off-screen self. To generalize this issue, and thus to ignore the different discursive construction of Sheila Sweet, would be to miss a significant ideological struggle surrounding the image of family life projected by the Groves. However, as suggested at the beginning of this article, exploring a disjuncture between public/private self, ripping away the public image and peering beneath the public 'mask', was in other ways central to how television's relations with fame were understood in the 1950s.

Face to Face: 'a disturbing tendency in TV interviewing'

Andy Medhurst's (1991) discussion of Gilbert Harding, the grumpy and erudite panellist on the BBC's *What's My Line?* (BBC, initially 1951–62), provides one of the only detailed case studies of early television fame in Britain. The article also positions Harding as exceptional. According to Medhurst, other names from early television lacked the 'extra layers of meaning, the added clusters of contextual relevance' (1991: 71) which make a textured reading of Harding's image possible. Medhurst concludes

that, on a conceptual level, Harding was positioned ambiguously between academic definitions of a 'TV personality' and a film star. The amount of press coverage Harding received was certainly vast, and the suspicions surrounding his sexuality charged the concept of the private with particular political implications. But it is surely difficult to assert what is exceptional, and thus by implication typical, in such an unknown field. While Harding's 1960 appearance on *Face to Face* offered one of the most controversial and compelling editions of the programme, when he was famously pushed to the brink of tears when asked about his relationship with his late mother, the discussion which surrounded it formed part of the wider debate about the impact of television on the circulation of public figures. But while *Face to Face* emerged in 1959, two years after *The Grove Family* had finished, the discourses with which the programmes were associated circulated concurrently. *Face to Face* brought into sharper focus debates which had surrounded British television's relations with fame since the mid-1950s.

The memos from the producer, Hugh Burnett, indicate how *Face to Face* was influenced by the American interview series *Person to Person,* which began in 1953 and was hosted by the distinguished journalist Ed Murrow.[7] In 1958 Burnett insisted that:

> [T]here is room in our output [for] … exhaustive questioning of distinguished people on highly controversial and personal topics … [The programme] would lay out boldly the history, beliefs, prejudices and character of a single human being. (Hugh Burnett to Assistant Head of Television, 27 February 1958, T32/640/1)

The programme in fact interviewed a wide range of people with different backgrounds and careers, ranging from cabinet ministers, royalty, philosophers, literary geniuses, sportspeople, pop stars and film stars to television entertainers. Guests included King Hussein, Carl Jung, Milords Birkett, Boothby and Shawcross, Stirling Moss, Dame Edith Sitwell, Evelyn Waugh, Simone Signoret, Lord Olivier, Sir Noel Coward, Gilbert Harding and Tony Hancock. John Freeman was the interviewer selected to interrogate these names: he had been a socialist MP, had previously worked on the BBC's *Panorama,* and was to become the editor of the *New Statesman* while *Face to Face* was on air. But while this background was clearly intended to lend the programme a certain political legitimacy, its emphasis was primarily on the 'private' self. Freeman explained in one magazine interview that he did not want to know 'what a member of the cabinet thinks about the cabinet, but rather to find out about the nightmare he had last night' (*Good Housekeeping*, 4 July 1960). Its claim to probe the 'offstage self' could not have been more acute, and Burnett repeatedly stated that the aim was to reveal 'the face behind the public face of anybody prepared to come on and show themselves' (*The Unknown Hancock* (TX/BBC Two, 26 December 2005).

Although the in-depth interview technique had been part of radio journalism, the idea of revealing the 'face behind the public face' took on quite literal connotations in the context of television. In Burnett's original conception of the programme, he explains how he intends to:

> [Hide] the interviewer and concentrate the cameras exclusively on the subject under scrutiny. This is a new departure for television, producing extremely interesting results. The viewer at home can concentrate and indulge his curiosity in an interrupted scrutiny of the face of the public figure under pressure. (undated memo, Hugh Burnett, T32/640/2)

While Freeman was either off-camera or seen from behind, the subject was picked out under a harsh white light, framed in an extraordinarily tight and unwavering close-up. Comparisons with interrogation (as well as torture, cross-examination and the psychiatrist's couch) were frequently noted by critics and viewers at the time, and BBC Audience Research recorded complaints about subjects 'sweating under police interrogation' or 'positively frying under the lamps' (BBC Audience Research, 1960a).

The face 'behind the public face': up close

Yet the programme's much trumpeted bid to reveal 'the face behind the public face' rested on two assumptions. First, it implied that the public selves of the famous were the products of constructed personae, and second, that television nevertheless possessed the capacity to uncover the 'real' self before the viewer's eyes. This attitude reflects Joshua Gamson's (2001) argument that, from the 1950s, there was an increased awareness of image construction in celebrity discourse, due in part to the multiplication of media outlets. Gamson's argument is that celebrity texts negotiated an increasing emphasis on manufacture as an explanation for fame by continually reinventing their claim to the 'authentic' self. One such strategy involved increased emphasis on a 'behind-the-scenes' rhetoric, 'instructing the [audience] … further in reading performances, finding the "real" behind the "image"' (Gamson, 2001: 274). This discourse acknowledges that 'a gap between image and reality exists, but denies that bridging it is a problem' (2001: 274). *Face to Face* was certainly self-reflexive about the relationship between the 'real' and the role (Harding is quizzed as to whether he is conscious of cultivating the mannerisms of 'Gilbert Harding'), but in relation to *Face to Face,* one of the most striking differences between now and then is the evacuation of the subject's agency. As the emphasis on apparently vulnerable and exploited public figures suggests, they were rarely positioned as willing participants in the encounter. This meant that questions of authenticity – which would necessarily be raised if the 'performance' were seen as complicit – were not readily apparent.

The idea that the face caught in close-up will reveal the 'hidden main-
 springs of a life' (Balazs cited in Dyer, 1998: 15), is not a new philosophical

perspective. But in terms of the critical reception of *Face to Face,* this perspective needs to be situated within the discourses which surrounded the television close-up. In relation to television drama in the 1950s, Jason Jacobs (2000) has explained how intimacy was discussed in terms of observation, with the television close-up imagined as a penetrating 'microscope'. As one reviewer observed:

> The camera is ruthless in its exposure of those facial forgeries of emotion which get by in the auditorium; the proximity of the actor to his audience imposes upon him a severe discipline of integrity in all he does with a smile or an eyebrow. (cited in Jacobs, 2000: 119)

Jacobs argues that the televisual close-up was not discussed primarily in terms of identification or seduction (as with the cinema), but observation, and what comes across strongly in these discussions is the insistence on its supreme realism. But this example also foregrounds the problems inherent in mapping the emerging aesthetic contours of the medium largely in relation to drama. Once we bring non-fiction programming into view, we can begin to see that this epistemological claim to a 'super-realism' was not always welcomed. A key problem with *Face to Face* was that its images seemed only too real.

Face to Face certainly probed more deeply into the subject's life than was common in the television interview at this time. Questions ranged across the subject's family relations, dreams, personal failings and annual salary to religious beliefs. Yet while some critics pinpointed this as part of the programme's intrusive nature, the fact that their concern was not really about the programme's verbal discourse is thrown into relief by the BBC's *This Is Your Life*. Originally an American-devised format, *This Is Your Life* began on the BBC in 1955 and, while immensely popular, it earned an extremely controversial reputation as an intrusive and unethical format (see Holmes, 2007). But as with the discursive construction of the Groves, the BBC policed the verbal narrative of the programme very carefully (the 'Life' narrative must not contain 'incidents [that were] sordid or embarrassing in any way')[8] and the career-based stories deliberately edged towards a seamless intertwining of on- and off-screen personae.

Despite the complaints about *This Is Your Life* revealing private lives (a phrase which suggests the discursive exposure of an off-screen existence), what troubled critics was the imaging of the self caught off-guard and revealed in the moment through the live, spontaneous rhetoric of the television image. There are undoubtedly resonant links to subsequent media developments here, most obviously in the growth of paparazzi photography, and the development of celebrity reality TV. Despite the well-meaning intentions of *This Is Your Life* – it was far more celebratory than *Face to Face* and lacked the explicit aim to probe and reveal – there was a critical distaste for the famous weeping on television,

and many were appalled at its visual feast of bewilderment, confusion and surprise. Some editions of *Face to Face* were filmed and some were live, but in edging towards the following decade and the more politically subversive television of the 1960s, it is undoubtedly bolder in its deliberate intention to 'unmask' the public face. However, *This Is Your Life* makes clear how the debate that it provoked was not new. Following the Gilbert Harding interview, John Jelley's article in the *Daily Mail*, 'I Object to the Soul-Washing of Gilbert Harding', was forceful in its denouncement of the observational capacities of the close-up:

> Let us not be mealy-mouthed. There is no newspaper that has not at some time intruded on private grief. But at least the excuse has been the discovery of facts. And the emotion has been neutralised by the cold objectivity of print and paper. But television does not deal in facts – indeed hardly in words. It gives us the close-up of the quivering lip, the damp eye, the shaking hand. (Jelley, 1960)

In troubling the boundaries between public and private, the highly sexualized and gendered language here was bolstered by frequent criticisms of the programme's 'sensationalistic peepshow' mentality (*South Wales Echo and Evening Express*, 10 February 1961), the sense of which was perhaps bolstered by the still-new experience of privatized spectatorship. Yet in terms of reflecting on how these discourses circulated in parallel with those surrounding *The Grove Family*, it seems significant that the two most controversial editions of *Face to Face* focused on Tony Hancock and Gilbert Harding – the only television names to appear on the programme. What was so especially troubling about seeing television stars probed, revealed and 'unmasked'?

This question foregrounds contradictions inherent in the epistemological claim of *Face to Face*. While it openly claimed to be more interested in the person's 'private' self than their public career, the BBC was careful to select people who were regarded as talents or geniuses in their own domains, or who held important political and public roles. In this respect, discourses of cultural value were most visibly expressed in relation to the cultural status of television fame, as represented by Hancock and Harding. Harding was himself plagued by the feeling that his work in light entertainment had sold short what Freeman calls his 'first-class mind' (Medhurst, 1991: 66). In comparison, *Hancock's Half Hour* on television was a critical and popular success (Goddard, 1991), and Hancock was acknowledged as a clear comic talent. Yet the suggestion that people from television would somehow not provide sufficient 'depth' pervaded audience responses to both of the programmes. While Hancock's uniquely expressive face, caught in close-up, was pivotal to the comic effect of *Hancock's Half Hour* (Goddard, 1991), on *Face to Face* it was seen in a different light, with the comedian 'drawing feverishly' on a cigarette stub, and offering what some viewers recalled as 'the outpourings of a

confused mind' (BBC Audience Research, 1960b). Others referred to him as a 'fish out of water' who seemed 'unable to cope with the stringent demands of the programme', and expressed 'surprise at the lack of fluency and wit (bearing in mind his amusing series)' (BBC Audience Research, 1960b). In relation to Harding, while many viewers sympathized with his 'tortuous ordeal', responses similarly skirted around the sense that he was not a legitimate subject for the programme in the first place. But these reservations reflected on more than the cultural value of fame in what one critic called the 'peculiarly ephemeral world of television' (*Guardian*, 19 September 1960). They also lead us back to the argument that television appears to collapse the distance between the 'real' and the role. Despite the differences in their public roles (comedian versus host), there nevertheless appeared to be a greater level of shock at the apparent disjuncture between 'brilliant comic' or confused Tony, and 'Old Crust' or tearful Harding, precisely because viewers had been encouraged to locate the 'real' self somewhere *within* the screen role.

Despite the contrast set up in the opening of this article, *The Grove Family* and *Face to Face* do not necessarily offer oppositional discourses on television fame. Both pivot on what Langer describes as television's 'search for intimacy' (1981: 360), and the talk show interview has since been described as a space which seeks to reveal the famous as 'ordinary mortals' (Bell and van Leuwen, 1994: 194). With respect to the 1950s and *Face to Face,* this argument certainly has some purchase. But it also offers a partial perspective, reinforcing the notion that television's relations with fame are 'safe', conservative and reassuring, when cultural commentators viewing television at the time saw them as anything but that. Given that such associations have played a role in shaping the value judgements conferred on television fame (not least of all in academia), this evidence is worth some thought.

The wider interest of the present author was in exploring how these case studies might contribute to historical knowledge about television's relations with fame, while enabling an exploration and evaluation of the conceptual tools used to study this field. This is important in a context in which 'television history' and 'television studies' are seen as separate domains and, as John Corner (2003) has observed, television history should be in dialogue with theories and concepts in television studies, impacting upon non-historical research and pedagogy. The earlier reference to the contemporary explosion of reality TV is a case in point, and this is simply an example of one juncture at which historical and conceptual interventions might meet productively.

In terms of connecting the contemporary with the historical, both of these case studies still speak to current constructions of television celebrity (see, for example, Geraghty, 1991; McNicholas, 2005 on soap celebrity). But while necessarily retaining the marks of its historical difference, it is arguably *Face to Face* which more clearly resonates with contemporary

epistemological attitudes towards the famous. As the talk or chat show interview is now often regarded as simply another mode of professional performance (perceived as 'increasingly formulaic, intended for publicity') (Bell and van Leuwen, 1994: 242), the hunger to access the 'real' self outside of the role has arguably been transferred to celebrity reality TV. A key difference here is that unlike *Face to Face* or *This Is Your Life,* this programming celebrates a culture which has largely dispensed with meritocratic conceptions of fame. While *Face to Face* carefully justified its probe by foregrounding the worthy status of the public self, UK programmes such as *Celebrity Big Brother* (Channel 4, 2001–) and *I'm a Celebrity… Get Me Out of Here!* (ITV1, 2002–) openly revel in showcasing fading stars, or are totally unconcerned as to whether the subjects had a merited claim to fame in the first place. The programme environments are also decidedly contemporary in their conception of identity, whether we refer to the CCTV surveillance compound of *Celebrity Big Brother*, or the bid of *I'm a Celebrity…* to strip people of their commodity trappings (clothes, make-up, communication technologies) in the hope that the jungle will expose the 'raw', 'primitive', self beneath. These contexts in themselves indicate a culture which is increasingly sceptical of the authenticity of the celebrity self, and with their constant discussion of performance and image construction, the programmes actively exploit this scepticism (see Holmes, 2006). The seeds of self-reflexivity may be there in *Face to Face*, but in addressing what is understood to be an audience entirely conversant in the language of image construction, this representational play has reached new levels in contemporary formats. Here, of course, the subjects are largely constructed as willing participants in a game, while the debate surrounding *Face to Face* (and its emphasis on tortured victims) evacuated the subjects' agency, and thus any hint of a complicit or knowing performance. Indeed, without this investment in the 'reality' of the *Face to Face* encounter, the concern which greeted the programme would have made little sense.

Yet this is not to imply a neat chronological contrast between a thoroughly modern investment in the truth value of the interview, versus a postmodern celebration of surface identity. In the words of Annette Hill, reality TV in fact encourages a particular viewing practice in which audiences are beckoned to look for the 'moment of truth' when 'people are "really" themselves' in an unreal, performative, television environment (2002: 324). This conception also connects with Gamson's (2001) understanding of the discursive construction of contemporary celebrity discussed earlier in this article. Given the increasing prevalence of manufacture as an explanation for fame (which itself represents a threat to the economic enterprise of celebrity), the construction of contemporary celebrity works hard to protect the possibility of locating authenticity. Within the context of inviting us 'behind-the-scenes' of the celebrity image, an increased emphasis on the power of the audience, and the suggestion of an ironic

or mocking perspective on celebrity culture, the insistence that there is the possibility of locating the 'real' self lives on (Gamson, 2001). Indeed, the belief that the 'X-ray' vision of the camera, especially the close-up, will at some point unearth the *real* self before the audience's eyes, remains central to the epistemological claims and appeal of reality shows.

Within this process, it has also been suggested that while reality TV makes 'ordinary people extraordinary', it makes 'extraordinary', famous people 'ordinary' (Biressi and Nunn, 2004), and this might be seen as further evidence of continuity rather than change, returning us to an emphasis on 'universal' conceptions of television fame. But as hinted previously, reality TV clearly needs to be placed in its own particular cultural and social contexts. For example, there is an interesting question here, as to why – if we look at the conventional winners of both celebrity and non-celebrity versions of reality TV shows – we want to celebrate and reward people who appear to maintain a constant, 'down-to-earth' self within the pressure of a constantly surveilled environment. Equally, the strategies through which participants are understood to reveal their 'authentic' selves speak to the triumph of a therapeutic culture in eroding the boundary between public and private (Furedi, 2004). This is a prospect which, as the outraged reaction to the 'soul-washing' of Gilbert Harding makes clear, was still a rather alien concept in 1960.

Indeed, this article has suggested that while undoubtedly useful and resonant, the canonical paradigms of television fame need to be situated in, and inflected by, particular historical contexts. Neither of the case studies explored here was simply the product of some apparently 'innate' qualities of television fame. Rather, they drew their meaning from various contextual factors, ranging across the institutional influence of the BBC and its moral or ideological construction of public service, to discourses surrounding the aesthetic possibilities and power of television – particularly with regard to emergent discourses on the close-up. But whether we are examining the trembling lip of Gilbert Harding or the daily domestics of the homely Groves, what is perhaps most striking is how, for a subject that is literally defined by public visibility, much of its history remains unknown.

Notes

1. This was undertaken at the BBC Written Archive Centre (WAC), Caversham. All newspaper clippings referred to are available at the BBC Written Archive Centre (WAC), Caversham. The clippings do not include page numbers and are archived in date order. In most cases they no longer have all their information, such as title and author.
2. *The Lime Grove Story: The Grove Family*, BBC One/TX, 26 August 1991.
3. John Warrington to Head of Light Entertainment, 31 May 1954, T12/137/1 (WAC).
4. John Warrington to Head of Light Entertainment, 9 September 1954, T12/137/1.

5. 'The Groves – Home and Away', *Radio Times Annual* 1955, T12/137/20.
6. *The Lime Grove Story: The Grove Family* (BBC One, 26 August 1991).
7. Hugh Burnett to Assistant Head of Television, 27 February 1958, T32/640/1.
8. Controller of Television Programmes to Director of Television Broadcasting, 21 November 1955, T12/522/1.

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Biographical note

Su Holmes is Reader in Television at the University of East Anglia. She is the author of *British TV and Film Culture in the 1950s: Coming to a TV Near You!* (Intellect, 2005) and *Entertaining TV: The BBC and Popular Programme Culture in the 1950s* (Manchester University Press, forthcoming). She is also the co-editor of *Understanding Reality TV* (with Deborah Jermyn, Routledge, 2004), *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture* (with Sean Redmond, Routledge, 2006) and *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader* (with Sean Redmond, Sage, 2007).
ADDRESS: Department of Film and Television, Arts 2, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK. [email: Susan.Holmes@uea.ac.uk]