

Quiz shows – history and development

Like any media product, quiz shows have developed in response to audience expectations, social values and what technology is available. Quiz shows both reflect and contribute to their society.

1930s ~ Radio and The Depression

Before TV was invented, quiz shows were broadcast on the radio. The question and answer format worked well on the radio. Some people point to quiz shows early beginning in 1932, on 740 KTRH-Am in Houston, USA. The programme was called **Vox Pop**. The presenter, Parks Johnson, asked people in the street a question. If they got the question right, they got a small prize. This simple beginning proved popular and other shows soon followed.

In 1936 **Professor Quiz** started, again on American radio, on CBS. The show invited guests on, and they asked the Professor a question. If the presenter, 'Professor Quiz' didn't know the answer, the guest won \$25.

These early shows provided a mix of entertainment and knowledge. The addition of a cash prize was especially popular in 1930s America, which was suffering from The Great Depression. Many people were unemployed, the financial situation was bleak. A little light relief and the chance to win some money was greatly valued in these dark days.

1950s ~ The Rise and Rise of Television

In 1950 only 9% of households in America had a television. By 1960, nearly 90% of households had a television. The 1950s was the decade when television took over, going from a rare luxury to an affordable 'must-have' in just ten years. In these early days of television, it was common to transfer successful radio shows to television. They already had a tried and tested formula and a ready made audience.

In 1954, the Supreme Court in America ruled that quiz shows were not a form of gambling. This meant that quiz shows could be shown on television.

Quiz shows were cheap and easy to transfer. The sets were simple, the casts were small, the format was straightforward, and the prospect of big money prizes drew in the audience. A lot of the prizes were donated by manufacturers in return for plugs and free advertising. A radio show called **Take It or Leave It**, which had the prize of \$64 transferred to TV in 1955 and became **The \$64,000 Question**. This was huge amount of money in the 1950s. At this time, a factory worker

could expect to earn about \$4000 a year. As well as the prospect of big prizes, the producers also had a few tricks to make the show seem more exciting. Contestants had to stand in an 'isolation booth' to answer questions. Producers would turn off the fans which kept the booth cool. The temperature would rocket, and contestants would begin to sweat. To the audience this looked like the contestants were sweating because of the pressure and tension, making it all seem more dramatic and exciting.

Up to 55 million people tuned in to watch ***The \$64,000 Question*** at its peak. Thousands and thousands of ordinary people wrote in to CBS every week to ask for a place on the show.

America was in the midst of The Cold War with Russia. One feature of this was the race between the two superpowers to develop better and better weapons technology. While quiz shows weren't a direct spin off of this, they did thrive in this time of respect for intellectual achievement. The spectacle of competition, and of one person achieving more highly than all the others and so winning a big prize symbolised the American capitalist system and was in direct opposition to the communist values of Russia and the USSR. Quiz shows represented the zeitgeist – the spectacle of competition and success were what America valued.

TV shows liked to be associated with knowledge and high cultural values. It gave the new medium of TV a certain respectability. But this didn't last long!

In Britain, in the earlier part of the 1950s, TV still had an old-fashioned, respectable feel, and was still strongly influenced by its radio heritage, not yet taking full advantage of the visual aspects of the new medium. The biggest quiz of the time was ***What's My Line?*** which started on the BBC in 1951. It was based on an American show; contestants were chosen from the general public. They would mime their occupation, and the panel members tried to guess it. The involvement of ordinary people, and the celebration of everyday occupations, along with the opportunities for humour offered by the panelist's guesses, named this a popular show, and it achieved audiences of up to 12 million at its peak. The host, Eammon Andrews and the panelists were in the first wave of TV celebrities.

The first commercial station in Britain was launched in 1955. Although its programming had to be: "predominantly British in tone and style and of high quality, and nothing was to be included which offended against good taste or decency or which was likely to encourage or incite to crime or to lead to disorder or to be offensive to public feeling, it did mark a change in British television. The influence of America grew, as British producers looked overseas for ideas and formats to fill the new schedules, and imported American shows, and the ratings war between ITV and the BBC began.

In ***What's My Line***, contestants merely won a scroll – there were no big prizes or cash incentives. However, the new commercial channel introduced ***Double Your Money*** in 1955. Inspired by a radio programme, ***Double Your Money***

offered prizes up to £1000, for the contestants who answered general knowledge questions while sealed inside an isolation booth. The cash prize and spectacle of ordinary people suffering and sweating while answering increasingly difficult questions made for exciting and dramatic viewing, very different from the 'parlour game' atmosphere of the BBC quiz.

'A terrible thing to do to the American people'

said President Eisenhower 1959.

The scandals of corruption and deception blighted quiz shows in the late 1950s. Shows were often sponsored by a single company. The more people who watched, the more that company benefited from exposure. On a lot of quiz shows, the winner came back each week, until they eventually got beaten by someone else. Some contestants were more popular with the viewers than others. More popular contestants got bigger audiences. But how could the sponsors make sure popular contestants stayed on the show for a long time? Simple – give the popular contestants the answers, and give unpopular contestants harder questions.

The most famous case of this was on the quiz show ***Twenty-one***, where Charles Van Doren was coached to be the winner for over twenty weeks in a row. The scandal hit hard. Many careers were ruined. Some people were prosecuted for perjury or obstruction of justice. The story of this scandal has been told in the 1994 film '**Quiz Show**.' Some people tried to argue that as quiz shows are basically just entertainment, it shouldn't matter if they are fixed to make them more exciting. What do you think?

In both Britain and the US, the game shows often reflected a new-found freedom of expression and creativity which was represented by the phrase the 'Swinging Sixties.' It was the era of the teenager and there was a growth in related industries like fashion, music, photography and design. Quiz shows had lost respect and popularity from the scandals in America, and they also seemed rather old-fashioned to the new 'youth culture.' In the 1960s, game shows, rather than quiz shows, became more popular, relying on solving puzzles and playing games, and winning by skill or chance, rather than having extensive knowledge. This also allowed more youthful and less educated contestants to succeed, rather than the older educated person who thrived on knowledge based quiz shows.

University Challenge began in 1962, continuing until 1987, and was revived again in 1994. It asked very hard questions, on topics such as chemistry, physics, science, mathematics, philosophy and literature. While it is hard to see

this now, **University Challenge**, which featured two teams of undergraduate students each week, was part of the youth-orientated programming of the 1960s.

The 1970s and 1980s

It was almost twenty years before the quiz show scandal was forgotten enough for quiz shows to become popular again. Two very different types of quiz became popular in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 70s, the scandals forgotten, knowledge based quizzes such as **Mastermind** were introduced on the BBC. On the other hand, reflecting the rise of consumer culture were shows like **The Sale of the Century** and the newly revived **The Price is Right**. Colour TV was now common, since its introduction in 1967, and this new breed of show had bright, garish sets, often with moving sections, flashing lights, an elaborate scoreboard, loud music and a noisy atmosphere. They were very different from the restrained question and answer formats of the 1950s. In some ways, they celebrated the values and aspirations of the working classes. They were determinedly 'lowbrow' shows, which privileged knowledge of consumer goods and prized abilities such as how to shop quickly. At the same time, in the mid-1980s, viewing figures for **University Challenge** began to fall. It was seen as elitist and 'snobbish.' The contestants were often drawn from Oxford and Cambridge Universities, and the newer universities and the polytechnics rarely featured. It did not tie in to the new emphasis on the working classes or the consumerist desire for big prizes. The show was cancelled in 1987.

Mastermind fared rather better. Beginning, on the BBC in 1972, it had a simple formula that nevertheless created a great deal of tension and drama. The four contestants answered quick-fire questions on a subject of their choice, and then on general knowledge. The rapid pace of questions, and the set design added to the tension. Contestants would sit under a spotlight in a big black chair. The creator of the show was apparently inspired by his experience of being interrogated by the German Gestapo in World War 2, and indeed the sessions were much like an interrogation!

Mastermind's most famous winner was Fred Housego, a London taxi driver. Because of Fred's famous win, beating more traditional types, such as university professors and academics, the show escaped the labelling as elitist that led to the downfall of **University Challenge**, and remained popular and successful throughout the 1980s and much of the 90s.

1990s and 2000s

New technology made the biggest impact here. Multi channels, mobile phones and the internet all grew during the 90s and 2000s. Some conventional big family quiz shows are still popular, but, more and more, quiz shows are a niche market, interactive and multi platform.

Recent successes include the cross-over between quiz and comedy shows, such as **8 Out of 10 Cats**, with its podcast version.

The proliferation of channels and the requirement for smaller audience sections, as well as the nostalgia of the older audience groups, also led to the revival of several shows which had earlier been cancelled or not re-commissioned.

University Challenge returned to television in 1994 with Jeremy Paxman replacing earlier host Bamber Gascoigne. Notably, the show has widened its appeal, and tried to include teams from a wide range of Universities and Colleges. **Mastermind** also returned in 2003 with John Humphrey's replacing Magnus Magnusson, but keeping the famous catchphrase 'I've started so I'll finish.' The programme remained largely the same, although the questions and specialist subjects now include more aspects of popular culture. It also has a spin-off show, **Junior Mastermind**, which started in 2004, tapping into the school-age audience group.

The National Lottery began in 1994, and this spurred an interest in big money programmes. In 1998, **Who Wants to be a Millionaire?** began. If you wanted to appear on the show, you had to call in on a premium rate phone line. This earned the show huge amounts of money. The 'Phone a friend' and 'Ask the audience' features also rely on new technology to work effectively. Contestants answer general knowledge questions in a tense atmosphere, with close ups, stage lighting and dramatic music all adding to the atmosphere. Chris Tarrant, the show's host, asks, 'is that your final answer,' creating further tension, before, after long pauses, he reveals the correct answer. Although a fairly old formula, used before in shows like **The \$64,000** question, the scheduling is innovative, rather than a weekly show, **Millionaire** 'takes over' the airwaves being shown on consecutive nights for its run. It utilises 'event scheduling' where the run of the show becomes an event in itself, much like the yearly **Big Brother**. The format has been shown to hundreds of countries and is one of the most successful all time quiz shows.

More scandals hit the quiz show genre in 2001, although this time the programme makers weren't at fault. Major Charles Ingram, a contestant on **Millionaire**, was accused of cheating. He had accomplices in the audience who would indicate the correct answer by coughing. He, his wife and a friend, were all found guilty of conspiracy at a trial in 2003.

In 2006, all-night call-in quiz shows became popular. Lasting anything from 2 to 4 hours, they earned a huge amount of money for the channels at a relatively 'dead' time in the schedules. Taking **The Mint** as an example, it began in April 2006, and callers were encouraged to call in on premium rate phone lines to answer relatively simple questions for the chance of winning prizes up to £130,000.

Another set of scandals affected quiz shows in 2007. An inquiry into premium rate call-ins and competitions found fairly widespread malpractice, including on **Richard and Judy** and **Blue Peter's** competitions. Although not directly implicated, many competitions and quizzes were cancelled throughout broadcasting to avoid suspicion and negative publicity. In 2007, the BBC suspended all phone-in competitions indefinitely, after incidents involving the faking of competition winners, including during the charity broadcasts **Comic Relief** and **Children in Need**. The channel ITV Play was dropped, and renamed as ITV2 +1. ITV Play's offer of overnight phone-in competition and gaming shows like **The Mint** and **Quizmania** were phased out. Due to all the negative publicity, call rates had dropped significantly, making it uneconomic.

Quizmania is set to return soon, but as a live interactive online quiz game. If it proves successful, this will pave the way for more online live streamed quizzes with interactive participation by the audience.

Questions-

1. Give three examples where social, historical, legal or technological changes have benefitted a particular quiz show or quiz shows in general.
2. Give three examples where social, historical, legal or technological changes have had a negative effect on a particular quiz show or on quiz shows in general.
3. Do you think it is acceptable to fix quiz shows to make them more entertaining?
4. What do you think future quiz shows will be like? How will quiz shows in the future utilise new technologies?