

# In front of a live studio audience: Production design and liveness in celebrity chat shows

Geraint D'Arcy<sup>1</sup> 

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## Abstract

This paper analyses the spatial and aesthetic use of a live studio audience as an element of design in celebrity chat shows. It establishes an aesthetic framework of un-scripted television formats using Richard Levin's 1961 book *Television by Design*, identifying abstraction and stylisation as fundamental to shaping the audience and performance spaces of contemporary chat show formats. With close analysis of *Wogan* (1983–1991) and *The Graham Norton Show* (2007–2026), the categories of space, the inclusion of a studio audience, their performative functions, and their live aesthetics are established as an integral element to the design of the show format in an era of fragmented, on-demand content.

## Keywords

set design, space, theatricality

## Introduction

Celebrity chat is a format of television which is largely unexamined and has had a live studio audience baked into the format since the 1980s. This paper uses two case studies, *Wogan* (1983–1991) and *The Graham Norton Show* (2007–2026), to map out the different spaces involved in the production of celebrity chat shows and think through the design aspects of contemporary unscripted television and their use of live studio audiences. As television is both broadcast and fragmented online, the relationship between television's perceived liveness (Marriott, 2007) and its flow becomes manifest and conspicuous

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Media, Film and Television, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

### Corresponding author:

Geraint D'Arcy, Department of Media, Film and Television, University of East Anglia, NR4 7TJ, UK.  
Email: [g.darcy@uea.ac.uk](mailto:g.darcy@uea.ac.uk)

(Turnock, 2007). Celebrity chat provides an opportunity to reflect on this relationship and consider the role of the live studio audience not just as receiver of content, but as part of the design which leverages the vestiges of television's illusion of liveness.

There are several aspects of television theory in terms of its production design which need updating and reviewing, before they can be applied to contemporary examples. *Wogan* and *The Graham Norton Show* will then be used to exemplify the recognised elements of the format and explore how their production design incorporates the aesthetic of the live audience.

There has been a lack of methodological rigour for non-fiction television design since Richard Levin (head of design at BBC Television 1953-1971) wrote *Television by Design* in 1961. Television formats are often separated into categories of fiction and non-fiction (or scripted and unscripted) and in terms of academic focus and study of television design, only the offspring of what Levin termed 'contrived realism' (1961: 15, 18) has received any attention because it is akin to cinematic realism and the production design involved in that work. The contrivance of realism is decreased (although arguably realism is always contrived) in contemporary television drama which rarely broadcasts the kind of teleplays it once did. Nowadays, fiction design, dominated by articulation through cinema, or at least through single camera production, is becoming a recognised field with contributions from practitioners (McHenry, 2023), studies on production design histories (Christie, 2009), and a few works which provide academic and theoretical insights (Barnwell, 2017, 2019; Britton and Barker, 2003; D'Arcy, 2018). Also useful to the discussion in this paper is the work of Simone Knox and Kai Hanno Schwind whose exploration of the television sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004) explores elements of design directly relevant to celebrity chat.

Non-fiction television, however, has had little consideration since 1961 with the notable exceptions of Lynn Speigel's 2008 work on the history of design in the US channel CBS, and some reflection in D'Arcy's 2018 analysis of TV and Film production design theories. This is perhaps because, as Clifford Hatts (Levin's successor at the BBC design group) pointed out in a lecture to the Royal Society of Arts in 1975, 'there is no such thing as television design per se but only television and the designer's contribution to it' (1975: 83). This opinion reflects both the visual limitations of the technology and the prevailing attitude that design was secondary to the dominant element of the screen space. For a long time, the opinion that 'the best designers are those who can make their contribution to a programme appear effortless and precise' has dominated, with the caveat that if the viewers noticed the contributions, then the designers 'have failed in [their] intentions as programme makers' (1975: 83). This view perhaps seems justified when the screen is 12 inches on a diagonal, but now our household TV screens are up to 70 inches it is probably time to reassess that and start paying more attention.

## Television by design

In *Television by Design*, Richard Levin identified approaches and styles in design for television which became the status quo at the BBC after 25 years of programme making and 6 years after the launch of ITV. Colour television was yet to be rolled out (BBC2 in 1967, BBC1 and ITV 1969) and broadcast was at the time limited technologically to

360 lines interlaced on black and white screens which at their largest were 30 cm by 30 cm. Levin was put in charge of the first design department and was under constant threat of closure, failure and the pressures of making something 'work' that had never existed before (Levin et al., 1991). In his book, Levin does not try to historicise television design or offer much by way of analysis but instead attempts to categorise design types and establishes the first vestiges of a theory of why they might be like that. He categorises three styles used in television design: Contrived realism, Stylisation, and Abstraction.

Contrived realism is the style which has most recognisable traction in contemporary discussions of television design as it is primarily for use in fiction television. It shows 'real things used in real circumstances to present the factual circumstances of reality... the conception of the scene and its lighting produces ... an atmosphere of realism in which human figures can move with apparent complete authenticity' (Levin, 1961: 18). This in terms of design theory is enveloped by ideas of iconic realism and generic verisimilitude (D'Arcy, 2018). The idea of its contrivance is important: it is ostentatiously trying to be something it evidently is not.

In terms of understanding non-fiction television, however, abstraction and stylisation are more useful stylistic guides to what we see in contemporary design for unscripted television: stylisation which 'refines the detail of a scene to its simplest and most symbolic elements' (Levin 1961: 15) and abstraction which is design that is 'entirely non-representational. It is not concerned with facts or atmosphere, it expresses nothing' (1961: 17). Even though the designs cited by Levin in the 1960s for stylisation were inherently theatrical and would appear odd on screens today, in the 1960s they were meant to give a sense of 'the place and the evocation of the atmosphere' (1961: 19) of what were frequently variety or comic performances or brief light entertainment sketches. Backdrops were basically painted and used stylistically as indicative of place or theme fulfilling a representational setting function more than they presented any aspect of realism (Figure 1).

Stylisation seems to have been shunned by the technological advancements of television itself, and television's increasing visual fidelity means that such styles have fallen out of fashion as they appear in Levin's book. If stylisation still exists in sets which allude visually to symbolic simplification of aspects of a setting or place, then abstraction pushes the style away from representation. For Levin, abstraction is 'entirely non-representational. It is not concerned with facts or atmosphere, it expresses nothing', he argues, but produces a pattern or background of the 'right kind' (1961: 19). Abstraction in the form that Levin believes exists can be seen in sets where colour and shape end along graphical lines to produce sets that look like they are 'correct' (1961: 19). They strike the right mood and tone. Abstraction in contemporary examples tend to now form aspects of a program's branding, such as regional news programs, where the lines, displays, and furniture are holistically sombre and interesting without being distracting.

Levin also adds an approach which he says 'for want of a better term is to be called studio background' (1961: 17). Studio background incorporates aspects of stylisation and abstraction to produce sets which are used 'fundamentally to fill in those parts of the screen not occupied by the heads of speakers with a pattern of the right relative visual significance' (1961: 17). It was an approach which Levin had developed over his career from his start at Alexandra Palace in the 1930s where TV showed little more than a face on a



**Figure 1.** An example of a stylised set design taken from Levin (1961: 14) showing a production called 'Merely Melville' designed by Michael Goulding. A setting suggestive of place, 'a holiday at the seaside'.

screen. By 1961, the studio background was 'defined less by its aesthetic content than by its use and purpose, which is to... provide an understandable '... visual context...'(1961: 17).

Remnants of both stylisation and abstraction remain in the studio background the approach of which 'must reflect the character of the programme, and must contribute something to the meaning of the programme itself' (1961: 17). As screens got larger and colour was introduced, the need to have more interesting studio backgrounds which can be seen to incorporate elements of abstraction and stylisation naturally are still present in game shows and, in particular, in the celebrity chat show.

## Ordinary TV

Distinct from other broadcast chat, celebrity chat shows occupy several positions at once, all of which seem to orbit Frances Bonner's concept of 'Ordinary TV', that subset of critically disregarded programmes that have 'nothing special about them ...because their very everydayness seems to be a partial reason for their not being regarded as sufficiently important to bear sustained investigation' (Bonner, 2003: 3). As part of this subset of television, celebrity chat is overshadowed by discussions of talk shows (Frayling and Munson, 1993; Scannell, 1991). The distinction here is most telling in the difference between 'chat' (light, arbitrary) relying on personalisation and congeniality to engage

audiences (Loeb, 2015) and 'talk' (serious discourse) with hidden elements of control in seeming live chaos (Lundell, 2009). The latter tends to centre upon programming which looks at ordinary people in an extraordinary way revolving around what Andrew Tolson frames as 'the performance of talk' (Tolson, 2001: 3). The dominant academic examinations have been about shows featuring normal people or guests who are 'in some way newsworthy, authoritative, representative, or simply deemed by host or show producers to be intrinsically interesting' (Haarman, 2001: 33–4). The format of these talk shows varies but relies upon 'a feeling of intimacy and familiarity between host and members of the studio audience, and indirectly spectators at home' (Haarman, 2001: 33). It creates a parasocial relationship (Horton and Wohl, 1956) argued by Louann Haarman as 'potentially common to any television genre centering on a personality, ... particularly encouraged by talk show formats and procedures' (Haarman, 2001: 33). This is usually bridged by the charismatic host as is the case in celebrity chat, only the people who we hear in discourse are no longer ordinary, but are stars given proximity to ordinariness as they try to convince us that their 'world is not glamorous or exotic, but familiar and relatively mundane' (Tolson, 2006: 150).

The parasocial relationship of celebrity chat is not framed by face-to-face discourse as it might be in talk shows with normal people chosen for their expertise or interest and an audience of ordinary people invested in the subject (Haarman, 2001) but by 'banter, or the play of wit between hosts and guests' (Tolson, 2006: 151). In the celebrity chat format, this troubles the distinctions between the 'real' person and the public figure or celebrity. It is this that distinguishes the 'talk' from the 'chat', both in terms of seriousness of discourse and in terms of the authenticity of the performative frame where the audience of the celebrity chat is considered 'wide-eyed' in their 'fascination with the role of celebrity' (Tolson, 2006: 151). Here the programme must rely on the host to negotiate that relationship through their performance of discourse moving between smiling 'banter' and 'asking a serious question now'.

The lack of seriousness in celebrity chat is further compounded by two elements that are ordinary in as much as they are part and parcel of the glamour of celebrity but essential to that parasocial bridging which the framing of these shows relies upon. The first is their status as televisual spectacle and the second is the more problematic presence of a live studio audience who are not part of a talk show discourse.

Celebrity chat shows form part of what Helen Wheatley defines 'the under researched category of high-gloss "shiny-floor" shows' (2016: 13). High-end light entertainment programmes are often derided as 'shiny-floor' shows with that label tending to sweep up lots of the music-oriented shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing* (2004–Present) and *The X Factor* (2004–2018) together with celebrity chat. *The Graham Norton Show* in particular represents these shiny-floored, celebrity-focused light entertainment shows which have histories stemming from music hall (2016: 14). Shows like these are 'united aesthetically by a sense of gloss, by bright lights, glitter and shine, and by the transformation of television studio or arena into spectacular space' (Wheatley, 2016: 13–14). However, these celebrity chat shows also exist in the blurry 'borders between' light entertainment and current affairs (Britton and Barker 2003: 22) and the design of those shows must contain aspects of spectacle encompassing both situated discussion and interview to be presented in front of a live studio audience.

## Case study rationale, Wogan to Norton

To understand the design considerations that are needed for the genre of celebrity chat show we need to look at examples where the stylistic voice of the design is distinct. In the United Kingdom, a significant historic example of this would be *Wogan* and as a contemporary example of this type of chat show, *The Graham Norton Show*. Chronologically these two shows were separated by *The Mrs Merton Show* (1993-1995; 1996-1998) and *Friday Night with Jonathan Ross* (2001-2010) and *Wogan* itself was significantly predated by *The Late, Late Show* (1962-2023) in Ireland and *The Tonight Show* (1954-present) in the United States. Also of note in the United Kingdom was *Parkinson* (1971-2007).

*The Mrs Merton Show* can be discounted in this discussion as it was a pastiche of celebrity chat shows, which would confuse this study. *Friday Night with Jonathan Ross*, *The Late, Late Show* and *The Tonight Show* appear at first glance to be comparable examples of celebrity chat, but they could also be considered to be late night comedy shows or satirical ‘man at the desk’ shows (Doona, 2022) with the celebrity chat being a secondary focus. The discussion here would be easily adaptable to explore the design of those shows. Similarly, *Parkinson* eschewed the desk and the satire of the US and Irish talk shows to be otherwise focussed on more serious discussion with stars and personalities (Bennett and Holmes, 2010) with stories to tell. The *Parkinson* focus on interview rather than chat marks it as more current affairs than light entertainment in the border between the televisual idioms, and it was a contemporary of *Wogan* during its very long run filling a slightly different niche in BBC TV programming.

This article does not argue for a direct correlation between the *Wogan* set and the *Graham Norton* set designed some 20 years later, but it is arguing that the principles of the celebrity chat show format relies on a number of core tenets which underpin both designs and it explores the implications for the audience and the spectator-viewers at home can that be seen through specific, as Hatts puts it, ‘house styles’ for a show (1975: 83). Celebrity chat designs need a space to chat, a space for guest performance and a space to place the audience, for them to be seen as part of the event. The time span indicates that although the tones are different, the humour is different, the textures are different, the functions remain the same.

## The live studio audience

In talk shows, the subject of the show is often produced by the audience (Haarman, 2001: 35) who are meant to be representative of the audience it is addressing. Our framing of audiences changes however as the nature of television changes (Gorton, 2009; Livingstone, 2004). The audience is a cross section of the public and so as Sonia Livingstone argues: ‘the audience or media user is ... doubly articulated as the consumer-viewer’ (2004: 83). The talk show television audience becomes conceived as some kind of mass communicating encoder/decoder populous, but it is different from an audience as a group at an event carrying out a similar but limited function such as that of theatre, music or celebrity chat television.

A live studio audience in a celebrity chat show becomes part of the television text being consumed later by consumer viewer audiences. In a celebrity chat show it is the deliberate

inclusion of a theatrical type of audience. This is not quite the rowdy 'active audience' (Livingstone, 2003: 18) of the 17th and 18th century theatre but an audience that is framed as part of the show and as an integral part of the design of the show it emphasises the status of its perceived 'liveness'. Television's liveness has evolved over time but maintains its link with the cultural discourse that includes high culture such as live theatre and opera. Despite a shift in cultural focus towards television drama any indication of liveness in television is 'often still imbued with the aesthetics' (Greenhalgh, 1998: 73) of what John Caughie describes as the 'direct, spontaneous, authentic reality' (1991: 23) of a live audience.

The live audience has dual functions: they are a sounding board for the performers to perform to, and they cue the viewer at home in how to react to what they are watching (Thompson, 1995). Celebrity chat evokes some interesting 'mediated quasi-interactions' (Thompson, 1995: 85) between the audience of the live event, the celebrity participants of the event, and the viewers of the television broadcast. In these terms it is well established that the audience offers a reflexive marker for viewers connecting the live reaction to the expected reaction of the viewer (Montgomery, 1999; Thompson, 1995). Montgomery marks this as 'a pervasive kind of affiliative response on the part of the audience...' when their unified laughter at the live event provides 'an important way ... to demonstrate or confirm ... an appropriate alignment with the events that constitute the occasion of the show' (1999: 122).

In celebrity chat shows an audience has signed up, travelled to the studios and sat for three or more hours filming a single one-hour show. They constitute a fairly determined set of people who want to experience a live show. Central to the issue is the question of whether they remain a consumer-viewer audience since during the live event they are also one that is performative of that 'role' visually for the spectator viewers at home.

## **The design of celebrity chat**

The relationship between the space of audience and the space of chat and their mutual dependence becomes a distinct design aspect of the celebrity chat format. 'The studio audience occupies a peculiar position', as Thompson puts it, arguing that 'the members of this audience are part of a face-to-face interaction that takes place primarily between the chat show host and the guest' (1995: 105). We have an inherently theatrical space one which seems to encompass a 'staged' performance and a 'live' co-present audience. However, that audience space is shared with production technologies and technicians who usually occupy backstage space in theatrical settings. Usually, this would imply a spatial-technical relationship between the on-stage and visible to the viewer as part of a performance and the off-stage and invisible technologized space to be disregarded by the audience. The televisual frame of this relationship confuses matters though: on and off-stage are of consequence, but there are varying degrees of off depending on what type of audience you are. The spectator viewer at home is unaware of the technologization of the audience space, off for them is out of shot or off camera. They see the staged celebrity discussion and they see the audience watching it live and at very few points do they see the camera crew and floor managers behind the camera's view of these things. The technology has been obliterated for the audience at home. The live audience does not merely witness

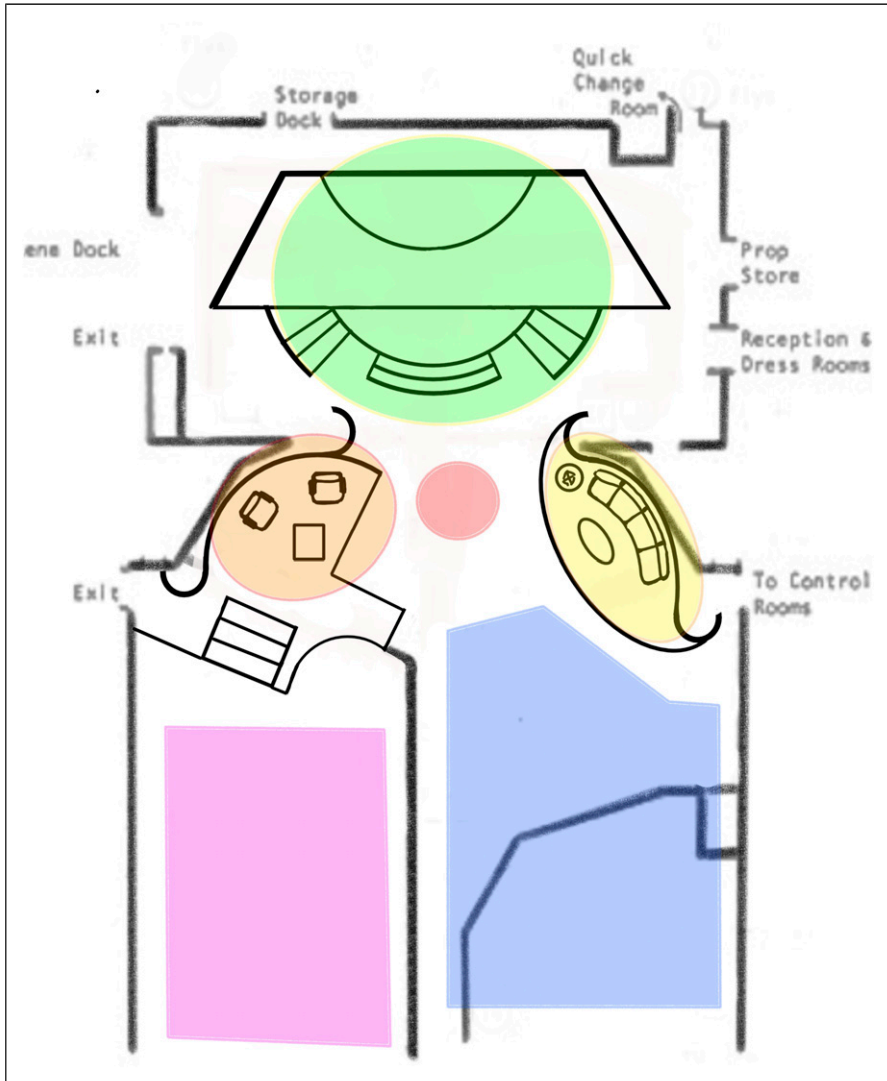
the event, they are co-opted part of the staging of the event in which they are collaborators in the illusion of their own liveness.

The contemporary design of studio backgrounds employ qualities of stylisation and abstraction and in celebrity chat the audience also has a role in the visual design because of the way it separates out the functions of the televised space: There is a 'live' audience space, therefore there is also a 'live' performance space. It is intended to be taken as evident by most viewers that this is as straightforward a relationship as that of the theatre. In design terms, however, it is considerably more complex than this: the task of the design for these programmes seems to be to present an imagined theatrical space as a sort of proscenium which renders the televisual technical elements entirely invisible. This gives the impression of a seamless live production which the audience is privileged to witness live and co-present, and the home audience is intended to enjoy it vicariously as such. The separation of reality from actuality however makes it very clear that the actual audience for the show is only ever the television audience at home. The people in the studio are part of the set.

## **Wogan**

*Wogan* was first broadcast from BBC Television Theatre 1982-91 and then BBC Television Centre 1991-1992. In 1985 there was a phenomenal amount of output which established its house style, as part of Michael Grade's drive to ensure the BBC licence-fee maintained value for money (£65 per annum in 1985). *Wogan* aired three nights a week between February and December 1985 producing 139 episodes for that year until eventually settling down thereafter to produce only 150 shows in a season running between 1986 and 1991 when it left the BBC Television Theatre and went to Broadcasting House. This fact alone makes the show significant in establishing and refining a design which can still be seen as fundamental to the form today.

Shepherd's Bush Empire built in 1903 by Frank Matcham was occupied by the BBC from 1953 to 1991 and known as the BBC Television Theatre. This location was referred to frequently by host Terry Wogan in his opening monologues as 'Shepherd's Bush Green' and much was made of it as a West End location in the heart of the celebrity-land of London, directly fixing the show's access to celebrity with the location of the studio. As can be seen in [Figure 2](#), derived from a ground plan from TV Studio History ([Kempton, 2024](#)), the studio had been awkwardly constructed out of a Matcham Theatre auditorium with stalls end-on, and circle and gods in a horseshoe facing an Italianate proscenium-arch stage. Half the stalls, with the auditorium at ground level split lengthways so that the studio floor wrapped around the right side of the audience, had been covered over to make a studio floor for cameras and cranes. Beneath the circle mezzanine, at stall-level, a further sound-proof space had been constructed for musical accompaniment. The Circle was maintained as audience seating but the seating in the stalls had clear visual access only to the stage-right half of the theatre stage. Matcham theatres were renowned for their gilt plasterwork and colourful decoration, but as the function of the old theatre had been given over entirely to the production of live television broadcasts, and as if to emphasise this by nullifying it, the auditorium decor was overpainted in beige.



**Figure 2.** Old photocopy of Ground Plan of BBC Television Theatre with added detail from Wogan (generic 1985) and colour overlay. Red: Monologue position. Green: Music Stage. Orange: Celebrity Interview stage. Yellow: Secondary interview space. Blue technical space. Purple: Studio Audience space. Adapted from materials in Kempton (2024).

Celebrity chat, characterised in the early days of television studies as anecdotal TV by Andrew Tolson (1985), centred upon television personality interviewing another television personality giving us chat about chat, or ‘meta-chat’ as Tolson puts it. Here the recounting of a biographical tid-bit its given authenticity by the host and their guest and then accessibility to an audience simultaneously because of the shifts in tone and address

that the host plays with. Through this ‘...the “genuine” personality is validated, authenticated, by our knowledge that s/he is “game for a laugh”’ (Tolson, 1985: 25). In the case of *Wogan*, the eponymous host walks out onto centre-stage and addresses the spectator-viewer audience directly through the camera. Tolson argues that the anecdotal effect of Terry Wogan’s monologue creates an atmosphere of humour and inclusive warmth that seems like it is telling humorous stories (through dramatised dialogue) even when it is not. The monologue depends upon two things: Terry Wogan’s ability to be both comic and self-deprecating and ‘the fact that Terry is continually slipping in and out of character; out of, and back into, direct address’ (1985: 25). In Tolson’s analysis of *Wogan* however, this direct address is towards the viewer-spectator through the camera, and Tolson seems to miss this slightly or at least not be aware of the third level of address. He observes that ‘at the end of each dialogue, Terry turns to face the camera and the studio audience applauds’ (1985: 25). The dialogues Tolson is referring to are the interactions with the celebrity guests, where the indirect address involves the differencing levels of performance of ‘self’ that they indulge in. Tolson includes Wogan in this analysis as a television personality presenter. However, at the top of each show, Wogan walks, sometimes trotting, sometimes dancing, onto stage and opens the show with a monologue to his audience. For the duration of the monologue, Wogan is always focussed on the camera lens and the audience at home. There is an occasional aside or glimpse up at the audience present in the room with him but his performance of talking to people in a room is almost always towards an audience imagined in the lens. At points throughout the monologues, and very often at the end of the speech, the viewers at home are given a reverse shot of this monologue where we are given the impression that Wogan is addressing the live in-the-room audience. This shot invariably is from centre stage looking from a position behind Wogan’s left shoulder at the view of the BBC Television Theatre Auditorium. These establishing angles, though brief, are fundamental to understanding the presence of the live audience (and therefore the validity of the event) but also give the impression that the 5 minutes of speaking at the start of the show were for the benefit of the people in-the-room with the host. What this shot also shows, however, is the full studio audience who only occupy one half of the auditorium. The camera placement conveniently misses seeing the remainder of the studio floor extending out into the main auditorium. Wogan looks like he has a full theatrical house in these shots that he has been addressing from centre stage, but he has been addressing a camera which, with its crew of two or three people (sound, floor manager, and the camera operator plus attendant technicians at points) obscures Wogan’s monologue from the in-the-room audience entirely.

The address to camera and the opening monologue is delivered as if to a full auditorium but is in fact delivered to an auditorium given over to the cameras and technical area.

In the view of [Figure 3](#), the audience is made to look fuller than it actually is. In the circle they wrap the full width of the auditorium, but the stalls are only half the size it appears. What the presence of the audience produces is a ‘contrived liveness’ forming part of the historical effort of television to ‘assert liveness as the quintessence of television... capitalizing on television’s most distinctive and precious property’ (Levine, 2008: 405) the mythological sense television provides of ‘being there’ (Feuer, 1983: 14). It looks like a show that you are missing out on in a typical UK theatre, only half that auditorium space



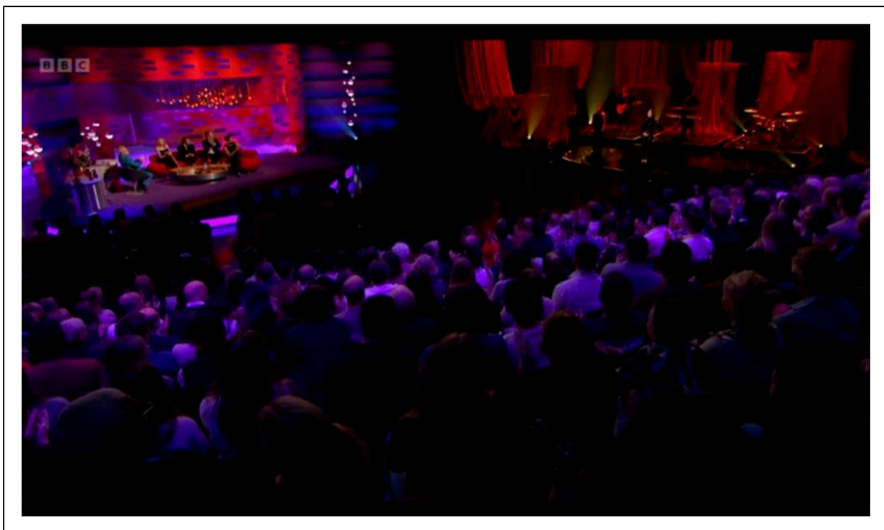
**Figure 3.** The rare Over-shoulder view of Terry Wogan and the BBC Television Theatre Audience.

is given over to TV technology. We don't see that though from our chair at home, we only get to see the audience we are meant to connect to who are surrounded by the branding of the show. Along the centre of the balcony of the circle a large Wogan graphic is visible and the reason the studio is painted beige also becomes clear: it is that colour to extend the palette of the on-stage set so that there is no visually significant break or disjunct from the space that the celebrities are interviewed in.

Housed in the stage space proper is a principal performance space including guest and host areas (stage right) and a down stage area for audience address which is actually mid-stage centre. A secondary performance space for invited (usually musician) stage performers to give a 'live show' for the assembled guests it located far back behind the proscenium arch and is angled towards down stage left. The stage right interview space is actually on the stage apron and encroaches across the front of the stage portal. Audience seated in the front of the stalls would have little to no view of the upstage performance space. In fact, just by considering the layout in terms of sightlines for the live audience it becomes clear that the in-the-room audience of Shepherd's Bush Green saw very little of any of the live performance at all no matter what mode of address Wogan was using. The auditorium is in fact a tertiary performance space, which unlike its theatrical counterpart is encompassed by elements of design and branding from the principal space. The orientation of these spaces are presented in live TV to emulate a variety performance: they look like they are in the same stage frame, presented one after the other to the home audience

watching the televised event, but to the audience in the studio these are separate ‘planimetric’ (Knox and Schwind, 2019: 148) spaces angled for the convenience of technology and the dance of as-live broadcast and not for the convenience of viewing as a live audience but for the televisual audience it presents a space ‘that is not reductively determined by the proscenium arch’ (Knox and Schwind, 2019: 148).

The design motifs that encompass the interview space, the audience space and the performance space, act as backdrop to the area of address and are used to mask the technical floor. In *Wogan’s* 1985 run, these consisted of a blend of stylisation and abstraction creating a sort of aspirational living room: Chrome Trim, high end furniture, ubiquitous beige and salmon palettes; it is the pinnacle of a DFS show room circa 1985. The principal space consists of a multi-level or stepped platform set, a set of guest sofas, a host area, with an executive chair and a masked area, sometimes with a side table. The guest sofa is frequently large enough for several guests but occasionally the sofa is swapped out for single armchairs, especially in the start or the headline segment of a show’s lineup. There is also the ubiquitous coffee-table, masking cables and shoes from the home audience in wide shots, replete with jug of water, glasses, and the (now very conspicuous) convenience of an ash tray (Figure 4). It was a style that, due to the programme’s persistence throughout the 1980s, had overstayed its welcome by the end of its run. Maeve Kennedy was less than kind to the form and format and the aesthetics of the design when *Wogan* aired its last show in 1992. Characterising the design in a review of the final show, as a ‘sofa-set’ (Kennedy, 1992, 30), marking its many transitions and applying scathing and frankly unkind terms to what was indicative of flagship broadcast design in the 1980s and its aim to be unobtrusive, domestic, and achievable. Kennedy’s skewering of the sofa and coffee tables as the set indicate the banality of the set design. This is not a banality of evil however, but a deliberate choice to reach for normality and



**Figure 4.** Graham Norton Show. View from the back of the auditorium

ordinariness, to leverage the idea that there is ‘nothing special about them ... because their very everydayness’ (Bonner, 2003: 3). This enhances the audience’s access to the celebrity guests, who in that planimetric arrangement, become more ‘reachable’ (Bennett and Holmes, 2010). Besides, the design came from a tradition of lighter current affairs programme design pioneered by Natasha Kroll in the design of the set for *The Brains Trust* (1955-1961): A simple design of modern domestic furniture and a coffee table in front of a studio background of screens for a weekly discussion panel on philosophy which set the standard worldwide (Britton and Barker, 2003) for group chat on television. It gained wide endorsement according to Clifford Hatts because ‘it felt right – was right’ (2003: 30).

## The Graham Norton Show

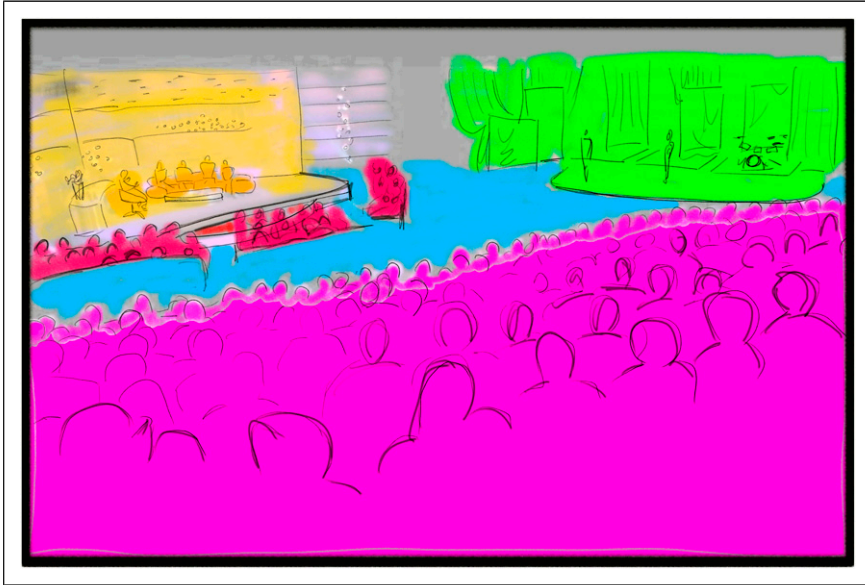
Terry Wogan was part of the everyday fabric of British television as Graham Norton is now, both knowingly lacking incisiveness and continually walking a line between not being exclusively promotional of celebrity achievements but also skirting the reasons of their presence as entirely caused by those same things. Importantly through the design and space in Wogan, we can articulate contemporary contrivances of celebrity chat. Liveness and presence are still articulated through abstraction and stylisation in conjunction with the studio background and the presence of a visible audience and design analysis can be used to identify the developed space in the planimetric set up of celebrity chat.

*The Graham Norton Show* has been a mainstay of BBC Television since 2007. It has an ever-popular ‘star host’ (Timberg and Erler, 2002) who is culturally rooted in BBC Television, being in part nostalgic for Norton’s popular early comedic career and as part of a general UK fondness of weekend evening programming which fulfils the desire for entertainment, high camp innuendo and gossip. *The Graham Norton Show* is popular in part because Norton is a successor (if not directly) to Terry Wogan: he is as an Irish TV personality working for a long time on UK television as a presenter and host and a UK presenter for the Eurovision Song Contest, again for the BBC. This combination has in no small way continued to win Norton success and a place central to British broadcast television and UK popularity.

*The Graham Norton Show* is performed live and recorded ‘as live’ on a weekday, but broadcast on a Friday night a few weeks later. Broadcast practices like these are ‘an industrial and critical concept that [have] no formal presence beyond academic circles’ (Bonner, 2003: 36), but it is nevertheless crucial to these programme formats to present the cosy illusion of immediacy to the show, with references to contemporary current affairs and situations all vaguely couched within the taping-broadcast window.

As testament to the popularity of this winning formula, *The Graham Norton* show has seen little alteration over the past 16 years in terms of format structure and aesthetic. The large studio in Television Centre is a large black box studio not a Victorian proscenium theatre. Nevertheless, in the spatial arrangement (see Figures 4–6) we have a celebrity interview stage dressed like a lounge area, and two audience spaces.

The set for the celebrity interview stage is like an extension of Norton’s sartorial extravagance; he is always suited and formal but in interesting fabrics and clashing colours, ever fashionable but always at the bespoke extreme of male clothing. The palette of the set design uses base colours of bold gold and reds with accents of silver and purple.

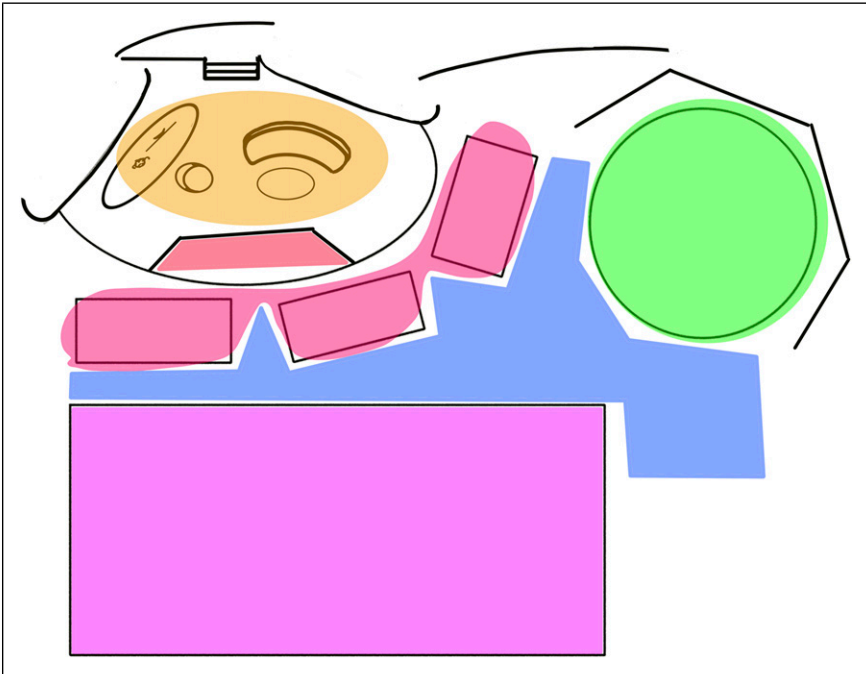


**Figure 5.** The Graham Norton Show studio with colour highlight. Red: Monologue Space. Orange: Celebrity Interview stage. Blue: Technical Space. Green: Music Stage. Pink: Guest Audience. Purple: Studio Audience.

A departure from Wogan's beige and salmon to produce something that feels no less accessible but more classy than domestic, a night out with friends: smart casual, classy and cool, with high-end banquet seating and expensive looking practical lights hung as pendants to break up the silver wave motifs in the background. The celebrity guests appear together in the green room (only accessible by studio participants and the spectator viewers at home through a live camera feed) and more recently these interactions happen on the sofas as the guests emerge one by one to be the brief focus of collective banter at a party-like gathering (Figure 4).

The first audience space is the guest audience space, wrapped directly around the celebrity interview stage space which is composed of special guests of the interviewees and selected members of the public (via a vetting process carried out in the queue which seems based largely on undisclosed aesthetic criteria). The second space is for the studio audience and is comprised of a large seating block that holds the bulk of the audience in raked seating which looks directly over the guest audience onto the celebrity interview stage (Figures 5 and 6).

In and around the smaller blocks of seats in the guest audience are the technical team of the studio floor, the camera operators, floor managers and other crew occupying this area as a technical space which makes efforts to remain invisible to the viewer of the show and to be ignored by the live audience. The last space of significance is the music stage which is not designed by the show designers and is a kind of receiving-house space where the guest artists performing have control of the stage design as they would in a theatre or live-performance venue.



**Figure 6.** Graham Norton Show colour coded abstraction. Red: Monologue Space. Orange: Celebrity Interview stage. Blue: Technical Space. Green: Music Stage. Pink: Guest Audience. Purple: Studio Audience.

When the music section of the show is introduced at home, the spectator-viewers are meant to feel that this exclusive performance is presented to them and that the live audience is witnessing this exciting event live, together with them, with the same view. The reality for the studio audience is somewhat more awkward: the music stage is at the far extreme of the studio space. The bank of studio audience seats faces directly towards the celebrity interview stage set and at an oblique angle to the music stage. The guest audience would see nothing at all from their seats and would have to stand and turn completely around to see the music stage or watch from the audience video monitors like the spectator-viewers at home.

Finally, there are two spaces where Norton addresses the viewer-spectator at home from: a continuity space situated in front of the studio audience seating from where a pre-show continuity segment with Norton and a star guest are enthusiastically applauded by the live audience; and a monologue position where the opening introduction is delivered. This tends to be formed by a lower, forward section of the celebrity interview stage directly by the guest audience, a position that Norton frequently uses to his advantage in terms of pitch, tone and comedy feedback. His delivery to camera from this position has a familiar knowingness to it that oscillates in delivery between direct to camera and glances aside to the in-the room audience. The visible, often rowdy studio audience reactions are often part of that interaction with reaction shots taken from the more proximate guest audience.

As with *Wogan* before it, the two studio audiences do not show up for the views that they gain, and they are not just there to provide performative feedback to the celebrities and Norton. Their role is more performative and more aesthetically important as part of the design of the space. If the background of the celebrity interview space aims towards general nightclub abstraction, then the guest audience and the studio audience seem to be sat, when we watch it on television, just the other side of the conversation. They are enfolded in this illusion. In wide shots the set design wraps the audience in the silver wave motif and the warm globular pendent lights. Aspects of the 'look' of the show are evident at the far limits of the seating block.

The guest audience and studio audiences contribute to the contrived liveness of the show through an enhanced design function that is used to incorporate the audience into the live action of the performance. This is particularly visible in segments delivered from the continuity space which relies heavily on the presence of Norton and the guest celebrity he is showing off plus the audience itself to convince the television viewer, watching earlier on in the evening (between other scheduled programmes on the same night) that the show is live and getting ready to commence despite being recorded days or weeks previously. Meanwhile, the proximity of the guest audience makes it part of the living event and its ordinary members are used as photographic background to the wider angles of the celebrities on the celebrity interview stage. Here, the audience serve as abstract colours and shapes with requisite expressions of enthusiasm and entertainment, surrounded by set extensions enhancing the atmosphere of the show.

There is a final difference from *Wogan* in the way the Norton audience are used: they are frequently shot from the back row of the bank of seats. This shot is used particularly in the segues between the interviewing section and the live performance aspects on the separate stage. The audience area fulfils a function that in *Wogan* was previously covered by mid-shot inserts of people laughing, but there are no shots of backs of heads in *Wogan*. Any shot from that angle in the Television Studio Theatre would have immediately revealed how cramped and lopsided the audience setup actually was. In BBC Television Centre, the audience block is vast and positioned so that the whole space can be seen. Further scrutiny might reveal that the seating block of audience may not be able to see anything particularly well, but the sheer numbers of the audience are an indicator of a live spectacle in itself and it is this that the format relies upon to maintain its at-home audience's interest.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to explore celebrity chat through the lens of production design and in the process contribute to production design theory in the area of non-fiction television design. The groundwork of stylisation and abstraction in studio backgrounds established by Levin in 1961 has been shown to still be an active part of television design in contemporary celebrity chat format in its combination with the spectacle inherent in the form and the ordinariness or at least accessibility of the format's subject matter and content. In this discussion, the planimetric circumstances of the design and staging of the show have also been further explored providing definition of the visually interconnected on screen, but physically disparate, spaces of the production. The examination of *Wogan*

and *The Graham Norton Show* have charted the establishment and development of the spaces required by the format: the monologue and continuity spaces, and the celebrity interview stage and their positions in relation to the studio audience, guest audience spaces and the always inconveniently positioned music performance space held together by the interstitial and invisible technical spaces.

The discussion of celebrity chat in terms of its design has relied upon the balance of its visual spectacle and the presentation of ordinariness. Underlying this is the ever present issue of televisual quality. Celebrity chat evokes a vicarious visual presence through its display of normal people in proximity with celebrity. Charlotte Brunsdon reminds us that 'television secures the distinction of all non-televisual cultural forms' and also incorporates key parts of its own aesthetic in order to ensure its 'worth' often finding it to be 'founded on an oxymoron' (1993: 61) as it borrows other aspects of television aesthetic to shore up its own significance for an audience. In this way, the use of the live audience in celebrity chat as a stylised and abstracted extension of the studio background is an interesting layer to consider in terms of signifying celebrity chat's cultural distinctiveness and worth. In *The Graham Norton Show*, the live audience is visually omnipresent; it functions as a foil to the stage action for the audience at home and is performatively connected to the atmosphere of the show in a way that the Wogan audience did not quite attain for itself but laid the groundwork for others to follow.

## ORCID iD

Geraint D'Arcy  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5645-6005>

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### Author biography

**Geraint D'Arcy** is an Associate Professor of Media Practice at University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. He is author of *Mise en Scène, Acting and Space in Comics* (Palgrave, 2020) which looks at the crossover of theory from film, theatre, and comics, and of *Critical Approaches to TV and Film Set Design* (Routledge, 2018) which established theories of production design.