‘Moments and opportunities’: Interstitials and the promotional imagination of BBC iPlayer

Paul Grainge
University of Nottingham, UK

Abstract
This article examines the promotion of the BBC’s online streaming and download service, iPlayer, as it has been presented to audiences through broadcast television. Analysing transitions in the BBC’s representation of iPlayer, it considers the promotional imagination of the service during the 2010s, a period when the Corporation was striving to communicate its digital identity and broaden iPlayer within mainstream use. Through industrial–textual analysis, the essay considers the paratextual function of iPlayer interstitials, and the relation of on-air promos to the Corporation’s internal strategy for the service in moving ‘beyond PC, beyond catch-up, beyond the early-adopter’.

Keywords
BBC iPlayer, interstitials, on-demand television, paratexts, promos, public service broadcasting

On 16 April 2014, the BBC launched a new marketing campaign for its on-demand iPlayer service. This comprised a series of 10-second scenes depicting the British Easter vacation. These ranged from portraits of travel delay on motorways, in airports and at ferry ports to rain-battered tents and remote hamlets, both without access to Wi-Fi. Each vignette ended with the pink logo of BBC iPlayer and the strapline ‘download something good before you go’. Emphasising television (TV) viewing as something mobile and portable, the trailers presented BBC iPlayer as a travel companion, an application ideally suited to the behaviours and rituals of individuals, couples and families on the move during a national holiday weekend. Appearing in the junctions of
the BBC’s linear schedule, the promotional address of the trailers worked to reconstruct
the ephemerality of TV; focusing on fleeting scenes of non-domestic British life, they
dramatized a digital media environment where the transient nature of broadcast TV was
being recast by asynchronous forms of media distribution and consumption.

This article examines the promotion of BBC iPlayer as it has been presented to
audiences through linear TV flow; it considers how on-air promos have been used in the
TV schedule to invite viewing behaviours beyond it. Contributing to debates about the
role and status of the promotional short-forms that circulate between, beyond and below
the shows that are often privileged within film and TV studies (Grainge, 2011), I con-
centrate on TV’s interstitial space. Considering the function of interstitials as ‘a class of
television output’, John Ellis suggests that synoptic forms like trailers, promos and
channel idents have the capacity to distil programmes and viewing habits, offering ‘an
internal metacommentary on ordinary TV’ (2011: 60). More extensively, Catherine
Johnson suggests that TV junctions ‘act as the site where the broadcaster has the
opportunity to communicate directly with the viewer, shaping the tone of address for a
particular broadcaster and/or channel as well as communicating the structuring patterns
of broadcasting to viewers’ (2013: 26; see also 2012: 115–142). While Ellis reflects on
the potential of interstitials to be read as ‘user guides’ in how to consume TV in a given
moment, Johnson demonstrates how (BBC) TV junctions have served, in different
historical periods, to ‘communicate something about the experience of watching tele-
vision while also attempting to persuade or control the behaviour of viewers’ (2013: 34).
Both draw attention to the way that interstitials contribute to the ‘communicative ethos’
of broadcasting, something that Johnson suggests has altered in response to the new
experiences of TV in the digital era.

As a form of interstitial output, on-air promos for iPlayer became increasingly ubi-
quitous within the flow of BBC TV in the 2010s, consonant with the product’s centrality
to the broadcaster’s digital strategy (Bennett and Strange, 2014). Indeed, I would argue
that the Corporation’s burgeoning digital identity – what BBC Director-General Tony
Hall described in 2015 as ‘an internet-first BBC which belongs to everyone and where
everyone belongs’ (Hall, 2015) – has been significantly performed within TV junctions,
and through iPlayer promos specifically. If iPlayer interstitials can be seen as a mark of
the BBC’s unfolding ‘metacommentary’ on online TV in the 2010s, this article connects
work on ephemeral media within TV junctions to a wider body of scholarship that
considers how promotional and advertising materials contribute to the social construc-
tion of new technology. Within the field of TV studies, this includes Lynn Spigel’s
(1992) seminal analysis of the popular response to new TV technologies in the formative
years of the medium but also work that examines how industrial discourses associated
with digital delivery have produced vernaculars around new media technology and
consumption practice. Analysing the introduction of radio, TV and digital media into the
home during the 20th century, William Boddy suggests that ‘ephemeral television
commercials can illuminate some of the wider issues involved in the take-up of new
domestic electronic media since they typically enact dense and affective scenarios of
socially embedded technologies’ (2004: 24). Boddy is concerned with examining how
changes in the forms and uses of electronic media, principally in the United States, have
‘served to incarnate and condense wider social tensions around the shifting definitions of public and private space, the roles of men and women inside and outside the home, and the construction of personal and national identity’ (2004: 4). Promotional materials become a key resource in this context, a site for examining what Boddy calls the ‘popular imagination’ of new communication technologies in particular markets.

Analysing developments in convergence culture, Chuck Tryon turns similarly to promotional materials, considering how advertisements by US cable TV companies and mobile media firms ‘imagined platform mobility’ in the 2000s. Examining tropes of mobility, flexibility and convenience, Tryon considers how promotional texts helped ‘to naturalize new viewing platforms, while also showing how they will enable users to transcend the limitations of current media technologies’ (2012: 294). Focusing on the same period, Max Dawson (2014) examines commercials for digital video recording (DVR) platforms such as TiVO in the 2000s; he identifies linear TV ads as one of a number of discursive sites that helped develop the proposition of DVR technology ‘rationalizing’ the act of watching TV, making it more efficient and productive as a leisure activity. While Tryon suggests that audiences were given representations of how digital screen technologies could be incorporated into daily life as a way to minimise their potential disruption to traditional viewing habits, Dawson sees a more extensive ideological project in DVR advertising at the turn of the 21st century; he suggests that digital TV technologies inspired fantasies of watching TV ‘faster’ and ‘better’, something he connects with neo-liberal social ideals. In different ways, Boddy, Tryon and Dawson examine the discursive function of ephemeral advertising materials in constructing TV’s digital present, something that Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson (2015) develop more broadly in their study of promotional screen content (idents, promos, trailers, digital shorts, branded entertainment) and the way that this content imagined transformations reshaping media culture across the connected fields of mobile communication, TV, film and live events in the late 2000s and early 2010s.

This article focuses on the promotional imagination of BBC iPlayer between 2010 and 2015, corresponding with a moment when the BBC was navigating its role as a digital public service broadcaster. Responding in 2009 to a government report called *Digital Britain* which laid out plans for developing digital infrastructure and participation in the United Kingdom, the BBC described its role ‘not just in developing digital technologies, but in making them an everyday experience for tens of millions of Britons’ (BBC, 2009: 3). In the context of government policy measures to develop and enable the social and economic potentialities of ‘being digital’ (Carter, 2009), technologies like iPlayer were positioned by the BBC as strategic in helping drive broadband take-up and the market of mobile and online TV. Of course, iPlayer was not the only development in the nascent field of online TV distribution. While major networks in the free-to-air (ITV, Channel 4) and pay-TV (Sky, Virgin Media) markets all developed catch-up and video-on-demand (VOD) services in the second half of the 2000s, hybrid digital TV and broadband services such as BT Vision and stand-alone providers like Netflix and Amazon became powerful new players in the subscription VOD market. These services were often positioned through extensive promotional campaigns. Surveying the discipline of TV marketing and the strategies used by on-demand brands to build consumer
affinity in the age of Internet TV, Andy Bryant and Charlie Mawer note that promotional campaigns for providers like Netflix and Sky have often focused ‘not so much on the programme content but on the changing ways people can view it’ (2016: 311). Illustrated by marketing campaigns that emphasise viewing possibilities like simultaneous episode release (Netflix) and TV box-set availability (Sky) – captured in Netflix’s wry campaign tagline in 2015 ‘Binge Responsibly’ – iPlayer promos such as ‘download something good before you go’ were one of a number of brand appeals used by media companies to stake turf in the emerging market of online TV.

Considering the BBC’s move to become a ‘digital destination’ in the 2000s, Niki Strange (2011) notes the multitude of messages and calls to action that began to appear in programme end credits in the mid-2000s. Drawing attention to end credit ‘windowing’ and the use of interactive graphics such as the BBC’s Red Button, she examines the way that online and interactive appeals in the ‘screen real estate’ of end credits envisaged a transforming audience, one inclined to pursue onward journeys to other types of (digital) content. Similarly, Catherine Johnson points to the increasing significance of spatial, as well as temporal, metaphors in the way that broadcast flow has been structured and presented through BBC TV junctions in the 2000s, visually representing ‘the parallel journeys that the viewer could take to watch television programmes across different channels or platforms’ (2013: 31). Since 2007, the iPlayer logo and ‘play’ symbol has become part of the BBC’s spatial and temporal address; it has been used in end credits as a reminder of programme availability through catch-up but also as a call to action, encouraging audiences to engage with content extensions and interactive services as part of the BBC’s digital offer.1 If, as Daniel Chamberlain contends, media interfaces ‘have offered personalization and control as a challenge to liveness and flow as the dominant ontologies and ideologies of contemporary entertainment media’ (2011: 251), the heightened visibility of iPlayer logos and promos on terrestrial screens has become a mark of this ‘challenge’; they draw attention to a process where the ontology of TV has been promoted as moving between broadcasting flow and digital database.

More specifically, the presence of iPlayer logos and promos points to the way that ‘media paratexts’ surround iPlayer and create interpretive frames for the service. Analysing the function of paratexts such as trailers, intros, promos, podcasts, DVD extras and merchandise, Jonathan Gray suggests that these ancillary and seemingly peripheral materials play a constitutive role in creating meaning for entertainment media, helping audiences to anticipate, interpret and engage with movies and TV shows. However, media paratexts also help frame the meaning of the platforms that distribute, aggregate and curate film and TV content. Gray suggests that paratexts ‘attempt to create interpretive communities and hermeneutic recipes for daily living in a media-saturated world’ (2010: 36). On these terms, iPlayer interstitials have established themselves as a means of creating ‘hermeneutic recipes’ for living with the new experiences of TV in the digital era, specifically as delivered by the BBC.

This brings to the fore bespoke on-air promos that have appeared in the BBC’s broadcast schedule. Forming the basis of marketing campaigns which have been developed and extended through digital media, iPlayer interstitials range from fleeting 10-second teasers (such as ‘download something good before you go’) to 30-
40-second trailers that enact or offer tutorials in iPlayer use. In addition, minute-long promos have been used to tell a brand story (‘always there when you need us’, ‘if you love something let it show’). In the remainder of this essay, I look at four key on-air promos shown across BBC channels in the 2010s, which demonstrate transitions in the BBC’s representation of iPlayer. It is not my intention to provide an exhaustive account of the creative genesis of these promos or provide a detailed discussion of their production history within and between BBC marketing teams and the promotional intermediaries that have made them. Instead, I use an industrial–textual method to consider the BBC’s promotional mediation of iPlayer. Combining interviews with senior BBC executives responsible for the development and marketing of BBC iPlayer as a product, and textual analysis of signature on-air promos, I argue that iPlayer interstitials reveal vernacular shifts that encapsulate the BBC’s attempt in the 2010s to broaden the service within mainstream use and account for audience (as well as political) ‘need states’.

**Pink portals, mainstream mums and recommendations of love: iPlayer interstitials**

The history of BBC iPlayer is tied in policy terms to the review of the Corporation’s charter that took place between 2003 and 2006, the government process that reviews the role of the BBC and its right to collect the license fee from the British public. Following proposals in 2003 by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport that the sixth ‘core purpose’ of the BBC was ‘building digital Britain’, the 2006 charter review gave the Corporation responsibility for ‘helping to deliver to the public the benefit of emerging communications technologies and services’ (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2006: 3). iPlayer became a key BBC service in this context and expressed the BBC’s public service role as a ‘trusted guide’ within the potentially disruptive world of digital distribution. Launched on Christmas Day in 2007, BBC iPlayer initially provided access to broadcast TV through a 7-day catch-up service delivered through personal computers (PCs). By the time of the ‘download something good’ campaign in 2014, however, iPlayer had developed across four screens (mobile, tablet, PC and TV) and over 1200 devices and was receiving 10 million user ‘requests’ per day in the United Kingdom (BBC, 2014). As Johnson and Grainge discuss elsewhere, iPlayer was developed as a hybrid TV-digital product in the 2010s and became central to the BBC’s attempt to understand and articulate its role as a digital broadcaster (2018). While BBC iPlayer accounted for just 2–3% of all BBC audience viewing in 2014, reflecting the endurance of live broadcast TV in the United Kingdom, the Corporation’s on-demand service had developed a powerful brand presence in British media life. Indeed, its promotional presence was such that a YouGov poll named BBC iPlayer the United Kingdom’s number one brand in terms of consumer perception in 2013, ahead of Samsung (2nd), John Lewis (3rd), BBC.co.uk (6th), YouTube (7th) and Marks & Spencer (8th).

Between 2006 and 2015, the BBC’s share of the broadcast market fell from 40% to 25% (Higgins, 2015: 223). This gave rise to searching questions about the meaning and identity of public service broadcasting in a digital world. For Tony Hall, who assumed
the position of BBC Director-General in 2013, BBC iPlayer was central to the Corporation’s digital future. Rather than a catch-up service offering extended windows for linear broadcast content, iPlayer was increasingly conceived by BBC managers in the 2010s as an entertainment destination in its own right, a personalized on-demand service described by Hall as ‘the front door to many people to the whole BBC’ (Hall, 2013). While the embrace of online TV was mirrored by other UK broadcasters with a public service remit – ITV announcing in 2014 a digital strategy for developing ITV Player as a destination for live TV viewing following growth in the use of its VOD service, and Channel 4 relaunching its on-demand service 4oD as an integrated brand platform called All 4 in the same year – iPlayer became, and to a large extent remains, the most prominent embodiment of TV’s interface with digital in the United Kingdom. In this respect, it provides an appropriate focus for considering the role that interstitials play in constructing and explaining the value of (online) TV to the viewing public.

According to Elizabeth Evans and Paul McDonald, BBC iPlayer and Channel 4’s equivalent on-demand service All 4 are the most common platforms for digital distribution in the United Kingdom. They note that ‘during intense industrial change, the established broadcasters act as a signal of consistency and predictability in a moment of upheaval in the way that audiences can engage with media texts’ (2014: 167). It is in this context that the promotional address of established broadcasters like the BBC become significant. Writing from a practitioner perspective, Bryant and Mawer note that ‘one of the biggest debates in television marketing these days is about the ways that brand portfolios and hierarchies work best in the on-demand space’ (2016: 305). For broadcasters like the BBC and Channel 4, this debate connects to questions about the continued role of channel brands and how on-demand services provide a new curatorial approach to content. More broadly, however, the challenge of marketing on-demand TV links to emerging/residual patterns of media use in the culture of ‘connected viewing’ (Holt and Sanson, 2014), the drive to increase brand awareness for iPlayer accompanied by questions of how to get audiences to think of the service as relevant to their viewing needs. The scope of this challenge was reflected in the BBC’s development strategy for iPlayer between 2010 and 2014, known internally as the ‘three beyonds’ – ‘beyond PC, beyond catch-up, beyond the early-adopter’ (Dan Taylor-Watt, interview, 16 December 2014).

Reflecting on the task of marketing iPlayer, the BBC’s audience research manager for the service, Alison Button, commented in 2014:

iPlayer is extremely difficult to market because if you show what it does, it looks like you’re trying to advertise Doctor Who and EastEnders – people get hung up with the visuals of the content [iPlayer] has got – and if you try and focus on the features it sounds like a geeky advert for a website with a lot of technical lists and that is not what it is either. So it is really hard to get across. (Interview, 16 December 2014)

Button’s point of reference in making this observation was a marketing campaign in 2010 that wedded the visuals of BBC content to images of technological wonder. This campaign used the motif of the digital portal to enact the discovery of iPlayer’s ‘next level’; the campaign depicted people (mostly in their 20s and 30s) stepping and jumping
through a mystical pink gateway that hovered magically in city streets, across the face of buildings, and in a forest outside a tent (Figure 1).

In metaphoric terms, the depiction of iPlayer as a ‘pink portal’ was of its time. Indeed, Will Brooker suggests that the representation of digital platforms within popular narratives in the late 2000s often used the imagery and language of portals as a means of ‘training us in the uses of digital technology and emphasizing the social mastery that results from understanding the world as data, and learning to read it, navigate it and manipulate it’ (2010: 554). By this account, the pink portal trailers imagined the BBC as a world of data, an environment that could be read, navigated and manipulated by jumping through iPlayer’s digital threshold. Foregrounding the facility of iPlayer to recommend programmes to friends online and remember personal favourites, iPlayer was portrayed as an electronic cosmos. The promos depicted pink auroras containing the literal stars of the BBC’s prime time schedule – digital constellations that could be touched and shared by anyone stepping into the BBC’s online universe. Reminding audiences of the public service value of this digital experience, the promos finished with the strapline ‘your very own BBC’. The ‘next level’ campaign was the first to position iPlayer as an entertainment destination. Until this point, iPlayer had been figured as a device for catch-up, captured in the marketing tagline ‘making the unmissable unmissable’. Following significant growth in iPlayer use in the late 2000s, however, driven by the development of high-speed broadband, the BBC looked to extend and develop iPlayer as something more than a streaming service. Its representation as a portal emphasised multiple functions such as favourites, recommendations, downloading and parental lock that enabled prospective new ways of encountering BBC content. However, Button notes that the next level campaign didn’t ‘cut through’ in marketing terms,
either in the way that it sought to convey iPlayer in experiential terms or in communicating with audiences beyond early-adopting (male) users. This led to alternative strategies in the way that the BBC sought to ‘get across’ iPlayer in the design of on-air promos.

The promotional imagination of iPlayer would shift in the early 2010s as managerial discourse at the BBC focused on the ‘three beyonds’ strategy. This would correlate with the extension of iPlayer as a multiplatform device and to a second major wave of iPlayer growth, this time driven by the explosion of multiscreen media associated with tablets and smartphones. The mobile app for iPlayer, launched in 2011, was downloaded 28 million times in its first 3 years and by March 2012 iPlayer was being used by 40% of online UK adults (BBC, 2014). Accordingly, a 40-second trailer was broadcast in the BBC schedule in 2012 called ‘beyond the computer’. Moving away from the imagery of portals, the promo represented the play logo of iPlayer descending onto mobile screen devices being used in buildings and spaces across the United Kingdom. Set to a ballad with the lyric ‘I’ve been searching all my days’, the play logo dropped quietly onto buses, beach huts, canal boats, office blocks, bus stops, holiday homes, windmills, council flats, terraced houses, even portable toilets. Contemplative in tone, the trailer ended with a shot of a twinkling urban night sky with multiple pink logos falling to the ground.

Released in the year of the final switchover from analogue to digital terrestrial TV in the United Kingdom, ‘beyond the computer’ depicted iPlayer as something existing in the national ether (Figure 2). In the same period that households in the United Kingdom were being trained through government information leaflets and TV campaigns to prepare for digital switchover, the promo vernacularized the discourse of ‘digital Britain’. One of a number of images of platform mobility developed by TV and telecommunication companies in this period (Tryon, 2012), ‘beyond the computer’ gave mobile digital culture a public service imprimatur. Promoting the ability to watch ‘your favourite BBC programmes wherever and whenever you want to’, the ad mapped the BBC’s world of data onto British spaces and spectrums. Although bearing out Chuck

Figure 2. ‘Beyond the computer’ (2012).
Tryon’s observation that ‘media mobility promotes a more fragmented, individualized notion of spectatorship’ (2012: 288), iPlayer promos conveyed digital connectivity as a project of collective national bearing. According to the BBC, ‘a fully connected digital Britain could be a nation in which everyone, irrespective of income or circumstance, could benefit from the social, cultural, economic and practical benefits of the new digital environment’ (2009: 3). ‘Beyond the computer’ offered spatialized images of these ‘practical benefits’, audiences empowered to access BBC content according to their own schedules, even in a portaloo if they so wished.

The promo did not contain images of BBC content or focus on technical features. Instead of representing iPlayer as a luminous gateway that people jumped through, the promo accentuated the effortless portability of the service on tablets and mobile phones. Meanwhile it depicted users ‘beyond the early-adopter’, moving away from twenty-somethings and gadget-loving men and towards camera shots and close-ups of women, the last image of the promo showing a middle-aged woman viewing her tablet alone, smiling contentedly in bed. If, as William Boddy argues, digital technology is often inflected with the rhetorical project of remasculinizing the TV apparatus through fantasies of power and control (2004: 73), ‘beyond the computer’ mapped this sense of control more overtly to the public and private needs of female users. This gendering would continue in subsequent iPlayer interstitials, the female user becoming a discrete lens used in BBC marketing to imagine and drive mainstream take-up of the service.

Expanding mainstream usage of iPlayer was a key objective for the BBC in the 2010s. For those responsible for iPlayer strategy at the BBC, the fact that iPlayer accounted for under 3% of all BBC audience viewing signalled a problematic gap between high brand awareness and actual use among mainstream audiences. While rebutting claims that iPlayer’s audience had plateaued in 2015, the Head of BBC iPlayer, Dan Taylor-Watt (2015), remarked in a blog post:

the challenge for us is to get everyone using iPlayer – whether that’s to make the journey to work better, the holiday in the middle of no-where in the rain more enjoyable or just easily catch-up on what you’ve missed from the comfort of your sofa.

This rhetoric was also used by Victoria Jaye (head of TV content, BBC iPlayer) who, at the time of writing, leads the ‘product development group’ for iPlayer within the BBC along with Taylor-Watt. As early as 2012, Jaye explained her view that getting everyone to use iPlayer meant communicating the relevance, rather than simply the availability, of iPlayer to audiences. She commented:

I have always said that to get mainstream audiences into iPlayer, we have to answer a need for them... we have got to solve their entertainment needs rather than present them with new, clever technology... Brand awareness of iPlayer is very high in the UK, but large sections of the population still don’t use us regularly, so why is there the gap? They (mainstream audiences) just don’t think it is relevant to their entertainment needs and I think that is the thing we have got to crack. We want iPlayer to be a daily habit for audiences. Promotion is a key part of getting audiences to think iPlayer is the place where they want to go first, for the best entertainment. (Interview, 2 July 2012)
By Jaye’s account, ‘beyond the computer’ was a brand awareness trailer. In this respect, it was significant in reminding broadcast viewers about the availability of the service but not as focused on communicating relevance, of helping ‘big television audiences understand the value that is delivered to their viewing television, how it transforms it and enables it on more of their terms’ (interview, 2 July 2012). The next major campaign focused more purposefully on what Jaye calls the ‘need states’ of audiences (interview, 16 December 2014).

The language of need states brings with it questions of how media organizations are compelled to think about their audience. Analysing industry conceptions of contemporary media audiences, Philip Napoli notes that ‘recent years have seen a tremendous amount of activity in terms of efforts to define, redefine, and empirically capture those aspects of the media audience that should matter most to participants in the audience marketplace’ (2010: 113). This point is reflected in the varying research methods used by the BBC to measure the iPlayer audience. Alison Button notes that:

> the world of online is fantastic at giving you very quick data of a certain type, so you can tell how many people have been using it, how many devices are using it and what they’re watching on iPlayer but you need to know what are those people like and how is it of value to them and is it complementing their linear TV viewing or not? (Interview, 16 December 2014)

Quantitative data on browsing, user requests and video playback have been matched in this way by qualitative survey data on the habits and preferences of particular audience segments. Button makes the point that, since the launch of iPlayer, audience research has had a shaping influence on both the design and marketing of the service as a product. This included a major redesign of iPlayer in 2014 and an accompanying promotional campaign launched in March of that year. Rather than a ballad to platform mobility, the on-air promo that accompanied the launch of the redesigned iPlayer identified ‘moments and opportunities’ where iPlayer could fit into people’s daily lives. Focusing on what the BBC audience and marketing team for iPlayer referred to as ‘mainstream mums’, the campaign enacted a representational shift in iPlayer promotion in the mid-2010s, framing the service in relation to quotidian moments in British life.

The focus on mainstream mums developed from audience and marketing analysis by the BBC that used questionnaire data to identify six main demographic segments of the iPlayer audience. These were based on life stage and included the segments 16–24, 25–39 (with and without children), 40–55 (men and women) and 55+. Mainstream mums became a key target group within this breakdown and described females ‘in their thirties and forties who have probably got some kids, have the least time because they are juggling work and children and families and everything. And they often have no control of the remote because either dad has got it or the kids have got it’ (Alison Button, interview, 16 December 2014). As an audience persona, mainstream mums were seen to represent a group ‘who just think it [iPlayer] is not for them... because they think it is a bit geeky or they think they have to be a super user on the phone’ (Alison Button, interview, 16 December 2014). This provided the context for a 60-second TV promo called ‘always there when you need it’ which developed a sense of BBC iPlayer as a tool,
friend and form of support. Focusing on the 25–39 segment (with children) – with the 16–24 segment figured, in marketing parlance, as ‘the halo’ – the promo used The Smith’s accessible, uptempo hit ‘This Charming Man’ to code a depiction of bustling, on the go, iconoclastically British life.

In narrative terms, ‘always there when you need it’ enacted a range of scenes corresponding with prospective iPlayer ‘moments’ (Figure 3). These included, to name just four, ‘half term when you need to get things done’ (depicting a mother on the phone with children running noisily around the table), ‘the breakroom where no one talks to each other’ (two colleagues of different generations uneasily sharing lunchtime), ‘waiting for your mates to wake up after a sleepover at his house’ (a young boy gazing wistfully out of a bedroom window) and ‘Dad’s total domination of the remote’ (a father wrestling the TV remote from his three young daughters). While the trailer played on linear TV, other moments more relevant to the 16–24 segment (e.g. a Sunday morning hangover) were extracted and played through digital media. Following on from the ‘download something good’ teasers described at the start of this essay, ‘always there when you need it’ connected iPlayer with scenarios of social and familial need. Unlike ‘beyond the computer’ which dwelt on individualized images of platform mobility, ‘download before you go’ and ‘always there when you need it’ imagined scenes where iPlayer could fit into the time-pressed lives of people negotiating hectic, harassed, occasionally hungover and sometimes socially awkward moments of the day. Without showing a single screen device, the promo focused on iPlayer’s capacity to meet entertainment needs and become a ‘daily habit’ within fleeting everyday moments.

According to Max Dawson, digital TV technologies in the United States became linked in the 2000s to prevailing discourses of attention management. He suggests that digital video recorders, in particular, were ‘reimagined as a time-management tool, a defence against distraction, an educational instrument or parenting aid, and the DVR owner as an enterprising investor in her own time and attention’ (2014: 225). In many ways, ‘download before you go’ and ‘always there when you need it’ accurately fit this description in their various depictions of dead travel time, and situations where children...
need occupying. Where Dawson connects promotional discourses around the DVR to wider neo-liberal ideologies, however – notably the reflexive project of learning how to allocate attention profitably – I would argue that the promotional imagination of iPlayer is parsed differently in these and other trailers. In discursive terms, iPlayer promos have been used to make an argument for the public value of the BBC. There is nothing new or surprising in this. As Catherine Johnson demonstrates in her analysis of the adoption of branding by the BBC and Channel 4 since the 1980s, marketing and branding have been used by public service broadcasters in the United Kingdom to explain and communicate their public service values in response to market-oriented changes in the broadcast landscape. Rather than undermine public service broadcasting, or antithetical to its purpose, Johnson illustrates how branding has become ‘a necessary strategy in an increasingly commercial environment’ (2012: 109), a complex process that helps frame engagement, shape expectations and construct the terms with which audiences talk about a service or use a product.

As a way of framing engagement with the BBC, Alison Button suggests (echoing comments by Victoria Jaye) that the tactical purpose of ‘always there when you need it’ was to focus on ‘the people who have all the right kit and are easily competent to do it and yet they’re not seeing that they could get value from the BBC and catch up on the programmes they love’ (interview, 16 December 2014). The language of value invoked here was widely used at the BBC between the charter reviews of 2006 and 2016. According to Niki Strange, ‘public value’ was adopted wholesale by the BBC in the 2000s ‘as a notion for achieving efficient public management’ (2011: 135). In one sense, the managerial goal of maximizing the efficient delivery and consumption of BBC content can be seen to connect with the ideology of neo-liberalism mapped by Dawson. At the same time, what Strange calls the BBC’s attempt to ‘reframe notions of public service as “public value” in the digital age’ (2011: 135) develops from wider attempts to rationalize and protect the BBC from the assault of hostile commercial rivals and a Conservative government seemingly intent on reducing its size. Reflecting long-established tussles between the BBC and successive Conservative governments eager to reassess the BBC’s funding model and license fee (a high-water mark being the establishment of the Peacock Committee by Margaret Thatcher’s government in 1985), attacks on the BBC became newly acute in the years leading up to charter review in 2016, and in ways that had a bearing on promotional discourse around BBC iPlayer.

This was signalled by the publication of a government green paper in July 2015 that acted as a post-election, pre-charter broadside. In what can be seen as an early attempt by the newly elected Conservative Party to diminish the BBC’s role and operations as a public service broadcaster, the green paper presented a number of proposals designed to narrow the BBC’s scope. This included the suggestion that the Corporation no longer make popular entertainment but, instead, restrict itself to highbrow programming supplied less readily by commercial broadcasters. It is in this context that a pan-BBC promotional campaign called ‘if you love something let it show’ took on particular discursive resonance, celebrating the BBC as a provider of popular entertainment for all. Released four months before the green paper, and broadcast through 2015, the 60-second promo featured a cover of The Beatles’ ‘All you need is love’ and conveyed BBC content
in terms of affect. In narrative terms, the promo captured people in moments of happiness, pride, absorption and joy (Figure 4). This included a father carrying his daughter to bed, a child cooking, siblings at play in the kitchen, a man avoiding football scores in a shop window, four twenty-something girls dancing in a bedroom, an elderly Afro-Caribbean man conducting music while listening to headphones, another pensioner sitting proudly on a lawnmower and a grey-haired couple ballroom dancing. As the chorus of the song builds, a red heart appeared on screen with the name of BBC content relevant to the image – ♥ CBeebies storytime app, ♥ Bake Off, ♥ Doctor Who, ♥ Match of the Day, ♥ Annie Mac, ♥ The Proms, ♥ Gardeners’ World, ♥ Strictly. The campaign was accompanied by interstitial videos of celebrities explaining BBC programmes they love, and a website curating collections of ‘most loved’ programmes. These collections were based on ratings, online data and social media, but also interactive clicks made through a heart button included within programme information pages on BBC iPlayer.

The core purpose of the campaign was to facilitate practices of sharing recommendations through iPlayer. This was linked to an initiative called ‘myBBC’ launched by the Corporation in March 2015 to encourage audiences to sign in when using BBC online services. At one level, ‘if you love something’ helped foreground the BBC’s focus on data as a mechanism of delivering more personalized BBC content. According to Bryant and Mawer the new data-enabled relationship between TV service providers and audiences ‘is an exciting prospect for TV marketers because it offers the opportunity for “programmatic” promotion: put simply, using data to serve messages that will be more relevant and valuable for consumers’ (2016: 314). The prominent heart-shaped icon within the BBC promo served as a ‘call to action’ within this personalized, more ‘programmatic’ mode of TV marketing. By inviting viewers to use the love button and discover the associated website and hashtag, the campaign was designed to connect iPlayer to social media behaviours and an ethos of ‘public service recommendation’. Situating the BBC’s place in the digital present, the promo was an articulation of Tony Hall’s mission statement for the BBC in the Internet era, in particular the ambition to
‘reinvent public service broadcasting through data’ (Hall, 2015). At the same time, however, the promo inscribed values of universality and mixed programming in its symbolic inscription of BBC content. Set to a cover version of one of the Beatles’ most recognisable songs, the promo referenced programmes and enacted quotidian scenes that conveyed a sense of common ‘feeling’ for the BBC. Reminiscent of the BBC’s evangelical ‘Perfect Day’ promo in 1997 – released in a previous election year to shore up popular support for the BBC and its funding model – the affectivity of the promo anticipated tempestuous political winds. With charter review looming, the promo would serve the BBC’s own political need states in a moment when the Corporation’s public service identity – specifically the BBC’s role providing shared viewing experiences around popular entertainment – was being challenged by newly vituperative government attacks.

The on-air promos discussed in this essay form part of a lineage of marketing texts that have been used by the BBC to help justify the Corporation’s value and unique funding arrangement to government and the viewing public. By examining four key paratexts between 2010 and 2015, I have traced shifts in the marketing address of iPlayer in a period when the BBC was striving to communicate its role as a digital broadcaster. Initially marketing iPlayer in 2007 through a focus on catch-up, the BBC sought in the 2010s to extend the meaning of the service as a mainstream entertainment destination. This was signalled by a transition from the metaphor of portals and the rhetoric of platform mobility to a narrative emphasis on need states. The industry language of need states, it should be said, was not specific to the BBC; it was used broadly among UK TV executives in the 2010s to consider the experience of watching TV in the digital era. Reflecting on the endurance of channel brands, ITV’s marketing and Research Director Rufus Radcliffe suggested in 2015:

> what viewers have is different need states where they’re looking for different experiences and different things. There is definitely a very strong need state, which is ‘I don’t want to be the scheduler here and I would like to enjoy a live experience with millions of other people through a channel brand’. (cited in Bryant and Mawer, 2016: 304)

The marketing of iPlayer anticipated ‘different need states’ more attuned to the platform economy, on-air promos enacting the role of the service within everyday moments where the affordances of on-demand TV were seen to have relevance and value. Writing about the ‘culture of connectivity’, José van Dijck suggests that ‘many of the habits that have recently become permeated by social media platforms used to be informal and ephemeral manifestations of social life’ (2013: 6). On these terms, campaigns like ‘if you love something let it show’ would foreground ephemeral moments in daily life as a means of promoting the ‘platformed sociality’ of iPlayer.

Considering the transition from analogue to digital TV since the late 1990s, William Boddy points to ongoing uncertainty about TV’s ‘role as signifier of national identity (and public service broadcasting’s political rationale in the UK and elsewhere), its ontology of liveness and photographic realism, and its place as a consumer product within the gendered household’ (2004: 124). In different ways, iPlayer promos articulate
these questions of national identity, media ontology and gendered domestic (and non-domestic) practice. Along with it, they express the attempt by the BBC to frame the Corporation’s public service rationale in a digital world. If, as Charlotte Higgins suggests, the BBC stands in the 2010s as ‘both beloved institution and cultural and political battleground’ (2015: 212), iPlayer promos help illuminate not only the social construction of on-demand TV in the UK market but also the ongoing negotiation of the BBC’s beloved-cum-battleground presence in British media life. As a cultural and critical resource, on-air promos for BBC iPlayer provide their own ‘moment and opportunity’ to consider how ephemeral TV interstitials have helped to position the BBC’s digital relevance and social role in an age of public service media.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes
1. In 2013, for example, iPlayer logos signalled initiatives such as BBC Playlister, a personal music platform enabling audiences to create playlists from BBC radio and television (TV) content. Similarly, in 2014, iPlayer was positioned as the gateway to BBC iWonder, newly launched interactive educational guides developed around programme-related themes.
2. All the trailers discussed were made by the BBC’s roster agencies for promotional work, which between 2005 and 2015 included Red Bee Media, RKCR/Y&R and Karmarama (Grainge and Johnson 2015: 119–147).
3. According to research by Ofcom, 89% of all TV viewing was live in 2013 (Ofcom 2014: 141).
4. This redesign remodelled the architecture of iPlayer so that it maintained a consistent look across screen devices and introduced smarter search and image-led navigation within its interface. This responded to audience research that suggested that viewers sought a simpler, and more consistent, user experience across platforms. In editorial terms, the redesign also developed features like online first commissions and collections of curated programming (see Johnson and Grainge, 2018).

References
BBC (2014) Introducing the new BBC iPlayer – BBC iPlayer 2014 Press Launch. 11 March. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AdUHw_sSw0 (accessed 10 December 2014).
BBC (2009) Digital Britain: The BBC’s Role, The BBC Executive’s Response to Digital Britain – The Interim Report, March. London: BBC.
Bennett J and Strange N (2014) Linear legacies: managing the multiplatform production process. In: Johnson D, Kompare D and Santo A (eds) Making Media Work. New York: New University Press, pp. 63–89.
Boddy W (2004) New Media and Popular Imagination. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Brooker W (2010) ‘Now you’re thinking with portals’: media training for a digital world. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13(6): 553–573.

Bryant A and Mawer C (2016) *The TV Brand Builders*. London: Kogan Page.

Carter S (2009) *Digital Britain*. London: HM Government, Department of Business Innovation & Skills and Department for Culture, Media & Sport.

Chamberlain D (2011) Scripted spaces: television interfaces and the non-places of asynchronous entertainment. In: Bennett J and Strange N (eds) *Television as Digital Media*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 230–254.

Dawson M (2014) Rationalizing television in the USA: neoliberalism, the attention economy and the digital video recorder. *Screen* 55(2): 221–237.

Department for Culture, Media & Sport (2006) *Broadcasting: Copy of the Royal Charter for the Continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation*. London: The Stationary Office.

Ellis J (2011) Interstitials: how the ‘bits in between’ define the programmes. In: Grainge P (ed) *Ephemeral Media: Transitory Screen Culture from Television to YouTube*. London: British Film Institute, pp. 59–69.

Evans E and McDonald P (2014) Online distribution of film and television in the UK: behaviour, taste, and value. In: Holt J and Sanson K (eds) *Connected Viewing*. New York: Routledge, pp. 158–179.

Grainge P and Johnson C (2015) *Promotional Screen Industries*. London: Routledge.

Grainge P (ed) (2011) *Ephemeral Media: Transitory Screen Culture from Television to YouTube*. London: British Film Institute.

Gray J (2010) *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and other Media Paratexts*. New York: New York University Press.

Hall T (2015) The BBC in the Internet Era. Speech delivered at New Broadcasting House, 2 March. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/speeches/2015/tony-hall-bbc-internet-era (accessed 4 June 2015).

Hall T (2013) Where Next? Speech delivered at BBC Radio Theatre, 8 October. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/speeches/2013/tony-hall-vision.html (accessed 4 May 2015).

Higgins C (2015) *This New Noise: The Extraordinary Birth and Troubled Life of the BBC*. London: Guardian Books.

Holt J and Sanson K (eds) (2014) *Connected Viewing: Selling, Streaming & Sharing in the Digital Era*. New York: Routledge.

Johnson C (2013) The continuity of ‘continuity’: flow and the changing experience of watching broadcast television. *Key Words* 11(3): 23–39.

Johnson C (2012) *Branding Television*. London: Routledge.

Johnson C and Grainge P (2018) From catch-up TV to online TV: digital broadcasting and the case of BBC iPlayer. *Screen* forthcoming.

Napoli P (2010) *Audience Evolution: New Technologies and the Transformation of Media Audiences*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Ofcom (2014) *The Communications Market 2014*. Available at: http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/cm14/UK_2.pdf (accessed 1 August 2015).

Spigel L (1992) *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Strange N (2011) Multiplatforming public service: The BBC’s ‘bundled project’. In: Bennett J and Strange N (eds) *Television as Digital Media*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 132–157.

Taylor-Watt D (2015) Putting BBC iPlayer performance in context, 29 May. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/aboutthebbc/entries/6be54086-c2e4-4e85-a777-0fc72be30010 (accessed 30 May 2015).
Tryon C (2012) Make any room for your TV: digital delivery and media mobility. Screen 53(3): 287–300.

van Dijck J (2013) The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Author biography**

Paul Grainge is a professor of film and television studies at the University of Nottingham. His books include *Promotional Screen Industries* (co-authored with Catherine Johnson) (2015), *Ephemeral Media: Transitory Screen Culture from Television to YouTube* (ed.) (2011), *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age* (2008), *Film Histories: An Introduction and Reader* (eds) (2007), *Memory and Popular Film* (ed.) (2003) and *Monochrome Memories* (2002).