Reinforcing the myth: Constructing Australian identity in ‘reality TV’

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The current incarnation of ‘reality TV’ in Australia has a strong focus on the portrayal of everyday life. Although based on ‘real’ situations or people, there is a clear tension between ideas of authenticity and performance. As a global phenomenon, ‘reality’ formats are produced for local audiences by highlighting aspects of the national culture and identity, with format popularity directly linked to identification and affirmation of the spectacle of ‘reality’. This paper will analyse the use of popular Australian myth in ‘reality’ formats by charting narrative and character construction as an ‘illusory everyday’, with reference to Bondi Rescue (Cordell Jigsaw). The paper will examine the representation of Australian identity through both myth and construction in ‘reality TV’ as the perpetuation of a cultural simulation. Implications for research on the genre and the industry are also discussed.

The worldwide phenomenon of ‘reality TV’ is well entrenched in current Australian broadcasting. While the dominant feature of the genre is the portrayal of the ‘everyday’ through the inclusion of ordinary people or situations, there is an underlying tension between elements of authenticity and performance regarding programme production and reception. Australian ‘reality’ formats have evolved over time according to audience popularity and with a clear focus on reflecting aspects of national culture and identity. This paper will explore the representation of national ideals and popular myth in ‘reality TV’ as an ‘illusory everyday’, with reference to Bondi Rescue (Cordell Jigsaw). Through the examination of the combination of the Australian beach myth and the spectacle of ‘reality TV’, the representation of Australian identity at work can be viewed as the perpetuation of a cultural simulation. In this way, the portrayal of national ideals is reinforced through a constructed performance within negotiated television conventions. This also raises further questions of viewer reception, genre categorizations, and the relationship between the television industry and audiences.

Reality TV and myth

‘Reality TV’, or Popular Factual Entertainment, has been a prominent feature of Australian broadcasting, particularly since the turn of the millennium and the proliferation of global formats marketed for local production. As a result, it is increasingly possible for anyone or anything to have the opportunity to be broadcast on television, albeit within certain structural or competition parameters. The genre’s success and development signals its significance in contemporary television production and reception, and it is thus equally
important to examine how these national narratives are being represented to their audiences.

Superficially, the genre title itself highlights the convergence of fact and fiction involved in formats, as an important aspect of their packaging and appeal. The ‘reality’ represented is distinguished by production choices to mould and choreograph the content into engaging and identifiable viewing for audiences, such as documentary norms of ‘fly-on-the-wall’ recording, talking-head interviews and omniscient voiceover, in combination with entertainment practices including multiple narrative strands, evocative soundtrack and slick editing. It is common for formats to be classified with terms such as ‘docu-soap’ or ‘game-doc’, which highlight their hybridity from various genres (Murray and Ouellette 2004, 4–5). As a result, ‘reality TV’ defies easy definition as a result of this blurring between established norms of television. However, this also leads to a point of difference between the industry and its critics.

Use of the term ‘reality’ is fraught with epistemological arguments of subjectivity and objectivity, and the nature of truth and representation. In her extensive study of ‘factual’ television, Annette Hill summarizes the critical view of such terms as a ‘container for non-fiction content’ (2007, 3). However, on closer examination, this is indicative of a simplistic view situated close to traditional notions of television genre and representation as a fact/fiction opposition. As a result of their popular and often sensational status, ‘reality’ formats have been criticized as ‘trash’ or the lightening of documentary culture, which Dovey (2002, 12) argues ‘threatens to float the whole TV documentary tradition off into some Disneyfied pleasure garden of primary colour delights’. These strands of criticism suggest a hierarchy of value in ‘factual’ television where documentary is informative and worthy, while popular entertaining forms are solely for diversion. In effect, ‘reality TV’ has opened up a televisual space dealing with more complex questions than this binary opposition.

Interestingly, the industry does not tend to adopt the label of ‘reality TV’ as widely, and in its place has a range of terms for its myriad forms, such as Factual Entertainment, Popular Factual or Contemporary Documentary. For Bondi Rescue producer Rick McPhee, ‘reality’ and ‘factual’ as industry terms do not lend themselves to more literal considerations used in the genre’s criticism, as for television production ‘reality is where you construct something, you change something, and you impose something on a group of people’ (McPhee 2009). So while the common label and its criticism adheres to the promise of everyday people and events, ‘reality’ formats attain their authenticity by constructing simulations, as highly selective and purposeful productions. Alternatively, Bondi Rescue is considered as ‘factual’ by its creators as a result of its style as ‘observational documentary’. This is determined in relation to the existence of its subject matter regardless of the camera’s presence, and the production technique to ‘just follow what the lifeguards do ... [the crew] don’t create anything’ (McPhee 2009). The footage gained in this ‘factual’ style then receives similar post-production editing to ‘reality’ formats through entertainment conventions to create a ‘mix’ with ‘a bit of humour, a bit of drama, a bit of character, a bit of human interest’ (McPhee 2009). The use of terms such as ‘reality’ and ‘factual’ can thus be seen to differ between a value judgement in its criticism, and as relating to style or technique in its production. In light of this, ‘reality TV’ is more effectively considered within the notion of verisimilitude, as a relationship between the programme and its referent through systems of credibility for the viewer, rather than a perceived fidelity to ‘real’ or ‘fact’ (Neale 1999, 32). The representation and its efficacy is thus contingent on the construction and cognition of familiar generic and/or cultural conventions.
Similarly within semiotic discourse, Barthes (2000, 129) describes myth as ‘neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion’. The opposition between fact and fiction in relation to myth is thus likewise questionable in this sense, rather to be considered as a series of dominant ideas and values that are naturalized. Silverstone (1988, 23) argues that myth and television occupy the same space of ‘intimate distance’ in attempting to identify cultural experience through continual narratives concerned with everyday life. In this way, myth also has an important role within ideas of nation, where it is an essential part of cultural meaning and maintenance. Foundations of national ideas and values are established through myth and highlight that which is considered natural and accepted or alien and excluded within a culture. These continuous narratives are embedded with various rituals and symbols lending coherence to a collective discourse (Schöpflin 1997, 19–20).

Within both ‘reality TV’ and myth, then, can be identified an ‘illusory everyday’. Illusion here is not meant to signify fallacy or deception, but rather a mirage that accords with the norms and pleasures of its producers and audiences. Both myth and ‘reality TV’ are sites of liminality where the everyday is stretched and blurred through dominant ideals and representation techniques, constantly evolving as open and ambiguous spaces of national narratives and ideals, not quite fact or fiction. For television, the inclusion of national cultural elements in format production has been argued as a performance of ‘Australian-ness’ that ‘speaks to its local audiences’ (Roscoe 2001, 475). This is achieved in the local production of formats that emphasize elements of ‘banal nationality [to reproduce] national identity in multiple taken-for-granted, invisible, or unnoticed details’ (Aslama and Pantti 2007, 64). Through the use of popular national myths, formats not only have the ease of recognizable symbols and references but also an aspirational view of national ideals and values for viewer identification. In this respect, television has an important role in fostering national culture by promoting a ‘sense of citizenship, social identities and creating and representing a common cultural and political core’ (O’Regan 1993, 81). However, the construction and performance involved in the ‘reality’ genre leads to questions of the nature of the representation at work and how this is mediated by both its mythic qualities and television production. To examine this further, television series Bondi Rescue provides an interesting case study in relation to the Australian myth of the beach.

**Bondi Rescue and the beach myth of ‘Oz’**

The myth of the Australian beach has been explored, theorized and contested over some time. The beach has been identified as ‘central to the Australian imagination’ as a space of pleasure and freedom in close proximity to urban lifestyles (Drew 1994, xi) and posited as liminal, iconic and oppositional in Australian narratives. This paper does not intend to assess the viability of the myth; rather, its arguments provide a framework to examine its continuing role in nationalism and identity, specifically for ‘reality TV’. Turner (1994, 5–10) argues that established national discourses are ‘notoriously hard to dislodge or deconstruct’ from the common imagination, with steady characteristics such as the ‘cheeky, resourceful larrikin’ and a ‘prescriptive, unitary, masculinist’ identity. In particular, the beach holds a ‘special place in constructions of national identity’ as a space of leisure and constant return (Bonner, McKay, and McKee 2001, 270). Beach imagery and ideals permeate Australian art, literature, theatre, film and television, as an evocation of innocence, freedom and community, not only for national consideration but also the promotion of the country worldwide as an idyllic, open and pleasurable space. Although problematic to refine national ideals to specific qualities, it is a technique commonly used
by televisual media ‘as a means of pitching and selling to off-shore industries’ as an identifiable image of ‘Australian-ness’ (Waddell 2003, 40).

The rise of the beach myth coincides with ‘increasing urbanization’ along the coastline as a sanctuary ‘to escape the stresses, strains and complexities’ of modern life (Booth 2001, 3), in combination with the shift away from the ‘bush’ identity, which had been associated with toil and isolation (Fiske, Hodge, and Turner 1987, 54). Huntsman (2001, 173) identifies the transitory state of the beach as impermanent, active and constantly ‘becoming’, while Drew (1994, 106) defines the coast as a fault line; ‘a place of transition’ that encircles the continent as an open boundary. Similarly, the beach myth is also transitory, shifting with a national psyche and increasing presence in Australian media narratives, and regularly appropriated to ‘suit the dominant ideologies of particular groups in specific periods of time’ (Waddell 2003, 43). The landscape’s ambiguity results from the amalgamation of land and water, as the transition between spaces of tangible nation and foreign. Here, ‘culture–nature is a combination’ where the nature of the beach is engaged and incorporated with urban civilization (Game 1989, 4–5). This establishes a ‘new paradigm’ of beach as myth in the ‘complex negotiations between the ideal beach of nature and the material culture of the city’ (Fiske, Hodge, and Turner 1987, 55, 64), as a discourse that celebrates the pristine coastline for leisure while simultaneously containing any number of dangers.

The beach has been grounded in an ideal image of Australia and way of life: ‘classless, matey, basic, natural’, where its egalitarian qualities can be linked to its natural elements (Fiske, Hodge, and Turner 1987, 55). In this respect, the beach is an ‘equalizer’: ‘no one owns the sun, sea, surf’ and it is open and used by all for pleasure (Game 1989, 8). The myth also couples the landscape with the figure of the lifesaver as an ‘ideal type of manhood’ (White 1981, 155). This has remained a prime image in national myths as an identity promoting courage, initiative and service, and now part of the beach iconography along with the ‘red and yellow’ flags. Historically, the image has been primarily masculine, white and classless, leading to questions of a political role in this ideal type and its maintenance:

Rather than working in rural industry, he fights the elements to preserve the life of citizens at innocent play on the urban beach. Like the Anzac he represents discipline and sacrifice in a far safer environment. The representation embodies the best of the old images and reworks them into a new modern form. (Saunders 1998, 103)

This representation can be seen to be reworked further using the evolving mythic ideals of the Australian beach through the genre of ‘reality TV’ in Bondi Rescue. The series is distinctive to Australia and broadcast internationally, with four series produced at Bondi Beach gaining ratings figures, on average, of 1.2 million viewers, and subsequent DVD releases. Both the Seven and Nine Networks ‘[rode] the coat-tails’ of the success of Bondi Rescue through the production of their own surf formats, titled Surf Patrol (Cornerbox) and Deadly Surf (Nine Network), respectively (Cuming 2007). Both initially gained significant audiences, but only Surf Patrol endured from sustained ratings. Interestingly, the addition of Bondi Rescue: Bali (Cordell Jigsaw), which took the lifeguard team to assist the locals at Kuta Beach, did not continue the ratings success for the Ten Network, and had an early exit from their schedule (Casey 2008). Taking these factors into account, purely on a quantitative basis, it suggests that there is more to audience engagement in these formats than simply watching the ‘everyday’ occurrences of surf patrols and rescues. In reviewing the eight episodes of the first series of Bondi Rescue, certain format elements become apparent as distinct from its derivatives. Most importantly is the fraction of time
used in the representation of rescues as only a small proportion of the format, with more segments within episodes devoted to uncovering the characters’ personalities and backgrounds, as well as the story of the service and beach itself, with the series described in its voiceover as ‘the untold story of the boys in blue’ (*Bondi Rescue* 2006). This is in direct contrast to the formats produced by the Seven and Nine Networks where the emphasis was more on dramatic rescue scenes. While this may be engaging in terms of action, it appears through rating figures that audiences prefer the inclusion of character development within this setting.

From the outset, *Bondi Rescue* presents an informative façade through the depiction of lifeguard duties and the promotion of water safety. It appeals to audiences through the common Australian experience of the beach; however, this is only part of its engagement. The format follows a soap opera structure in its division into various narrative strands referred to by its production as a ‘mix’ (McPhee 2009). These are interwoven from footage taken across the summer recording period, and can be suspended across one or multiple episodes. The transitions between narratives are designed to create suspense by delaying information of ‘what happens next’ and resolution, often involving the serious rescue enigmas. As the everyday situations of the beach and lifeguards tend not to play out within half-hour blocks for maximum action and suspense, this packaging is crucial to maintain the interest of viewers. The audience is invited to engage with the unpredictability and familiarity of the narrative structure, following the story and characters within their ‘everyday’. This is also reinforced by an omniscient voiceover that guides between narrative strands, re-caps what has already taken place, emphasizes the work of the lifeguards and speculates on the outcomes of their rescues. For example, within the first episode, the narrative of a young girl pulled unconscious from the surf is drawn out across the episode so that she is only arriving at the hospital with a suspected ‘worst case scenario’ injury at its conclusion. The enigma of her condition is suspended by the voiceover during the final credits and then subsequently resolved in the following episode with a more positive diagnosis and a visit from her rescuing lifeguard, Deano. The narrative gains closure in her visit to the lifeguard tower on her recovery to express her gratitude; however, this specific scene appears staged by the production in order to neatly resolve the story, indicated by the optimal framing of the doorway as she enters the lifeguard tower and Deano waiting just off camera. ‘Fill-in’ footage also extends the notion of the ‘factual’ format, where the crew may arrive late to a rescue in progress, but may ask the same lifeguard to run in the water again afterwards in order to complete the footage recorded for the rescue narrative (McPhee 2009). The lifeguards have admitted that ‘it took a while to get used to the cameras always being around’ (Cuming 2007), with particular use of lightweight, waterproof cameras attached to lifeguard boards and jet-skis to emphasize the ‘fly-on-the-wall’ conventions for a sense of immediacy and proximity to the action. However, the lifeguards have adjusted to the presence of a television crew while going about their ‘everyday’ job, now less self-conscious but more aware of what the production is looking for in footage to avoid re-takes, such as repeating questions or giving full answers in their talking-head interviews or responses to off-camera producers (McPhee 2009).

Central to the format are the lifeguards’ characters as mythic heroes, labelled as ‘elite watermen’ by the voiceover. This portrayal is consistent with the national type identified with the ‘sun-bronzed physique, the masculinity, the cult of mateship, the military associations, the hedonism and wholesomeness of the beach’ (White 1981, 157). The lifeguards are referred to in the series as ‘iconic Bondi bloke[s]’ or ‘cast from a vintage Australian mould’ (*Bondi Rescue* 2006) as a reflection by the production on their mythic qualities. Their bodies are constantly on show as tanned and svelte, highlighted in montage.
sequences of their topless walks, swims or paddles along the beach. This is also defined through their constant training and yearly fitness challenges, which act as a source of rivalry between the ‘band of brothers’ (*Bondi Rescue* 2006), emphasizing their discipline as well as their camaraderie and larrikinism. The lifeguards regularly confide to the camera of the pride in their work and sense of service, but at the same time they revel in this ‘fraternity’ and the benefits of working on the beach. In this way, the characters embody the ‘dedication, self sacrifice and humanitarianism’ associated with the iconic lifesaver, combined with the stereotype of the ‘free-wheeling, hedonistic surfer’ (Jaggard 1997, 185). The lifeguards are referred to only by nickname through the programme, such as Harries, Chappo or Whippet, either through the voiceover or by caption, which encourages a sense of mateship and familiarity for audiences. This proximity to their character also helps establish their authority through ‘talking-head’ moments where they relay their thoughts on events, people and issues of the beach. Throughout the series, the narratives follow not only their rescues but also explore their personalities through their backgrounds and lifestyle. Elements of their characters are revealed through short vignettes combining footage from the beach and personal photo montages, such as Reidy’s previous ‘life’ as overweight, or Harry’s and Kerbox’s former status as professional surfers. The series also makes reference to their ‘other’ jobs away from the beach, and includes a segment where a group of lifeguards attend a speed dating session. This focus on the characters increases the possibility for audience engagement beyond the action in order to relate more closely with the lifeguards and empathize with their situation and personalities, thus affirming their classic model of Australian identity.

The format strongly emphasizes the high proportion of visitors to Bondi and the sociability of the lifeguards, often shown making conversation with patrons enjoying the beach or recently rescued. The series estimates Bondi as populated mainly by tourists on any day over the summer season where ‘many haven’t got a clue about water safety’, although the lifeguards ‘learn so much meeting all these people’ (*Bondi Rescue* 2006). Their open and friendly approach is highlighted further through a segment concentrating on Harry’s and Yatesy’s ability to converse with foreign visitors in French and Spanish, respectively. This works as a reinforcement of the lifesaver icon as ‘a user-friendly national identity for domestic and, more importantly, international audiences’ (Waddell 2003, 40). The emphasis on equality acts to re-establish a more positive portrayal of the Australian beach after events such as the Cronulla riots, which are referred to in the series. Footage of the ‘eruption of racial tension’ is juxtaposed immediately with a rescue of an Iranian family who are then warmly greeted by their rescuer, Reidy, and his important reminder of the ‘red and yellow’ flags. The audience is aligned with the lifeguards in this way in restoring the egalitarian and open mythic nature of the beach, but also a simultaneous ‘othering’ of the naïve or deviant patrons. Any offensive behaviour, exemplified in perverts or thieves, or the constant display of surf inexperience is characterized as separate from the values of the lifeguards, and therefore draws a clear line of a beach ‘us and them’. Game examines this issue as part of the mythic beach nature/culture distinction in the beautiful/unbeautiful of Bondi (1989, 6). The lifeguards as ‘civilizers’ mediate the wildness of the natural beach as a positive effort, while an undesirable ‘culture’ from the urban city damages the innocent nature of Bondi.

**Bondi Beach** itself is a feature for the format and takes on a character-type role. The voiceover reference as the ‘world’s most popular sandpit’ represents Bondi, both locally and globally, as the epitome of Australian beaches; a ‘recreational and social playground’ typical in the national lifestyle (Brawley 2007, 7; Jaggard 1997, 183). The recognizable location and beach rules invite a link with the viewers’ own possible experiences for cultural identification.
and reinforcement. The portrayal also highlights the mythic combination of its location in metropolitan surroundings, with commercial buildings and houses evident along the edges of the beach, while simultaneously exploring the dangers of the beach including rips, bluebottles and sharks. This again emphasizes the lifeguard as ‘the regulator and preserver of all this innocent pleasure wherein, ironically, danger lurk[s]’ (Saunders 1998, 98). Bondi is described as a ‘home’ to its lifeguards who have ‘lived and breathed the beach all their lives’ (Bondi Rescue 2006). The centrality of the beach to ‘Australian-ness’ is further emphasized with the inclusion of the Nippers club and voluntary lifesavers, where these beach activities are inextricably linked to Australian maturation and lifestyles.

Although Bondi Rescue attempts to enhance the equality and classlessness of the mythic beach, the format’s representation also highlights its masculinity. Within the first series all the professional lifeguards are male. This is not stated as a criticism of their employment practices (as a later series has seen the hiring of female lifeguards) but rather it is important in how this gender distinction is portrayed through the format. Bikini-clad sunbakers or ‘damsel in distress’ stereotypes are a common female presence, often with the inclusion of their comments on the lifeguards’ physique. Similarly, the lifeguards remark on the perks of their job in spending their time surveying and being thanked by attractive, mostly naked women. This is directly linked to historic notions of beach culture and specifically Bondi itself as a ‘site of voyeurism: go to Bondi to look at, look at looking at, be looked at’ (Game 1989, 9). However, this beach ‘scenery’ is also effective as ‘cultural commodities’ to market locally and abroad as ‘signifiers’ for ‘Australia’ (Waddell 2003, 49). The lifeguards admit to the ‘distractions’ involved and this is exemplified through montages of scantily clad, attractive women on the beach. The body becomes a source of pleasure in this way, not only for those at the beach but also for viewers.

Reinforcing the myth

Even from this brief analysis, Bondi Rescue can be seen as a new incarnation of ongoing mythic ideals of the nation. Its ‘factual’ style, format construction and mythic qualities all combine as elements of its performance; where the national myth appears ‘real’. The observational recording of events and characters, either in situ or in constructed circumstances, and its subsequent representation into a hybrid format is essential to how this performance is achieved for television. The genre relies on its audience to be media ‘savvy’ in negotiating the elements of actuality and artifice (Andrejevic 2003, 4), where television is necessarily performative as it ‘tread[s] the line between intention and execution, between reality and the image’ (Bruzzi 2000, 7). On closer inspection, two levels of myth emerge from the analysis of Bondi Rescue; the social and semiotic myths of ‘Australian-ness’ and the beach, and the dominant myth in criticism regarding the ‘real’ in ‘reality TV’.

In particular, Bondi Rescue taps into national ideals through both its production and content. The ‘mix’ developed in the format’s production is designed to reflect the changeable nature of the Australian beach; between its pleasures and dangers. The drama and action of the rescues are balanced with the entertaining narratives of the lifeguards, with constant reminders of their service, masculinity and mateship. The lifeguards become ‘social actors’ for the format in its observational style and also in their own representation of self for the production, where this can be ‘construed as a performance’ (Nichols 1991, 42). In this way, the effect of the national ideals of the beach and lifeguard character should be questioned as to its influence on both the production and lifeguard performance. The location, characters and rescues are inextricably linked to the historic ideas of this dominant myth, but also coupled with contemporary attitudes, such as multiculturalism.
As a result, the transitory state of the myth can be seen to shift to encompass new issues and reflect new values, as a reaffirmation of both its historic and current qualities. Moreover, Bondi Rescue refines elements of ‘Australian-ness’ into a set of characters and their location. This is significant for television in representing narratives of the national ‘everyday’ and culture, and specifically in the genre’s combination of factual and entertainment conventions, argued by O’Regan (1993, 81) as an ‘important agency of “popular socialisation”’. In this particular case, Australia is linked fundamentally to, and wholly represented by, the beach. The high ratings of the programme suggest that this portrayal appeals to audiences as a source of entertainment and information, and also as a construction and performance of ‘Australian-ness’. The shift of the format to Bali and subsequent drop in ratings implies less interest for audiences where the representation no longer entirely encapsulated the Australian myth of the beach and lifesavers, with audience figures stabilizing in the following series returning to Bondi.

The ‘reality’ of Bondi Beach is heightened through this visually beautiful, action-packed immediacy to the beach and its lifeguards. Its portrayal becomes a televsual spectacle of ‘Australia’, both continuing and enhancing the beach myth in national culture to local and international audiences. However, the elements of representation and performance suggest a Baudrillardian simulation (1983), where the screened episode of events had no previous existence as seen in its post-produced form. Similarly, the continuing ideals of the Australian beach myth are simulations within this contemporary setting and form. Bondi Rescue is its own model of a ‘reality’; one that combines dominant ideas of culture and values with televsual conventions of factuality and entertainment. This is indicative of the phenomenon of ‘reality TV’ and its portrayal of the ‘everyday’. Through the reframing of narrative and characters into a format, ‘reality TV’ works beyond the limited question of actuality or artifice to a more complex and fluid space of blurred genres and mythic televsual conventions. From this point of view, the hierarchy of value traditionally given to documentary styles as opposed to entertainment qualities such as soap operas is deficient as a foundation of criticism, as the genre shifts between and embraces a variety of techniques in order to combine the informative with the entertaining. In this way, the ‘illusory everyday’ is linked closely to Baudrillard’s simulation as a hyper-reality, where everything is re-presented modelling a real that has no origin.

For Bondi Rescue, the ‘illusory everyday’ is a perpetuation of a cultural simulation, encompassing the performance of national identity and the representation of the ‘real’ on television. The format reflects the ongoing yet fluid beach myth within the national psyche, combining both its historic and contemporary values, and represents this within a televsual spectacle of the ‘everyday’. As a result, the portrayal of the beach and lifeguards is a performance of national identity that restores and reinforces the positive qualities of the beach myth as an aspirational image of ‘Australian-ness’. Furthermore, the analysis of the myth of ‘reality TV’ reflects a new avenue of consideration of the genre. The common critical problematic of fact/fiction is limiting in a genre that embraces its construction. Recognition of the ‘illusory everyday’ of formats thus aims to understand how these elements are combined from dominant cultural values and televsual codes of representation, in order to create entertaining and engaging programming for audiences.

Notes on contributor

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Television

