

HOW 'NETWORK 7' TELEVISED A REVOLUTION



Network 7 was a love it or loathe it British TV series from the 1980s that changed television for good. Launched in 1987, it ran for two series, until 1988, and was aired on Sundays between 12 and 2pm, on Channel 4. There had been nothing like it, but there have been plenty of copies since.

Devised by Janet Street-Porter and Jane Hewland, *Network 7* gave a voice to British teenagers and twenty-somethings, sowed the seed of Reality TV, and put “yoof culture” at the heart of the TV schedules.

Strange to think now, but back then youth TV was limited to roughly three shows: the educational *Blue Peter*, which was a cross between homework, the Boy Scouts and the Girl Guides; *Top of the Pops*, the legendary chart run-down show, hosted by Jimmy Saville and “Hairy Monster” Dave Lee Travis; and *The Tube* an anarchic live music series from Newcastle. And that was that.

Set in a ramshackle warehouse in London’s Limehouse, *Network 7* changed all this by taking its audience seriously and offering feature items, news stories, music and interviews on issues that were topical, relevant and often ground-breaking: from exposes on bank card fraud, to Third World debt, AIDs, bulimia, bullying and gangs. *Network 7* was also radical in that it was presented by “yoof”, and made stars of Sebastian Scott, Magenta Devine, Sankha Guha, Jaswinder Bancel and Trevor Ward.

It was easy to see why Ward was the best of the bunch, for he didn't try and be a traditional presenter, something all the others did (and often badly). No, he was himself, and tackled each story with his own clever and original take. Trevor Ward was the main reason for watching *Network 7*, it was like having a young Hunter S. Thompson presenting a TV show - for Ward brought a steely journalistic edge to what was basically a day-time series presented by young things.

I contacted Trevor to find out how he got started:

I was working for *Mercury Press* agency in Liverpool in 1987 under the brilliant and inspirational Roger Blyth when I was 26. *Network 7* was a brand new Sunday morning show, like a thinking-man's *Tiswas*. About halfway through their first series, they said they were looking for a reporter. The following week, they repeated their appeal, but this time they said the applicants had to be Northern. So I sent in my CV and was invited down to an interview on the set – a load of reconditioned caravans in the middle of a big warehouse in East London. Janet Street Porter and Jane Hewland gave me a merciless grilling and I drove home convinced I hadn't got the job.

The next day, a researcher rang me and said I was on the final short list of three, and that we would be expected to come down to London the next Sunday to do a live audition on that day's show. The viewers would vote in a live telephone poll for who got the job.

I thought it was a brilliant idea, even though there was a one in three chance it could end in nationally-televised humiliation for me.

That week's show was coming live from a *Rock against Racism* festival in Finsbury Park, and we each had to find a story during the programme's two-hour running time to present to camera in under a couple of minutes about half an hour before the end.

I thought it was pretty obvious that it would have to be a PTC rather than an interview if we were to successfully sell ourselves to the viewers in such a short timespan, so I harvested a load of juicy anecdotes from a bunch of bouncers and turned those into a script which ended with about six of them carrying me off camera. I was unaware of what the other two were upto, and later found out they'd chosen to interview people from worthy causes represented at the festival.

Anyway, I got almost half the votes, so was declared the winner at the end of the show.

You can gather from this why Ward was the show's highlight - he approached stories in an interesting and intelligent way. Every fuckwit would have gone all hang-wringing and worthy, but not clever Trevor, and that's why he is so good.

My first live story on *Network 7* was on its Death Penalty programme. *Network 7* was brilliant for pioneering viewer interaction, and viewers were regularly asked to vote on a range of issues. That week it was the death penalty and whether a particular Death Row inmate –whom we had a live satellite link with – should die. I was handed the London, studio-end of things. It was incredibly nerve-racking. My first piece -to-camera (PTC)– at the top of the two-hour programme – was a two—and-a-half-minute walking/talking shot – an eternity in TV time - referring to various modes of capital punishment – all without autocue.

That was the other thing about *Network 7* it engaged with its audience, it was like a social network for news stories, features and information. And by god did they pump that screen full of information - from what was coming up, to the temperature in the studio. Even so, for a generation it was compulsive viewing, and opened the gates to more accessible, more informative, more entertaining TV.

Janet Street-Porter went onto to win a BAFTA for *Network 7* and was then appointed head of “yoof” TV at the BBC, before, more recently, returning to journalism. Trevor Ward continued as a journalist (writing for *Loaded*, *The Guardian*, and working as an editor on the *Daily Record*) and presenter, and is now a highly respected writer, producer and documentary-maker.

There aren’t many clips of *Network 7* out there, and sadly none with Ward, but the few that are do give a hint of what the show was like. This selection ranges from opening titles, an item on gay youth and “coming out” (which was highly controversial subject back then), Madonna in concert, and an interview with The Beastie Boys.





Beastie Boys 1987 Network 7 Interview



Artful Dodger on Network 7 TV show.



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Posted by Paul Gallagher | 01.06.2011 02:56 pm

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