Television's royal family: continuity and change

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INTRODUCTION

British television has had a long, and not always happy, relationship with the Crown, but since Richard Cawston's documentary *The Royal Family* (BBC, 1969) the Windsors have acknowledged the necessary evil of allowing the cameras in to record less formal aspects of their life and work. The Queen herself has since been the subject of three such observational documentaries: Edward Mirzeoff's *Elizabeth R* (BBC, 1992) marking the fortieth anniversary of her reign, Matt Reid's *Monarch: The Royal Family at Work* (BBC, 2007) and Michael Waldman's *Our Queen* (ITV, 2013). These documentaries are often unsatisfactory experiences for their royal subjects and the filmmakers alike. Reid's film created controversy when the veracity of its trailer was called into question, resulting in the resignation of the then BBC1 controller Peter Finch. *Our Queen*, a rare offering in this genre from ITV, revealed a tension between the filmmaker, Waldman, who wanted to observe the monarchy, and the advisers, who sought to conserve its reputation and therefore wished to limit his access.¹ As the latter unsurprisingly triumphed, an almost inevitable celebratory mode was conveyed. The royal family seems much more comfortable with cameras that are kept at an appropriate distance as on formal occasions covered by broadcasters. As these brief examples suggest, such televised representations are potentially fraught with implicit questions about the legitimacy of monarchy in the twenty-first century, or on the other hand, the suitability of the younger royal generations to replace the Queen.

In this chapter, we therefore focus on the ways in which two British broadcasters, the BBC and Channel 4, handled coverage of the monarchy during a particularly sensitive period for the Windsor family of ageing and generational

change. These events culminated in the commemoration of Queen Elizabeth's sixtieth year on the throne, the speculation surrounding Prince Charles as the oldest heir apparent in British history, the marriage of Prince William and Catherine Middleton and the birth of their son, George, now third in line to the throne. What various examples of this television coverage reveal are the delicate negotiations necessary on the part of the broadcasters in dealing with the continuity of the monarchy, traditional symbol of the stability of the nation and the inevitability of change. In addition to speculation surrounding Prince Charles's suitability to take over as monarch and the possible abdication of the Queen, the marriage of Prince William to a 'commoner' provoked much discussion about her genealogy and her assimilation into the royal family. The latter, of course, is overshadowed by still vivid public memory of William's mother, the late Princess Diana.

Such anniversaries and state occasions are opportunities for broadcasters, especially the BBC, to commission documentaries and to construct 'media events', and are the keystones of much historical programming, as we have noted in detail elsewhere.² BBC television has covered royal events since 1939 when the departure of the King and Queen for Canada was televised³ and has in the intervening decades positioned itself as the holder of the nation's archives, from which it regularly produces documentary programmes about national history, including the monarchy. In contrast, Channel 4, set up in 1982 to offer alternative and innovative programming, has been less concerned with the nation's past and especially celebratory accounts of its monarchy. Commemorative programming on the BBC often seeks to represent a historical national identity and in doing so create a sense of community within a culturally disparate nation. The rise of commemorative programming in nations across Europe over the past two decades has been noted by scholars: anniversaries offer programme makers and national broadcasters such as the BBC an opportunity to air material which conveys knowledge of significant national and international events, whilst also cementing the broadcasters' role as part of the same national history and heritage. For the BBC especially, commemorative programming emphasises its role in creating and maintaining a memory of, in this instance, the royal past, whilst satisfying audience expectations that such events be marked. Most recently, the sixtieth anniversary of the Queen's accession to the throne (2012), the wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton (2011) and the birth of their first child (2013) have prompted depictions of royal history on a number of channels as well as broadcasters' websites.⁴

In 1953 the coronation of Elizabeth II was televised and viewed by an imaginary collective of citizens engaging in the national calendar with the royal family at its core. Analysis of the commemoration of this event, alongside other royal occasions, demonstrates how national identity continues to be key to UK terrestrial channels' accounts of the royal family and the nation, past and present. The Diamond Jubilee of the accession saw the BBC especially offer a multi-dimensional account both of royal but also broadcasting history, with its website drawing together a range of relevant recorded material from the 1950s to the twenty-first century, most of which, such as 1965 footage of the Queen visiting Berlin, originated from the BBC's own archives, and some of which was itself commemorative material from earlier jubilees.⁵ By layering royal and institutional commemoration in this manner, as is also done in *The Diamond Queen* (2012) series, in which a reference to the televising of the coronation in 1953 is accompanied by colour footage from the BBC's own archives, the corporation can lay claim to being central to the national marking of such events.

JUBILEE COVERAGE

In February 2012 the BBC aired *The Diamond Queen*, a three-part series led by the current affairs presenter Andrew Marr, which included contributions from other members of the royal family. In using the noted journalist Marr – in BBC2 Controller Janice Hadlow's description, a 'familiar and trusted guide' – as an ambassador 'for the idea of history' the series stressed its, and the BBC's, credibility and authority.⁶ Although an unsurprisingly celebratory account of the Queen's life and actions in the present, it nonetheless through significant silences and editing seems to offer some degree of criticism of other members of the royal family and their, it is inferred, desire to take the Queen's place on the throne, presumably through her abdication.

The first episode of the three-part series begins with Marr addressing the audience, over footage of waving flags and a blue sky, reminding them of the importance of the monarchy to Britain. Soon afterwards, Prince William, one of the Queen's grandsons and next in line to the throne after his father Charles, the Prince of Wales, is interviewed and comments on his grandmother's professionalism in her role, describing himself as a 'young upstart' who recognises the importance of watching her in order to determine 'how it's done'. Whilst this certainly does not suggest that he wishes her to abdicate, it nevertheless reminds the audience that the Queen will, eventually, be replaced by a younger

member of the royal family. Significantly, though, it is William and not Charles who makes these comments. Indeed, two minutes further into the episode, over footage of the Queen meeting her subjects at an event in Wales in April 2010, Marr asserts that, unlike elected heads of state who, in the relatively short term, campaign for votes, 'this is the real endless, perpetual campaign ... she's here one week after her eighty-fourth birthday but retirement, never mind abdication, seem to be words never mentioned in her presence'. Indeed, this is the only explicit reference to her potential abdication in the series, although the comments of Prince Henry, William's younger brother and at the time third in line to the throne, may perhaps be viewed as ambivalent: 'these are the things that at her age she shouldn't be doing. And yet she's carrying on and doing them.' While almost certainly intended as praise for his grandmother and her refusal to rest despite her advanced years, the editing of Prince Henry's interview may lead the viewer to question not the legitimacy, but the safety of continuing for the Queen.

Although such quotations are revealing in their own light, so too are the absences. Princess Anne, the Queen's only daughter and at the time tenth in line to the throne, appears in episode one; Prince Andrew, the Queen's second son and then fourth in line to the throne, appears in the second episode, and Prince Edward, the Queen's third son and youngest child and then eighth in line to the throne, appears in the third. The absence of the Queen's eldest child is marked: other than a brief reference in the second episode to 1992 as a difficult year for the Queen, because of a massive fire at Windsor Castle in the November and the announcement by the then Prime Minister John Major of the separation of Charles and his wife Diana the following month – although interestingly the separation of Prince Andrew and his wife Sarah in the March of 1992 is not referenced – only in the final episode is interview material from 2008 showing Charles used, and in revealing ways.

Indeed, the interview is used only in the last few minutes of the final episode, marked tellingly as 'interviewed in 2008', unlike the material gathered from the other children and several grandchildren of the Queen. It appears in the context of Marr's drawing together of the final episode and of the series as a whole, in which he concludes: 'So sixty years on the throne. Quite an achievement for this small woman, with a world-familiar face, a thousand years of history at her back, who since a twist of fate at the age of ten has known her destiny.'

Using claims to tradition to justify the continuation of the monarchy, yet somehow also suggesting that fate, rather than a centuries-old monarchical

structure, led to Elizabeth's crowning, Marr is at this very important point unseen, although seen elsewhere in the series. He therefore occupies the role of 'Voice of God' narrator, identified by Bill Nichols as the expository mode of documentary. Such a mode has tended to foster 'the professionally trained, richly toned male voice of commentary',⁷ which further emphasises Marr's authority and legitimacy as presenter. He speaks over footage of himself meeting the Queen and at one point is heard apologising to her for 'stalking' her over the past eighteen months of filming, certainly emphasising his legitimacy and proximity to the elite subjects of the series he has fronted. However, he also adds what might be interpreted as a reminder of the thorny issue of the Queen's potential abdication, mirroring that first raised in episode one: 'For her children and grandchildren, it's a different story [from that of the Queen's continuing activity]. Next in line of succession, the Prince of Wales is the oldest heir apparent in British history at the age of 63.' Initially off screen, Charles can then be heard adding, as if in response to Marr's assertion, 'Half the battle, isn't it, is how to adapt in the best way, without losing that element of continuity. Not easy – you feel your way gently, you know.' The response, and the interview in general, seem to deal with the question of change to and within the monarchy, an issue of some interest at the time the interview was recorded (2008) because discussion of what was to become the 2013 Succession to the Crown Act was underway, encouraged by backbench MPs such as Evan Harris, whose Royal Marriages and Succession to the Crown (Prevention of Discrimination) Bill 2008–9 represents an attempt to modernise royal succession.⁸ Eventually such sentiment led to the legal enshrinement of the principle that age rather than gender would determine who should succeed to the throne.

Rather oddly in this context, then, Marr's voice-over continues, as he notes that: 'and her legacy also of course lies in the hands of her eight grandchildren', with no reference to her children and particularly to the next in line to the throne, Charles. This is reflected in the last few minutes of interview material, in which William talks about the pressure on him to perform well, given the example the Queen has set, and noting that: 'while she's still there and providing such a good example, it allows me to learn and be able to develop'. His brother Henry adds that 'at the end of the day... she has put this country way before anything. ... I would love to see anyone else handle [it] and I don't think they would as well as she has.' While again intended as praise for his grandmother's efforts during her reign, his comment also seems to suggest the unworthiness of any descendant, including his own father, and therefore the

26 The wistful senior relative? Prince Charles views Windsor home movies in *A Jubilee Tribute to the Queen by the Prince of Wales* (BBC, 2012).

illegitimacy of any desire that the Queen should abdicate. As Marr concludes, in a vein which seems to support this interpretation while also reminding the audience of the elderly Queen's mortality: 'We've taken her rather for granted. And after 60 years, perhaps its time we stopped.'

Prince Charles's reflections on the Queen's period on the throne were, however, transmitted on BBC1 on 1 June 2012 as a prelude to the live coverage of the celebrations that marked the Jubilee. The programme *A Jubilee Tribute to the Queen by the Prince of Wales* (BBC1) was billed as a 'personal' tribute and included 'private cine film' and 'home movies' taken, for example, behind the scenes on Coronation Day which show the Queen juggling the duties of monarch and mother and on family seaside holidays in Norfolk. Caroline Davies, previewing the programme for the *Guardian*, suggests that this 'footage is similar to that stored in boxes in millions of homes across Britain'.⁹ In the programme Charles is seen viewing the old footage and is visibly moved to see the 1952 film of his mother shot by the Duke of Edinburgh in Kenya, where she received news of her father's death and her effective succession, and family film of his great-uncle Lord Louis Mountbatten, killed by an IRA bomb in 1979. Looking through this archive Charles appears as a wistful senior relative, the custodian of the 'family album' who has been overtaken by more recent events and left to sit at home with his memories. Referring to the sovereign he speaks admiringly of the longevity of her reign and her adherence to tradition, which he says has helped

'anchor things a bit and give reassurance that something is there which is perhaps a little more timeless than other things which are changing all the time'.

While representations of the monarchy appear across a number of television genres, they are significantly present in those programmes that commemorate what are considered to be important events in a nation's past. Programmes that coincide with and celebrate the anniversaries of such historic occasions can be understood as historical event television. Dayan and Katz refer to the importance of 'media events' in what they call the 'live broadcasting of history' for national and, increasingly, international broadcasting and their intended audiences. They identify the form of these event types as 'contest', 'conquest' and 'coronation', examples of which respectively would be major sporting events, state funerals and what they call 'the festive viewing of television', for example Bastille Day in France.¹⁰ These media events interrupt the routines of scheduled broadcasting and involve live coverage. Increasingly the broadcasters are active partners in their preparations. In the UK these types of event often focus on the royal family, a seemingly endless source of weddings, funerals, birthdays and 'jubilees' for blanket 'live' national broadcasting. The 'live' elements, e.g. state occasions, parades, concerts, etc., which make up these programmes are supplemented and supported by other genres, such as documentaries which provide background to the main events and which are scheduled across a weekend or which are aired as lead-up to the live coverage.

The 2012 Jubilee celebrations covered three days – Saturday, Sunday and a national holiday on Monday – and took the form of a 'Thames Pageant', a live concert in front of Buckingham Palace, a Service of Thanksgiving in St Paul's Cathedral and a procession to Buckingham Palace. The BBC was central to all events, leading the pooled broadcast of the river pageant, as producer and exclusive rights holder for the live concert and lead pool broadcaster of the procession. As lead broadcaster, the BBC inevitably bore the brunt of the criticism of the coverage that was considered too populist, shallow and, unusually for the BBC, lacking in factual accuracy. Much of the criticism focused on the BBC's choice of presenters better known for their work in children's programming, charity telethons and magazine shows rather than news and current affairs. In a typically English way, the weather could be and was blamed for some of the shortfalls. The live broadcast of the 7-mile route on the river of the 1,000-boat flotilla, requiring 90 cameras including remote-controlled pan and tilt HD cameras on the royal barge itself,¹¹ was practically washed out by constant heavy rain. Undeterred by the criticism the then Director General, Mark Thompson,

rallied his troops in an internal email saying: 'By capturing the spectacle of the Thames pageant and yesterday's ceremonies alongside smaller local celebrations we reflected reaction from up and down the country. Our role in creating and staging Monday's incredible diamond jubilee concert also meant we made our own contribution to a special moment in our nation's history.'¹²

The procession 'set-piece', the finale of the celebrations, was organised through the pooling of BBC, ITN and Sky outside broadcasting facilities. In contrast, the Channel 4 coverage of the anniversary was largely through news and current affairs programming, and might be seen as implicitly critical of the BBC's far more celebratory approach. The Channel 4 website offered a news report on the anniversary, which seems to contrast 1950s and contemporary Britain by emphasising how 'communities were strong', with 'the royal thread woven through six decades of profound change, in Britain'. Channel 4 news presenter Jon Snow went 'out and about' to garner the views of a number of people, interlaced with a 'voice from the time', Richard Dimbleby, a 'professionally trained, richly toned male voice of commentary' in Nichols's terms, whom we hear speaking over black and white footage of crowds gathering in 1953 for the coronation. As Snow interjects, over recent images of a crowd amassing for the celebrations, 'we don't even talk like that anymore'. Over footage both of the 1953 event and its anniversary in 2013 he continues:

Then she was in the imperial pomp of carriage and horse. Today, the more prosaic Roller. We were six years on from ruling India. Today we're hoping she'll do more trade with us, not least in these Rollers. Then the ladies in waiting and maids of honour arrived in style. Today, there was just one, packed into a transit behind. [Footage of interior of Westminster Abbey.] One thing hasn't changed – the music.

By offering contrasts, the account is very different from the BBC's, which instead emphasises continuity. With reference to 'Vivat Regina', Snow continues 'Sung then by the probably all-white Westminster scholars. Today, from the same school, pupils despatched from China, India, Araby [*sic*] and beyond, the new life-blood of British private education.' It is difficult not to read this as a veiled criticism by the channel of the choice of children for the choir: all male, from very privileged backgrounds, international consumers of elite education. Perhaps to counterbalance this, Snow goes on to interview people at a 'London street market' near Westminster, with their accounts of sleeping on the pavement near the Abbey in 1953, to be there in good time for the coronation

procession. However, after two accounts from elderly women, a Northern Irish man adds that 'I'm afraid it was all a big disappointment to me, cos I didn't really know what was going on. My mum was all excited.' The inclusion of a Northern Irish voice is intriguing; aside from suggesting that not everyone in the crowds appreciated the spectacle, it demonstrates the migration of people from different parts of the British Isles to London. It also, perhaps, reminds the viewer of the delicate political balance still being maintained in the province. Returning to the gap between 1953 and the present, Snow notes that 'the content of the state [is] profoundly changed', with an elderly woman claiming that 'everyone was kind, and friendly, and there wasn't the horrible things going on ... we might have been short of things [during rationing] but we didn't really go hungry'. Instead of offering continuity, then, the account seems to identify both positive and negative forms of change. Unlike the BBC, Channel 4's coverage of the Jubilee depicts it as part of wider British and world history, positioning the royal family as carried on a tide of wider change, rather than instigators of it, and with regular references to economic and business developments.

Channel 4 is of course a very different broadcaster from the BBC. Founded in 1982 with aim of having simultaneously two 'faces' or logics, the 'public service' tradition of broadcasting inaugurated by John Reith at the BBC and the 'private services' or 'cultural entrepreneur' tradition, embodying a more corporate and commercial ethos, its dual mission was foundering by the 1990s.¹³ We have emphasised the importance of broadcaster and channel branding elsewhere.¹⁴ The move from Channel 4's explicit embracing of a public service ethos to a more problematic model, in the media historian Simon Blanchard's view, in which a 'private service's "face"', specifically the '[m]arket-corporate expansion of television as "just another business"',¹⁵ brought financial gains for a minority but may have led it to distance itself from other broadcasters who still, like the BBC, align themselves at least in part with a public service ethos. The need to do so is further evidenced in our analysis of representations of royal genealogy, particularly that of the Duchess of Cambridge.

ASSIMILATING THE 'OUTSIDER'

With the recent royal wedding and royal birth it seems hardly surprising that there should have been discussion of the origins of the Duchess of Cambridge, formerly Catherine Middleton, future queen and, later, mother of the future King George VII. The BBC and Channel 4 versions of the Middletons' family

history suggest different roles on the part of the broadcasters, and different preconceptions of their audiences, as much as they offer rival interpretations of the royal baby's ancestry. A focus upon genealogy is, though, hardly surprising given the wider public interest in family history research, mirrored in the hugely successful BBC series *Who Do You Think You Are?* (2004–). Offering insights into family history research but also, perhaps more importantly, into the genealogy of a range of celebrities from sportspeople and actors to politicians and comedians, the format has been sold overseas and arguably forms part of the BBC's flagship output, core to its channel identity. By offering a similar account of the Middleton family past, then, the BBC were drawing upon this authority, while Channel 4's version of Catherine's family history both online and in broadcast material may have been attempting to rival it and offer an alternative interpretation. Such alternative versions reveal desires to position the future queen in ways palatable to different viewers and therefore to add to ongoing discussions of the role of the royal family, past and present.

One of the earliest television documentary series to consider the history of royal marriage to commoners was Channel 4's *Monarchy* fronted by David Starkey, one of the faces of Channel 4 and, as we have suggested elsewhere, a contentious presenter-historian who is an intellectual 'brand' himself and is part of the broadcaster's branding.¹⁶ In December 2007 'The Windsors', the final programme in the seventeen-part series, aired. In it Starkey acknowledged briefly the move during the First World War to encourage monarchs to marry English commoners, part of an attempt to maintain public support for a monarchy with close family ties to the German Kaiser. This thread was not discussed at length in the series and was only returned to in the context of an impending wedding, in Starkey's 2011 documentary *Romance and the Royals*. 'The Windsors', however, offered telling insights into the royal family, particularly the Queen, including her thorny relationship with her daughter-in-law Diana, Prince William's mother, in whose memory a concert had been held earlier in the year to mark the tenth anniversary of her death, and thereby into the politics of succession, royal marriages and births.

Starkey initially discusses the 'rebranding' of the British royal family from Saxe-Coburg to Windsor in response to anti-German feeling in the First World War. To further appease the public, he notes, the possibility of allowing monarchs to marry British commoners was also mooted at that time. Then, over aerial footage of Windsor Castle, which had been devastated by fire in 1992, Starkey refers to 'unprecedented change' through a 'firestorm of scandal', as

'the heir to the throne and his wife paraded their mutual adultery'. Such assertions are certainly not part of the BBC's *Diamond Queen*, and demonstrate how the choice of such a contentious figure as presenter led to a rather different form of royal history, less celebratory and more castigating. Starkey's introduction of the episode summarises it as 'the rise, triumph, and eventual humiliation of the house of Windsor', but it tries to do so in the measured voice of the historian. He lays claim to something approaching Nichols's expository mode, and yet his commentary has already conveyed moral judgments of many of the individuals in his account. In this sense Starkey is perhaps also reflecting the dual faces of Channel 4; his tone suggests a public service element, emphasising ethics and morality, and yet both this 2007 episode and the 2011 *Romance and the Royals* seem calculated to profit, via advertising at the very least, from their subject matter. Certainly, from his initial work with the channel Starkey has offered, in the view of Peter Grimsdale, the then Commissioning Editor for history, a counter-intuitive alternative to the BBC¹⁷ and the example of the series considered here certainly seems to confirm this.

'The Windsors' also raises issues about the personal relationships of existing members of the royal family. For example, Starkey specifically considers Prince Charles, remarking that the Queen's family have been 'unable or unwilling' to keep to her 'iron code of duty'. Charles's wedding to Diana in 1981 is particularly focused upon, as, Starkey asserts, it 'started a chain of events which shook ... the House of Windsor to its foundations'. He also highlights Charles's ambivalence over the idea of marrying Diana, until his father told him he was honour-bound to do so. In addition, Starkey suggests, the births of their sons seemed to exacerbate their problems, although he does not give details. Offering alternative accounts of the marital breakdown, and sympathy to Charles for returning to his mistress rather than to Diana because of her affairs 'with all and sundry', Starkey argues that the Queen was forced to guide the family through a political and media minefield.¹⁸ Although Charles is certainly depicted as a less 'professional' choice of monarch than his mother, the possibility of abdication is implicitly negated. Indeed, as Starkey asserts over footage of Charles dancing and admiring penguins on a royal visit overseas, 'barring an act of God, [he] will be, must be, king'.

While series such as *Monarchy* offered a rather critical interpretation of the Queen's descendants, Starkey's, and Channel 4's, later work moved even further towards an explicit statement of the need for the royal family to recognise its British roots and, if necessary, to reject marriage to members of an elite in

favour of 'commoners'. References to Catherine's family history began to be made in 2011, with Channel 4's *Romance and the Royals*. Screened a few days before her wedding to Prince William, in April 2011, the documentary identified precedents for the marriage of a Prince and a commoner, and most interestingly, the channel's website linked this to wider national issues: 'By putting William and Kate's marriage in its historical context, David Starkey reveals it as the logical next step in a century-long struggle to return our monarchy to its native roots, preserving it as a focus of national identity.'¹⁹ Despite these claims the programme was criticised by several reviewers, including Benji Wilson of the *Telegraph*, who considered it 'Channel 4 cashing in on the royals',²⁰ ignoring Starkey's credentials as a historian and as presenter of the *Monarchy* series on the same channel, although perhaps expressing some of the uneasiness felt by viewers when forced to reflect on the impermanence of a family depicted as an unchanging fixture of British history and identity.

In addition to creating television programmes representing royal history and politics, broadcasters have increasingly published texts about the monarchy on their websites. This has been particularly the case in recent years, with the marriage of William and Catherine, and the birth of their son George in 2013, and has often taken the form of genealogical tables and accounts. For example, a day before her wedding the Channel 4 website declared Catherine 'the middle-class princess', emphasising both her maternal ancestors' work as miners in north-east England, as well as her father's solicitor ancestors. Perhaps this identification of Catherine as middle class was intended as praise for a more inclusive monarchy, although the channel was keen to note on its website that '[f]rom an anti-monarchist viewpoint, however, she is marrying – notwithstanding her origins – into an unelected institution at the top of a social and political system that is ossified, unrepresentative and undemocratic',²¹ thereby offering also a criticism of the institution of monarchy and perhaps, therefore, of Catherine's desire to join it. During a period of economic downturn, the activities of an elite, whether economic or royal, may be particularly open to criticism.

However, despite Starkey's assertion in *Romance* of the Britishness, or at least Englishness, of royals when marrying commoners before the early eighteenth century – a point contradicting to some degree an assertion he made, albeit briefly, in the final episode of *Monarchy* – and the channel's website defining Catherine as middle class, alternative accounts such as that published in the *Daily Mail* newspaper claimed Catherine as distantly royal, and even as a 'distant

cousin' of her husband.²² William's parents, too, were distantly related, and unsurprisingly, at the birth of William's son, the channel asked 'How royal is the royal baby?'²³ Unlike Channel 4, though, the BBC emphasised Catherine's 'humble roots' without reference to royalty or middle-class identity, with coal-miners, carpenters and labourers the main focus, rather than the solicitors on her father's side of the family.²⁴ These two different approaches to the future Queen may be interpreted as reflecting the two channels' identities, as much as those of the royal family and those marrying into it. As we have already noted, while the BBC's account of the Queen's life was keen to celebrate her achievements and the specialness of the royal family, with which Catherine was contrasted, the Channel 4 news account of the same year (2012), identified the relative privilege of Catherine's ancestors.

In the light of such varied depictions of family history, it is pertinent to consider whether this suggests a pro- or –anti-abdication position on the part of broadcasters. For several years and particularly in 2013, which saw the abdication of the Dutch Queen Beatrix and the Belgian King Albert in favour of their children, the UK press, and current affairs series such as *Question Time*, discussed the possibility, and used both past and present examples to support their arguments. Focusing, as the *Diamond Queen* did, on the age of Prince Charles, commentators such as Harry Mount, writing in the *Telegraph*, have noted that 'Prince Charles must sometimes wish he could go Dutch'.²⁵ However, this press discussion was little reflected in BBC coverage or even in that of Channel 4, which tended instead to consider the ethics of maintaining a monarchy or the genealogy of those marrying into it. Admittedly, the BBC's *Diamond Queen* does, through the absence of Prince Charles, seem to suggest that his sons would be more likely to take the throne, and certainly, by discussing the 'royalty' of William's son George, Channel 4 seems to draw a direct line between the Queen and William, bypassing Charles almost entirely.

Commemorative historical coverage aside, the BBC has acknowledged debates over abdication. In a BBC News broadcast of 30 April 2013 that began by discussing the historical significance of monarchy across Europe, the problems of the Spanish royal family and related allegations of embezzlement were featured. Moving to footage from the British Jubilee celebrations, the commentator asked if any of the world's other monarchs would consider abdication, although 'at 87, she [Elizabeth] shows no sign of leaving her throne'. Some months earlier, on 31 January 2013, the panel of the BBC current affairs programme *Question Time* grappled with the same debate when one audience

member asked 'Should Prince Charles ask the Queen to go Dutch?' In reply the comedian Dom Joly likened Prince Charles to former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who after years shadowing Tony Blair achieved less than a term in office before being losing the general election, and overall was, in Joly's words, a 'terrible disappointment'. Joly's argument that Charles should step aside for his son William received audience applause. Another panellist, James Delingpole of the *Spectator*, was also applauded when he added that, whilst the Queen does not make 'provocative, outspoken remarks', Charles has over the past decades taken 'explicitly political positions' and therefore might be seen to compromise the role of constitutional monarch. However, the more careful line taken by Baroness Warsi stressing Charles's work on community cohesion as well as the ongoing work of the Queen also received applause.²⁶ Such debates in news and current affairs programming are examples of television's function of 'working through'²⁷ aspects of national concern. Whether they have really affected the depiction of the royal family in history programming seems a moot point.

The broadcast coverage of the birth of Prince George (born 22 July 2013) is interesting to consider in relation to the issue of royal succession. Media crews camped outside St Mary's Hospital, and once again the BBC was criticised, this time for 'too much coverage', but fought back by reminding the press of the 'major historical event – the birth of a new heir to the throne' and reporting that BBC News Online had 19.4 million unique browsers globally and 10.8 million from the UK on Monday 22 July, the day the Duchess went into labour.²⁸ The christening of Prince George took place on 23 October 2013 at St James's Palace and the official photographs included a photograph of the Queen with the 'three future kings', Charles, William and George. As of May 2014 this remained on the BBC News website²⁹ alongside the last such official photograph taken in 1894 picturing Queen Victoria at the christening of the future Edward VIII with the future kings George V and Edward VII. The iconic image of the Windsor monarch and her successors seems to anchor the monarchy while also securing the future in rough seas ahead.

CONCLUSION

Television coverage of the royal family, past and present, reflects the different intentions and remits of the broadcasters involved. For the BBC, balancing accusations of popularisation against a need to have a sizeable audience in order to justify its position as the only licence-fee-receiving broadcaster, and to maintain

its status as self-declared archivist of national history, this has led to a variety of attempts to represent the royal family and its history, from Jubilee coverage to a range of documentaries. For Channel 4, offering an alternative view has meant drawing on a news- and current affairs-related agenda particularly central to its identity. The websites of both broadcasters highlight areas of conflict, particularly over those joining the royal family.

Arguably, then, the 360⁰³⁰ online and televised coverage of such events as royal weddings and jubilee celebrations has the potential to offer more viewpoints across official broadcasting sites. However, as we have noted elsewhere of history programming,³¹ this potential is often not realised. In the coverage of the monarchy the possibilities are limited by constraints placed upon broadcasters by the royal family with regard to access and the nature of their participation in specific programmes. These concerns are part of the delicate negotiations with a centuries-old institution, the representatives of which may not always agree to their involvement, as the absence of Prince Charles from *The Diamond Queen* suggests. Similarly, the BBC itself is concerned to maintain good relations with the royal family in order to uphold the institution's self-defined role as the primary national broadcaster, thus shaping and to some extent limiting the ways in which it depicts the monarchy. However, both the BBC and Channel 4 are engaged in competition for audiences which itself engenders something of a polarisation in representation as each network attempts to reinforce its own identity and ethos to attract its target audiences.

The differing coverage of the Duchess of Cambridge's ancestry by the BBC and Channel 4, which includes website material, demonstrates alternative interpretations of her ancestry reflecting the preconceived audiences for the channels. Catherine is, according to Channel 4, of middle-class origin, while the BBC emphasises her 'humble roots'. The former is a narrative of increasing privilege, the latter a more romanticised 'rags to riches' story. Interestingly, however, both broadcasters stayed within the confines of a version of royal genealogy rather than attempting an entirely different means of representing Catherine's heritage, for example the DNA analysis employed by a number of popular television programmes. British television coverage of royal celebrations does more than offer opportunities to make covert statements about the institution of monarchy and its future. As part of its 'alternative' ethos, Channel 4 can and does make explicit and critical statements about the institution, its privilege and its place within British society. Nonetheless, conscious of its claims to public service broadcasting, it too does not stray far from the national narrative of the monarchy.

NOTES

- 1 Mark Lawson 'Our Queen: the latest royal TV to tell us almost nothing', *Guardian* (15 March 2013), www.theguardian.com/tvandradioblog/2013/mar/15/our-queen.
- 2 For example, Ann Gray and Erin Bell, *History on Television* (Routledge: London, 2013), pp. 100–29.
- 3 See Joe Moran, *Armchair Nation* (Profile Books: London, 2013), p. 42.
- 4 See for example the BBC sites on the history of royal weddings: www.bbc.co.uk/history/royal_weddings; the history of royal births: www.bbc.co.uk/history/0/22623324; and the Queen's reign and Jubilee: www.bbc.co.uk/history/people/queen_elizabeth_ii. Channel 4 sites include those on the wedding: <http://blogs.channel4.com/snowblog/royal-wedding-history-pantomime/15160>; and the Jubilee: www.channel4.com/news/jubilee.
- 5 See BBC History, 'The Queen', www.bbc.co.uk/history/people/queen_elizabeth_ii#p00t3pry.
- 6 Gray and Bell, *History on Television*, p. 51.
- 7 Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 105.
- 8 For additional information see 'Royal Marriages and Succession to the Crown (Prevention of Discrimination) Bill', House of Commons library research paper 09/24 (2009).
- 9 Caroline Davies, 'BBC documentary shows poignant images of a queen in the making', *Guardian* (1 June 2012), www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/jun/01/bbc-documentary-images-queen-making.
- 10 Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events and the Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 1.
- 11 Adrian Pennington, 'Diamond Jubilee: by Royal Appointment', *Broadcast* (24 May 2012), www.broadcastnow.co.uk/techfacils/production-feature/diamond-jubilee-by-royal-appointment/5042633.article.
- 12 Ben Dowell, 'Queen's Diamond Jubilee: BBC bosses dodge criticism of TV coverage', *Guardian* (6 June 2012), www.theguardian.com/media/2012/jun/06/queens-diamond-jubilee-bbc.
- 13 Simon Blanchard, 'Two faces of Channel Four: some notes in retrospect', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 33:3 (2013), p. 365.
- 14 Gray and Bell, *History on Television*, pp. 44–5.
- 15 Blanchard, 'Two faces of Channel Four', p. 374.
- 16 Gray and Bell, *History on Television*, pp. 80–1.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- 18 See Mandy Merck's chapter in this collection for further examples.
- 19 See summary of *Romance and the Royals* on Channel 4 website: www.channel4.com/programmes/kate-and-william-romance-and-the-royals/episode-guide/series-1/episode-1.

- 20 Benji Wilson, 'Kate and William: Romance and the Royals, Channel 4, review', *Telegraph* (28 April 2011), www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/8478054/Kate-and-William-Romance-and-the-Royals-Channel-4-review.html.
- 21 See 'Kate Middleton: the middle-class princess', www.channel4.com/news/kate-middleton-the-middle-class-princess.
- 22 See 'Wills and Kate: kissing cousins', *Daily Mail* (3 August 2010), www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1299794/How-Prince-William-Kate-Middleton-related-thanks-Tudor-tyrant.html.
- 23 See 'How royal is the royal baby?', www.channel4.com/news/how-royal-is-the-royal-baby-kate-william.
- 24 See 'Royal wedding: family tree', www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-13050232.
- 25 Harry Mount, 'Why the Queen is never going to abdicate', *Telegraph* (29 January 2013), www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/queen-elizabeth-II/9834829/Why-the-Queen-is-never-going-to-abdicate.html.
- 26 *Question Time*, BBC1, 31 January 2013.
- 27 John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (London and New York: I.B.Tauris, 2000), pp. 91–101.
- 28 www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/complaint/bbcnewsroyalbabycoverage.
- 29 www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-2461019.
- 30 See Gray and Bell, *History on Television*, p. 223, n. 26.
- 31 *Ibid.*, pp. 17–25.

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