

# **Vampire Hunters: the Scheduling and Reception of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* in the UK**

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## **Introduction**

In a viewers' feedback programme on TV, a senior executive responded to public criticism of UK television's scheduling and censorship of imported cult TV. Key examples included *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its spin off series *Angel*. The executive stated: 'The problem is, with some of the series we acquire from the States, in the States they go out at eight o'clock or nine o'clock. We don't have that option here because we want to be showing history documentaries or some other more serious programming at eight or nine o'clock' [1]. TV channels in the UK do not perceive programmes like *Buffy* and *Angel*, which have garnered critical and ratings success in the USA, appropriate for a similarly prominent timeslot. Although peak time programmes can include entertainment shows, these are generally UK productions, such as lifestyle or drama.

This article analyses the circumstances within which British viewers are able to see *Buffy* and *Angel*, and the implications of those circumstances for their experiences as audience members and fans. The article is in two sections. The first section outlines the British TV system in general, and the different missions and purposes of relevant TV channels. It also addresses the specifics of scheduling *Buffy* and *Angel*, including the role of censorship and editing of episodes. We highlight how the scheduling has been erratic, which both interrupts complex story arcs and frustrates fans expecting to see their favourite show at a regular time. Furthermore, scenes and even entire episodes have been cut by UK broadcasters to conform to taste and decency guidelines. The way certain channels understand their role as broadcasters, in particular for a young or 'family' audience, has implications for how *Buffy* and *Angel* are presented. The second section explores the consequences of the scheduling and censorship of these programmes in relation to the viewing experience. On-line fan communities have gained a heightened significance in the British context because of the problems viewers have faced in seeing these shows. Fans seek out explicitly British websites within which to participate in fan message boards and discussions because it gives them a forum to express grievances, share information, and validate their fan status. The experience of being a *Buffy* or *Angel* fan in the UK highlights culturally specific fan activity. We focus on the British context to the scheduling and reception of *Buffy* and *Angel* as a case study which illuminates different broadcasting attitudes to and viewer experiences of cult TV.

## **Broadcasting *Buffy* and *Angel***

### **TVUK**

The main terrestrial channels in the UK perceive themselves as catering to a mass audience. BBC1, the public service broadcasting channel funded by a license fee, aims to inform, educate and entertain a mass audience, whilst also catering to regional and minority interests. ITV, a commercial channel funded by advertising, aims primarily to entertain a mass audience, but is also required by the Independent Television Commission (ITC) to inform and educate viewers. Primetime television on the two main terrestrial channels is primarily home grown product, offering a range of genres, in particular soaps and drama which can regularly attract over 10 million viewers (40+% market share). BBC1 and ITV are engaged in a scheduling and ratings war and in recent years have moved main night time news bulletins to incorporate more popular entertainment programmes during primetime. The ratings war has yet to impact significantly on the early primetime, or family, slot which is devoted to the news; teatime news bulletins

are a time-honoured tradition in the UK, and the public often structure their daily routines in relation to these news bulletins (Gauntlett and Hill 1999).

*Buffy* and *Angel* are both shown on minority terrestrial channels (BBC2, Channel 4), and a pay-TV channel (Sky One). In terms of minority terrestrial channels, these channels have felt the impact of the ratings war on BBC1 and ITV, and have been competing to attract surplus viewers by consolidating their niche programming during primetime. In an increasingly fragmented and competitive TV market, UK minority terrestrial channels have worked hard to establish clear channel identities, especially during primetime. This connects with the scheduling of imported cult TV as these channels primarily schedule such series during the teatime slot, perceiving US sci-fi and fantasy drama as suitable for family viewers and younger viewers who are not the target audience for these minority channels.

It is rare for imported programming other than feature films to be shown in prime time on BBC1, thus it is unsurprising that an imported show such as *Buffy* appears on BBC2. What is surprising is that BBC2 screen cult TV. BBC2's main audience is upwardly mobile, educated, older viewers, aged 40+, and the majority of programmes (lifestyle, factual) reflect this niche audience. Its primetime programmes attract up to three million viewers. Thus, although BBC2 screen *Buffy*, they would be unlikely to feature it in a primetime slot, as this is reserved for more 'serious', mature programming.

Unlike BBC2, Channel 4 is funded by advertising rather than a licence fee. However, like BBC2 its remit is to cater for minorities, in particular to focus on new programming, from independent producers, which highlights innovation and experimentation. Its primetime programmes attract up to three million viewers. Channel 4 prides itself on taking risks, and showing films and TV programmes uncut [2]. Its main audience is young (16-24) and upwardly mobile, and the channel is perceived by youth audiences as catering specifically for them. It is not surprising that Channel 4 acquired *Angel*. Many US imports are shown in primetime, such as *ER*, or *Friends*, with soaps, news, factual and lifestyle programmes featuring earlier in the evening. However, what is surprising is that Channel 4 adopted BBC2's approach to imported cult TV and classified *Angel* as children's programming.

Content regulation in the UK follows specific guidelines, outlined by the BBC, the ITC and the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC). These guidelines ensure that programming before the nine o'clock watershed should not contain material which could be considered offensive to a family audience. Although 70% of homes in the UK do not contain children, 'the earlier in the evening a programme is placed the more suitable it is likely to be for children to watch on their own' [3]. In the UK 61% of the public believe it is necessary to protect children and other vulnerable groups by using content regulation [4]. Thus, programming featured in the teatime slot must be suitable for children.

Whilst on the one hand the BBC is aware of the audience's diverse views on what will and will not cause offence, material shown in the early primetime slot will be unlikely to contain scenes of violence, sexual innuendo or bad language. These editorial values also apply to acquired material. As *Buffy* is made for a niche US audience watching after eight o'clock in the evening, adjustments must be made to fit the programme in a family slot. Although 'the BBC will try to ensure that editing interferes as little as possible with the original intentions of the film maker' [5] in the case of *Buffy*, substantial editing occurs in order for it to be shown in the UK. Channel 4 must adhere to the ITC programme codes which mirror the BBC in terms of the nine o'clock watershed. The ITC's Family Viewing Policy 'assumes a progressive decline throughout the evening in the proportion of

children viewing, matched by a progression towards material more suitable for adults' [6]. Thus, Channel 4's decision to show *Angel* in early primetime, ensured that it had to edit the series to fit the timeslot.

Non-terrestrial TV in the UK treats imported cult TV differently from terrestrial channels. British Sky Broadcasting's Sky One, is a general entertainment channel available by subscription on cable, satellite and digital TV. Sky has a significant ownership connection with Fox through Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation and regularly acquires some of the Fox Network's most popular TV shows for UK transmission such as *The X-Files* and *The Simpsons* [7]. Approximately 40% of the viewing public have access to Sky One. Its primetime programmes attract up to a million viewers and it caters to a niche audience of young adults (16-35). Its identity is mainly based on the channel's ability to acquire first showing of US imports before they appear on terrestrial TV. When Sky One show *Buffy* and *Angel*, they are only a few weeks behind US screenings, but are months ahead of UK terrestrial screenings. Sky is expected to adhere to the ITC Family Viewing Policy, but the watershed is at eight rather than at nine o'clock for premium encrypted subscription channels. Sky One mirrors the US treatment of *Buffy* and *Angel* by showing it during primetime.

Thus, the ideal platform for watching US cult TV is Sky One. However, because it is pay TV, minority channel, most cult TV fans watch their favourite programmes on terrestrial channels. Neither BBC2 or Channel 4 perceive imported cult TV as suitable for primetime, preferring to rely on UK factual, lifestyle and drama to attract their niche adult audience. By classifying *Buffy* and *Angel* as children's programming UK terrestrial TV is unable to respond to the expectations of fans, who are predominantly 16-35 year old primetime viewers. Clearly UK TV is out of step with cult TV and its fans.

### **Scheduling and Censoring**

The scheduling of imported cult TV on British terrestrial television can be problematic [8]. Imported cult TV, in particular US science fiction and fantasy, is usually scheduled between 5-8pm. The 8-10pm timeslot is frequently used for UK made leisure and drama shows. UK originated cult classics such as *Thunderbirds*, *Space 1999*, or *Dr Who* are also shown in this teatime slot, having attracted a cult audience since their original broadcast in the 1960s and 70s [9].

Contemporary UK productions which attract a cult following tend to be comedy or comedy-drama hybrids, such as *League of Gentlemen* (BBC2), or *Father Ted* (Channel 4). A rare example of a UK peak time show that resembled *Buffy* and *Angel* was Channel 4's *Ultraviolet*, a modern vampire thriller, which attracted a cult reputation after only one short season.

In the UK *Buffy* was first seen on Sky One. At the time of *Buffy*'s initial broadcast, January 1998, Sky One's primetime and daytime programming was dominated by imports from various US sources, including network shows such as *E.R.* and *Friends* plus series from syndicated outlets such as *Star Trek: Voyager*, *Stargate SG-1* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Apart from *The Simpsons*, Sky One's most popular genres were science fiction and fantasy. With aforementioned properties like *The X-Files* and *Xena*, it's clear why *Buffy* was seen to suit its channel profile. Over 400,000 viewers watched *Buffy* on Sky One, mainly aged 16-34 (BARB). Sam Rowden, head of Sky One Acquisitions, told the authors:

*Angel* was a 'must-have' as an acquisition because of the following that had already built up around *Buffy*. It is equally well produced, though darker and more sinister, but the story telling strength is still there and consequently so are the fans. We committed to this series even before it started airing in the US.

It was almost a full year before the first *Buffy* episode appeared on UK network (i.e. non cable or satellite) television. The BBC acquired non-pay-TV rights to *Buffy* and premiered it on December 30, 1998. On BBC2 *Buffy* had to sit between a diverse and changeable schedule of programming – from drama, sport, current affairs and documentary to comedy - both originated in the UK and acquired from overseas. Like Sky One, BBC2 often buys cult TV and tries to allocate a 6-8pm slot for them, but the exact scheduling of cult TV shows is highly volatile due to pre-emptions from live sports coverage and the like. *Buffy's* BBC2 stablemates are current science fiction series such *Star Trek: Voyager* and archive reruns such as *Star Trek's* previous incarnations, *Battlestar Galactica* and *Doctor Who* [10].

Despite the eventual ratings success of *Buffy* on both Sky One and BBC2 (see below), the chronicle of *Buffy's* own spin-off/companion series *Angel* in the UK is bizarre. Sky took the lead by acquiring first UK transmission rights to *Angel* and followed the US model by broadcasting it directly after *Buffy* on the same channel. The later timeslot (9pm) suited its darker theme and ensured that the occasional but important crossover storylines remained synchronised [11]. This proved successful in the US, with similar national ratings (3.55 and 3.58, Nielson) for *Buffy* and *Angel* in the 1999-2000 season, and successful for Sky One: *Buffy* regularly attracted 70,000 viewers, and *Angel* 60,000 (BARB), placing them in the top 10 shows for Sky One. Although fans expected *Angel* to make its later terrestrial appearance on BBC2, Channel 4 instead snatched the rights. Channel 4 is more inclined to show imports in prime time (usually 10pm), but with very few exceptions these are mainstream US hits such as *NYPD Blue*, *E.R.* and *Frasier*. A rare primetime genre import for Channel 4 was *American Gothic*, again shown in a 10pm slot.

Channel 4's other cult shows have included *Babylon 5* and *Stargate SG-1*. The former, a cerebral space opera not necessarily suitable for children was shown at various times, including weekend afternoons and early evenings during the week. Not only were devotees missing the early broadcasts but these were occasionally censored to suit the timeslot. Only after protests from a vociferous body of fans was a late-night repeat added which went some way to appeasing the protesters. *Stargate SG-1*, a syndicated US series is also occasionally cut for violence. It is shown normally at 8pm on Sky One, apparently uncut but, again, in a range of daytime/early evening times on Channel 4. Unlike *Babylon 5*, there have been no late night uncut reruns.

A similar fate has befallen *Angel*, which started on September 15, 2000 at 6pm. Some of Channel 4's thinking is revealed by Annette Maye, Programme Executive – Acquired Series, who told the authors: 'C4 decided to acquire *Angel* as we saw it as a series with lots of potential to appeal to a wide range of audiences. It fits with C4's identity in bringing the best of US series to the UK and also we saw it as cutting edge drama for teens.' Certain *Buffy* and *Angel* episodes contained shared storylines, but Channel 4 decided not to make its *Angel* episodes coincide with BBC2's *Buffy* transmissions. 'We have no plans to liaise with BBC about running both episodes together', said Maye. 'They are different but complementary shows.'

The problematic scheduling of imported cult TV has consequences for viewers. In the case of *Buffy*, the BBC first paired it with *Star Trek: the Next Generation*, showing *Buffy* after *Star Trek* at 6.45pm on a Wednesday evening. During the first season, *Buffy* rarely made it into the top ten programmes on BBC2, and averaged just over 3 million viewers, slightly less than *Star Trek TNG*. This was a much earlier timeslot, targeted at a different age group compared to the Sky One transmissions a year earlier. By the end of season one, fans were vocal about

BBC2's scheduling/censoring of *Buffy*. Although it was possible to spot one or two slight trims made to Sky's *Buffy* broadcasts in the UK, such censorship appeared to be minimal and infrequent. In its earlier slot on BBC2, however, cuts were more noticeable by fans – even if they had not seen the original versions. Edits usually applied to violent fight scenes, often accompanied by music – which would jump when trims occurred. Fans staged a successful campaign to show a late-night unedited version, thus illustrating the type of consumer activism described by Jenkins (1992, 1995) in relation to other cult TV series such as *Twin Peaks*.

Teatime episodes continued to be shown but also cut. Examples include 'Where the Wild Things Are' (Season 4) in which sex scenes between Buffy and Riley were shortened. Because of such cuts, the 6.45 slot is unpopular with fans, but some of the remaining material is found to be too explicit for other kinds of viewers. Complaints about another sexually charged scene in 'Harsh Light of Day' (broadcast at 6.45pm 12 October 2000) were upheld by the BSC, which ruled the sex scene had exceeded acceptable boundaries for broadcast at a time when young children could be watching.

Sophie Turner Laing, acquisitions editor for the BBC, explained why BBC2 would not drop the teatime slot for *Buffy*:

The original early evening transmission will remain an appointment to view for a large part of the audience, and particularly for fans at the younger end of the spectrum. We have a responsibility to this audience and therefore episodes are occasionally edited to ensure they remain suitable for the audience available to view at that time. [12]

The idea of an appointment to view assumes that a specialised audience will tune to a particular channel at a given time, especially to see a show. However, in a Gallup survey, 44% of British viewers claimed what most annoyed them about watching TV was not being home for their favourite show [13]. In the case of *Buffy*, a teatime slot may be suitable for the younger fans, but not for viewers aged 16-24 who are the core audience for this series.

The establishment of the show as an appointment to view was further complicated by frequent interruptions. BBC2 rarely interrupts a season of its successful UK programmes. *Buffy* was taken off air, mid season, on fourteen occasions between December 1998 and October 2000, usually to show sporting tournaments. The BBC's attitude to *Buffy* is evidence of a wider ignorance of the often complex story arcs of cult TV shows, and cult TV fans' natural desire to follow each season with little interruption (Jenkins 1992, 1995).

Despite the teatime scheduling of *Buffy*, it gradually attracted a core following of viewers aged 16+, as intended by the programme makers. When *Buffy* returned to BBC2 in November 1999 it was more popular than *Star Trek TNG*. In February 2000, *Buffy* reached number eight in the top BBC2 programmes, with 3.59 million viewers, compared to *Star Trek TNG* which barely made it in the top 30 (BARB). During the summer of 2000, *Buffy* was rarely out of the top three BBC2 programmes, rivalling very successful and highly marketed home grown programmes such as *The Naked Chef* (cookery show), and *Gardener's World*, and attracting up to and over 4 million viewers, a high figure for a cult TV series.

The growing success of *Buffy* on BBC2 in this teatime slot accompanied online activity among fans who may have previously felt isolated and disenfranchised. Key members of the BBC online cult TV/*Buffy* message board were mobilised into criticising the BBC for censoring *Buffy*, complaining about its marketing of *Buffy* as a children's programme, and lobbying for a 8pm slot, seen as the ideal time

for the show, as demonstrated in the US. The BBC acknowledged that *Buffy* 'is targeted at our younger adult audience (18-24)' but argued that 'as a public service broadcaster we have to try and cater for the varied interests of our diverse audience...therefore it is not possible to please all our viewers' [14]. Fans were bemused by the BBC's logic: 'It seems to me the 6.45 timeslot is now weirder than ever! To me they are totally contradicting themselves' [15]. This type of response from the BBC is illustrative of the way in which 'fan response is assumed to be unrepresentative of general public sentiment and therefore unreliable as a basis for decisions' (Jenkins 1992: 279).

When Channel 4 bought the rights to *Angel*, this meant that fans of *Buffy* would have to watch *Angel* on a different channel, on a different day, at a different time. It was originally given a 6pm start time, with no late night repeat; later episodes were combined into double bills, starting at 5.25pm. *Angel*'s darker tone resulted in heavier cuts. Regarding *Angel*'s first Channel 4 broadcast, Andrews (2000) reported: 'Several notable edits were made, especially to the opening scene which was practically non-existent due to censors' edits for violence and language. It is thought that a total of 1 minute and 22 seconds were cut from the opening episode.' One fan website discovered the episode 'Room with a view' was one of the most affected by cuts: examples included shots of beatings, blood, choking with a noose, violent exorcism, and knives: 'Angel's second fight with Griff was greatly cut, especially the neck breaking at the end' [16]. Similar to the BBC, the tone of the censored episodes were seen as too dark for some viewers. In its January 2001 report, the BSC upheld a complaint against 'In the dark'; the ITC received over 80 complaints about the series, and reprimanded Channel 4 for airing *Angel* at a time when children might be watching.

Fans dubbed Channel 4's treatment of *Angel* 'the *Angel* Massacre' [17]. Over a 1000 fans signed a petition, criticising Channel 4 for its 'outrageous scheduling': some wrote in with suggested new schedules which would accommodate a later screening. A viewer feedback programme, *Right to Reply*, gave a fan of *Angel* the opportunity to argue that Channel 4 had 'sucked the life' out of the programme:

In the first episode, Angel stumbles across a pair of vampires terrorising two girls. But we don't actually see the girls being attacked because part of the fight scene has been cut out. So, when we suddenly see a close-up of one girl with blood pouring out of her head, it doesn't make any sense... The first episodes of *Angel* are the least violent in the series, I dread to think how much will be cut out in future programmes. [18]

Jay Kandola, Head of Series Acquisition for Channel 4, echoed the BBC, by arguing that: 'Angel is one of those rare series which appeals to both an older and younger audience. Channel 4 has to make minimal cuts to make sure that it can be viewed by all of its fans and not just some' [19]. In its first week of transmission, *Angel* was number 27 in the top Channel 4 programmes for that week. By week two, it had dropped to number 53 (BARB).

When Channel 4 changed the schedule to an earlier slot, a news bulletin on the Buffyuk.org website summed up fan response the scheduling:

Question, when do you do when you are trying to establish a slot for a high profile drama that's currently annoying both fans and the easily offended? If your answer is: "put it on even earlier and show TWO episodes" then maybe Channel 4 has a job for you!... Even worse, in a strange manifestation of cosmic symmetry, BBC2 is skipping *Buffy* that same week, on account of... snooker. When we hoped BBC2 and Channel 4 would collaborate on scheduling. This isn't quite what we meant. [20]

Channel 4 was compelled to drop 3 episodes entirely (11th, 12th, and 14th episodes, 'Somnambulist', 'Expecting', and 'I've Got You Under My Skin') because they 'have been deemed unsuitable for family viewing and therefore we have had to remove them from the present schedule' [21]. Belatedly acknowledging the unsuitable teatime slot for *Angel*, and reacting to fan pressure, Channel 4 dropped the early evening transmission and began screening new episodes from 11pm (3 December 2000) in double bills, starting with 'Eternity' and 'Five by Five'. Although this was an attempt to appease fans, the new scheduling did not solve the problem of poor synchronicity with BBC2's *Buffy*. Fan response is evident in the ratings for Season 4 of *Buffy* and Season 1 of *Angel* which show fluctuating viewing figures for 2001. Although *Buffy* started off with 3.6 million viewers on BBC2 in January 2001, by February viewers had dropped to 2.6 million, barely placing it in the top 30 (BARB). On Channel 4, ratings for *Angel* fluctuated between 400-800,000 viewers for the new late night slot.

One strategy for dealing with unreliable scheduling and heavy editing of cult TV is to purchase home videos. Almost 200,000 UK fans have bought seasons one, two and three of *Buffy*, and almost 50,000 have so far purchased season four of *Buffy*, and season one of *Angel* in order to watch their favourite programmes uncut and in the right order [22]. However, there are still problems for UK fans. The first boxed set for *Angel*, like *Buffy*, was certified as only suitable for viewers aged 15 and over by the British Board of Film Classification. The second *Angel* boxed set released in the UK (Feb 12 2001) was classified as suitable for viewers aged 18 and over. This ensured that episodes were uncut but the rating was also controversial among younger fans: 'This could be bad for a lot of fans – I myself am only seventeen so won't be able to get it, and considering the state Channel 4 has made of the episodes, the boxed set was a lot of people's only hope' [23].

Although fans can purchase and build video/DVD archives of *Buffy* and *Angel*, the scheduling and censorship of both series is clearly important to the viewing experience, as the majority of viewers watch terrestrial TV, despite the fact that episodes can be almost a year behind the US. The difference between the ratings for season four of *Buffy* and season one of *Angel* on terrestrial TV highlights how important complimentary programming and cross promotion are for cult TV fans. With sympathetic scheduling UK terrestrial ratings for *Angel* could have equalled those of *Buffy*, as evident in the US and UK non-terrestrial TV. However, the 'Angel Massacre' ensured this was not the case. The broadcasts of *Buffy* and *Angel* are not supplementary, but essential to the viewing experience. Indeed, in the next section we argue that fan experience of these shows in the UK is connected to, not separate from the national context of the British TV system.

### **Watchers/online**

Henry Jenkins' (1992: 278) argument that 'fandom constitutes a basis for consumer activism' is particularly applicable to the circumstances of *Buffy* and *Angel* in the UK. As Jenkins notes, 'network executives and producers are often indifferent, if not overtly hostile, to fan opinion' (1992: 279); in the UK this indifference has created an online community which is primarily a forum for complaints, and for sharing information on the availability of the shows across all media. Thus, the UK treatment of *Buffy* and *Angel* has led to an online fan community which specifically seeks out other UK fans. The sites offer UK fans an opportunity to talk about the experience of watching *Buffy* and *Angel* in the UK, an experience which on the one hand emphasises the negative side to cult TV fandom, and at the same time celebrates being a fan. One fan summed it up when they explained: 'People say "So what do you spend all your time on the internet doing then?" I reply about the BuffyUK site & they say "Buffy!" Unless you have watched it I really think people have a bad misconception of the show'

[24]. The network treatment of both series in the UK does little to contradict the misconception that *Buffy* is not 'mature, quality programming', and fans seek to validate their status by participating in message boards and discussion which celebrates rather than denigrates being a *Buffy/Angel* fan.

The UK fan community has a choice in visiting TV industry sites, like BBC.co.uk/buffy, Skyone.com or Channel4.com, or fan-based sites, like The Watcher's Web, unofficiallybuffyuk, Slayed.co.uk, or BuffyUK.org. All these sites provide news, scheduling information, merchandise, and discussion forums. UK sites have the added complication of dealing with an imported series. As the news about the shows' storylines originates from the US, the more attentive web pages for UK fans, such as Earshot (BuffyUK.org), add 'spoiler alerts' to news items in case readers do not want storylines revealed ahead of time. The UK scheduling situation makes this highly complex. The freshest news undoubtedly will be a spoiler to all UK viewers. Stories and features may later be labelled a spoiler for BBC/C4 viewers only if the episodes in question have been screened on Sky. The problem is that the majority of UK devotees are having to wait longest of all. C4 viewers of *Angel* saw regular character Doyle die in 'Hero' 11 months after US audiences and eight months after Sky viewers. Fans eager to read the saturation coverage about their favourite shows face a hard task in avoiding such momentous news for anything up to a year.

Perhaps because of the UK context to watching *Buffy* and *Angel*, there is a flourishing forum for Buffychat. Two of the most frequented and updated sites are BBC Online, the Buffy/Cult TV message board, and BuffyUK.org. We want to focus on these two sites to illustrate how being a *Buffy* and *Angel* fan in the UK is different to other fans in other countries [25]. BBC Online fan discussion highlights the experience of watching *Buffy* in the context of UK television regulation and attitudes towards US cult TV. BuffyUK.org fan discussion highlights how UK fans successfully seek out each other in order to validate their status as cult TV fans.

BBC Online Cult TV acts as an auxiliary to the BBC's cult shows like *The X-Files*, or *Star Trek: the Next Generation*. Once at the *Buffy* site, one can find profiles of the key characters, information about episodes, and a lively message board. The *Buffy* site is so popular that the BBC recently opened a second site for *Buffy* reviews, as opposed to general *Buffy* chat (the site has over 25,000 hits). Although Sky One and Channel 4 both have sites which profile *Buffy* and *Angel*, there is little sense of a community on these corporate sites as fans either visit the BBC site, or fan-based sites like BuffyUK.org. It isn't difficult to see why this is the case. The Sky site simply doesn't have enough users to generate a fan community, although the moderators do their best to entice Sky fans to log on by inventing quizzes, eg 'who is the best looking, Angel or Riley?' Channel 4 give little attention to online discussion, instead using their site as a promotion for programmes. It is difficult to find the chat forum for *Angel*, and, if, as we did, you stumble across it in a fan site like BuffyUK.org, then you will only find a handful of people trying to generate a discussion, or in most cases, air grievances.

One of the main problems with the BBC Online site is that the moderators are not *Buffy* or *Angel* fans. Fan moderation is essential to a successful cult TV site, especially given the context of UK scheduling and regulation. Spoilers often slip through because the moderators do not know what has been screened/not screened on Sky One, BBC or Channel 4. Thus, it is the responsibility of fans to inform the moderators about these spoilers, and trolls (users who ignore house rules) who purposely send messages containing spoilers. Nancy K Baym (2000) highlights the significance of managing disagreement in relation to the development of online communities. The BBC Online site itself was subject to

criticism from fans when they constructed a new picture gallery with stills and captions which were spoilers for all BBC fans watching season four of *Buffy*. Needless to say, fans are not happy about this, and spend much time in this chat forum complaining about the BBC ('me moaning about the BBC again...') Channel 4 ('I hate Channel 4') and cuts to particular episodes ('cuts to Enemies'). This doesn't allow much room for actual Buffychat as the regulars are generally policing the site, or leaving the site to become members of fan-based online communities. As one regular explained: 'there are still a few people on this board that make it worthwhile, but MODS, it's NOW BECOMING AN UPHILL STRUGGLE to keep things going' [26]. As Baym (2000) points out, it is essential in large online communities such as this one for key members to remain regulars in order to maintain and continue to build the community.

Another issue for regular users is that the site is very slow because all topics are posted and retained on the site in order of thread and date of posting. There are no subdivisions to the Buffychat and users have to navigate their way to actual chat about episodes, bypassing complaints, spoilers, queries about merchandise and social chit chat amongst regulars. The type of discussion that does take place is usually reviews of new episodes, or favourite episode/character/dialogue related topics. Some sense of a community does emerge in these posts, as fans exchange musings and personal likes/dislikes. For example, there are several 'Buffy in Britain' discussions ('wouldn't it be good if Buffy had to come and put down a vampire epidemic in Britain?'), or debate on what Buffy maybe doing in the year 2020 ('is there a pension scheme, does she get sick pay?'), or auctions on favourite props in all seasons of *Buffy* ('I'm going to bags the Glove of Myhnegon, Anyanka's power centre and Cordy's car. That'll do nicely') [27]. Part of the strength of this forum is the volume and diversity of fans, and, in discussions like these, UK fans can enjoy using their knowledge of *Buffy*, get to know regulars, and establish themselves as members of the community at the same time. One discussion in BBC Online captures the essence of the message board which is to facilitate chat from all kinds of fans, young and old:

I am writing on behalf of my daughter who is 4 ½ and would like to join you in saying how great she thinks *Buffy* is. A little young I know, but we have all been dragged in to the series. Unfortunately, I missed a few eps, so fill me in, how did Willow get to be a witch? [28]

However, such discussion also captures the problems with BBC scheduling and BBC online chat. Responses to this post ranged from support to condemnation of this parent for allowing her daughter to watch a show aimed at more mature viewers. For the BBC, this is exactly the type of family user/viewer they are looking for, but for many fans of *Buffy* and *Angel*, such posts only serve to make them feel even more misunderstood. BBC Online illustrates how many viewers fail to find validation for their fan status by contributing to the message board, due to poor moderation and site navigation. As this is a corporate site, fans receive little reassurance that BBC understands or nurtures cult TV fans.

Alternatively, the fan-based site BuffyUK.org illustrates the type of fan activity which can occur in a supportive environment. Here, you can be a Bit Player, a member of the Scooby Gang, a Slayer, or a fully fledged Watcher, depending on your commitment to The Stakehouse, the meeting place for fans of *Buffy* and *Angel*. The Stakehouse is well organised and moderated by fans, so there are few spoilers or trolls to interrupt fan chat. There are several main rooms in The Stakehouse: 'Buffy on TV', 'Socialising', 'Merchandise', 'Buffy Bands'. 'Buffy on TV' has eight forums which cover the main interests and concerns of fans ranging from BBC, Sky, *Angel* on Four forums, to Spoiler, Box Set, and News forums, plus the WB forum for those UK fans who have managed to obtain contraband copies

of the latest episodes from the US. Thus, The Stakehouse manages to solve the main problem with the BBC Buffy/Cult TV site which struggles to map the bizarre and complex screenings of *Buffy* and *Angel*. Here, you can go to the right forum, and engage in chat which is based on episodes of *Buffy* and *Angel* you have actually watched on UK TV. The topics posted in these forums cluster around episode reviews ('Beer Bad' bad), musings on favourite characters (Riley Appreciation Thread!), best quotes (always a favourite topic), and complaints about scheduling and censorship (Channel 4 are Stupid). There are also detailed discussions on story arcs, and character developments, for example, one discussion centred on how old Angel would be after he returned from hell, bearing in mind time acceleration and the altered dimension of the demon underworld [29]. Another topic thread was based on the most emotional episode in *Angel*: 'I Will Remember You' versus 'Hero'.

Speculation on story, characterisation, and production is common in most cult TV online communities (Jenkins 1995, Penley 1997, Jones 2000). Who stays, who goes, who returns from the dead? are all regular queries for *Buffy* and *Angel* chat topics, but what makes the chat more specific to these series are the ontological, epistemological and philosophical discussions concerning the nature of death, the existence of afterlife, demons, magic, and the life of a chosen one. In the forum Mythos and Morality fans debate where real angels exist, how vampires speak, should vampires live or die, who picks the slayers, should slayers kill humans as well as demons? One topic focused on the best method for killing vampires. Fans debated different techniques: 'I would have to go with the old faithful, a stake. Arrows require a fair amount of skill for accurate firing through the heart and are less effective in close quarters fighting.' 'Good old fashioned beheading.' 'Carbon bullets and a gun with a huge bullet capacity.' 'C'mon people, think BIGGER, think NAPALM' [30]. This kind of playful chat is juxtaposed with more serious discussion. One fan responded to a lively topic discussion on a slayer's right to slay: 'Slayers should be above the law in exactly the same way police are above the law – which is to say not at all. Not one bit. Not even a little. The Slayer(s) uphold a moral code which, in essence is this: "Killing humans is bad."... If they start killing humans themselves they undermine their whole reason for being' [31].

Mythos and Morality is part of a strong social community at BuffyUK.org. There are seven different rooms to visit within the socialising forum of The Stakehouse. There is a stakehouse within The Stakehouse where fans can get to know each other. This is by far the most popular room, with over 35,000 posts. Topics focus on getting to know community members, and range from *Buffy* related discussions, eg 'which *Buffy* character do u think u're most like', to advice on relationships, all time favourite films, shoe size, and types of tattoos. This room is a chance for Bit Players to get to know Scooby Gang members, Slayers and Watchers, and rise through the ranks. Core fans arrange to meet offline at conferences, film screenings and at live gigs like Four Star Mary, who often feature on *Buffy*. There is even a BuffyUK community projects room, including a parachute jump for charity, and an enterprising suggestion that fans start up their own BuffyUK lottery syndicate.

A popular room is 'The Game Face', often involving 'finish the story', eg 'A Day in the Life of Joyce', more X-rated storylines like 'Willow Gets Laid', or, our special favourite: 'Angel gets wrecked' where 'Angel was feeling in a bit of a party mood...' In relation to *Nasa/Trek* (Penley 1997), 'The Game Face' is a chance for fans to use their creative skills to play with characters and storylines in *Buffy* and *Angel*. Here the tone is light, and anyone can join in, but for more serious writers, there is the Fang Fiction Forum, where fans can send in poetry and fiction and receive feedback from other fans/writers. This forum isn't a fully-fledged fanzine,

but rather a writer's group, and the emphasis is on feedback and support. Whilst some of the writing is in draft stage (can you think of any words that rhyme with Spike?), most of the fiction is in printable form, with elaborate details about ratings, spoilers, primary characters, peripheral characters etc, which are a direct response to the scheduling and censorship of *Buffy* and *Angel* in the UK. Fans choose existing stories and characters and expand the fiction beyond the boundaries of the programmes themselves. One fan has written several chapters for a book based on Willow before Buffy came to Sunnydale [32]. Another fan has written a homoerotic love story where, in a mythical, fairytale land, the tall, dark and handsome one realises his love for Xander whilst fishing one day by a tranquil pool [33]. This type of lyrical, erotic writing is balanced with fiction which attempts to mimic the complex narrative and wit of the original series. For example, this short story about the life of a demon adopts the tone of *Buffy* but shifts the focus to demons rather than slayers, as the demon is re-incarnated again and again only to be slayed again and again:

I scabble through the topsoil and burst out of the ground to stand before her. She is young, pretty, blonde...in my rush to feed, my powers of observation let me down. I should have realised that she did not appear frightened despite my horrific visage and unnatural entrance. I should have looked more closely at what she was carrying.

'Say hello to Mr Pointy.' [34]

Fan sites like BuffyUK.org are more creative and certainly more organised than industry sites and are a tribute to fans' desire to share experiences and perceptions of *Buffy* and *Angel* in a supportive and understanding online environment. The type of fan productions to be found at BuffyUK.org are common practices for cult TV fans (Jenkins 1992). However, BuffyUK.org also highlights how different being a fan of *Buffy* and *Angel* is in the UK to other countries. Because of the time difference between the showing of *Buffy* and *Angel* in the US and on UK terrestrial and pay TV TV, because of the denigration of US cult TV in the UK, viewers have to work hard at being fans and engaging in fan activities which are about the shows, rather than about scheduling or censorship.

### **Conclusion**

The circumstances within which British viewers are able to see *Buffy* and *Angel* impacts on their experience as audience members and fans. The wave of popularity relating to *Buffy* spread across the Atlantic to the UK, but it has been difficult for viewers to fully enjoy this experience because of many months delay and scheduling issues. A show which is readily and freely available in the US, becomes a hard to find commodity abroad. Network television channels are out of step with the expectations of cult TV viewers. Whilst fans have lobbied TV schedulers to show *Buffy* and *Angel* uncut in an appropriate and regular timeslot, their complaints have been largely ignored. This is because the TV environment in the UK foregrounds home grown factual, lifestyle and drama programmes in primetime. Imported cult TV is relegated to an earlier timeslot which means that under current content regulation, it must be suitable for a family audience. Imported cult TV is generally treated better by subscription television channels, and in related merchandising, because these media companies have realised the significance of niche audiences in a multi-channel environment; and because they rely on imported products as staple primetime entertainment.

UK fans have thrived despite and, perhaps, because of the difficulties in watching *Buffy* and *Angel* on network TV and their experience illuminates different national attitudes to cult TV and its fans. Fans seek out British websites in order to communicate with other fans who have similar viewing experiences. Websites

which are designed and moderated by UK fans are the most popular platform for Buffychat. Only the forums run by fans manage to cope with the complexities of variable UK transmissions. And, only the forums run by fans manage to validate fan status by providing a platform for fan production traditionally associated with cult TV.

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## Endnotes

[1] Janey Walker, Managing Editor Commissioning at Channel 4, quoted from *Right to Reply* Channel 4 10/11/00 6.30-7pm. ➤

[2] See for example their statement about not editing feature films to fit required time slots – [www.channel4.com](http://www.channel4.com). ➤

[3] BBC Producers' Guidelines: 2000, p77. ➤

[4] *BSC Regulation: the changing perspective: 2000*, p1. ➤

[5] See endnote two, p90. ➤

[6] ITC Programme Code: 2001, p4. ➤

[7] In the US, Fox TV produces *Buffy* and *Angel* for transmission on the WB network, they are not currently shown on Fox's own network. ➤

[8] In the UK taste for imported US drama appears limited to a niche audience with typical ratings of 2-4 million. At first, US medical drama *Chicago Hope* was shown on BBC1 in a relatively primetime slot but provided viewing figures more akin to a minority channel. It has since been relegated to the early hours of the morning. ➤

[9] Originally, *Blake's 7* and *Dr Who* were peak time weekend viewing on BBC1. ➤

[10] These comprise of the original 1960s *Star Trek* and its more recent spin-offs *The Next Generation* and *Deep Space Nine*. ➤

[11] In the fourth season of *Buffy* two key storylines were continued in the equivalent episodes of *Angel*, specifically the third and eighth *Buffy/Angel* episodes: *The Harsh Light of Day/In the Dark* and *Pangs/I Will Remember You*. ➤

[12] Quoted in *Cult Times* November 1999, p5. ➤

[13] Pace Report 2001, Gallup survey for Pace Micro Technology. ➤

[14] Quoted in a letter to a fan on BBC *Buffy/Cult TV* message board , 19/8/00 'Buffy'. ➤

[15] BBC online *Buffy/CultTV* message board, 20/8/00 'Re *Angel* cock-up' ➤

[16] See [www.buffy-slayer.net](http://www.buffy-slayer.net) ➤

[17] See news bulletin: 'The *Angel* massacre' on [www.buffyuk.org](http://www.buffyuk.org) 29/10/00. ➤

[18] Quoted from the transcript of *Right to Reply* available from [www.watcher's web](http://www.watcher'sweb.com) 29/10/00 ➤

[19] See endnote 6. ➤

[20] See 'All join in for scheduling fun' [www.buffyuk.org](http://www.buffyuk.org) 29/10/00. ➤

[21] The episodes dropped were 'Somnabulist', 'Expecting' and 'I've Got You Under My Skin'. Quote taken from [www.buffyuk.org](http://www.buffyuk.org) ; originally posted on the Channel Four.com website. ➤

[22] *Buffy* season 4, episodes 1-12 have sold 48,000 units; *Angel* season 1, episodes 1-12 have sold 44,000 units (November 2000), figures courtesy of Chart Information Network. Season 2 of *Buffy* sold 193,000 units; season 3 sold 159,000 units (CIN: November 2000). ➤

[23] Chris Leversuch ( [www.buffy/slayer.net](http://www.buffy/slayer.net) ) 9 December 2000. ➤

[24] See [www.buffyuk.org](http://www.buffyuk.org), The Stakehouse, BBC Forum, 'Age of Fans' 3/8/00. ➤

[25] There are a sprinkling of American and European *Buffy* fans which chat online at these sites, but the majority are UK fans. ➤

[26] See BBC online Buffy/CultTV message board, 14/8/00 'Today: a general rant'. ➤

[27] See BBC online Buffy/CultTV message board, 15/8/00, 'Buffy in Britain'; 25/8/00 'Buffy in 2020'; 22/8/00 'What do you want to take home?'. ➤

[28] See BBC online Buffy/CultTV message board, 17/8/00 /New'. ➤

[29] See [www.buffyuk.org](http://www.buffyuk.org) The Stakehouse, BBC Forum, 'Wouldn't Angel be Older?' 30/10/00. ➤

[30] See [www.buffyuk.org](http://www.buffyuk.org) The Stakehouse, Mythos and Morality (BBC), 'To stake or not to stake' 8/5/00. ➤

[31] See [www.buffyuk.org](http://www.buffyuk.org) The Stakehouse, Mythos and Morality (BBC), 'About Faith killing...er...whoever he was' 27/7/00. ➤

[32] See [www.buffyuk.org](http://www.buffyuk.org) The Stakehouse, Fang Fiction Forum 'Past Tense' copyright Byron. ➤

[33] See [www.buffyuk.org](http://www.buffyuk.org) The Stakehouse, Fang Fiction Forum 'The Lark and the Nightingale' copyright Missmalkin. ➤

[34] See [www.buffyuk.org](http://www.buffyuk.org) The Stakehouse, Fang Fiction Forum 'A Sunnydale Education' copyright Incandenza.