FRIENDS

(Series 1 Episode 1, 1994)

Factsheet 2 - Media Industries, Audiences & Media Contexts

Acknowledgements

Image	Acknowledgement
Friends logo	© Warner Bros

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FRIENDS

(Series 1 Episode 1, 1994)

Component 2: Understanding Forms and Products

Focus Areas:
Media Language
Representation
Media Industries
Audiences
Media contexts

PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Media Industries

The effect of ownership and control of media organisations:

- *Friends* was produced by Warner Brothers, a multinational, mass media conglomerate. It was broadcast on NBC in America and Channel 4 and E4 in the UK. NBC also broadcast other successful sitcoms including *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and *Will and Grace.*
- Channel 4 acquired *Friends* from Sky in 1999 as part of a package including the hospital drama *ER* in a deal worth $200 million.
- Channel 4 has a unique model in that it is a publisher-broadcaster. It has no in-house production and instead commissions content from across the UK and globally.
- The programme gained in popularity but the actors remained an ensemble group and negotiated contracts and fees together. In 2002 they were each paid $1 million an episode.
- Friends moved to E4, as it fitted into the channel's 16-34 target demographic. It was repeated extensively on both E4 and Channel 4 until 2011 where it moved to Comedy Central.
- The programme won a series of awards, for example in 2003 Jennifer Aniston won a Golden Globe for an Actress in a Comedy Series.
- In late 2018 Netflix paid the programme's owner, Warner Media, about $100m for the right to stream it for the next 12 months illustrating the enduring appeal of the programme. This was the first time Warner Brothers had licensed a programme and the first release for Netflix in the comedy genre.

The importance of different funding models:
The programme has continued to be financially important to the channels, bringing in essential revenue and appealing to advertisers.

The programme demonstrates high production values, it had a team of writers, a polished script and attracted advertisers. The success of the programme contributed to Channel 4's cross-funding model whereby it offset loss-making programmes with those that are more commercially viable allowing it to offer a diverse range of programmes, some of which are aimed at a niche audience.

Advertising has always been an important source of revenue in the US and UK. The cost of a 30 second advertisement in the US series of *Friends* was usually around $450 million. The final episode was extended to two hours and the cost of an advert was $2 million making it the most expensive commercial break for a non-sports programme.
(https://www.theguardian.com/media/2003/may/13/broadcasting.advertising)

The programme had continued global appeal and in 2016 was the most watched programme in India.

Merchandise continues to be an important source of revenue encompassing clothing, stationery, homeware, and a version of *Friends* Monopoly, all featuring the *Friends* recognisable font style and branding.

The function and types of regulation in the media:
Television companies and specific channels operate self-regulation through scheduling decisions, the watershed, and announcements at the beginning of programmes giving information about possible areas of offence.

Channel 4 is internally controlled by a Board and Executive Team who maintain standards within the remit of a Corporate Code of Conduct. Channel 4, like other commercial broadcasters, is externally regulated by Ofcom (excluding the advertisements) and as such must comply with the Ofcom Broadcasting Code.

Netflix is based in the Netherlands and therefore comes under the jurisdiction of Holland. Ofcom has no ability to regulate Netflix and there is obviously no watershed, parents are responsible for safeguarding their children using the platform.

PART 4: STARTING POINTS – Audiences

The ways in which media organisations target and categorise audiences:
Friends was broadcast in the UK initially on Channel 4, a commercial public service broadcaster. Channel 4 caters for more niche/specialised audiences than, for example the BBC. It is also known for introducing new programmes to audiences, including American imports.
Friends was scheduled on a Friday evening as part a zoning strategy, 'Friday Night Comedy', to appeal to fans of the genre.

Friends appealed to the existing Channel 4 16-25 audience. Its initial target audience was Generation X, but it is still popular with millennials. Those who saw the programme the first time around will watch it for the nostalgia element and their familiarity with the characters. It appeals to both men and women due to the range of characters featured.

However, the programme has wider appeal through its adherence to the typical conventions of sitcoms including verbal and visual humour and the focus on relationships.

In the 1990s *Friends* pulled in 25 to 30 million viewers a week. In 2018 research suggests that *Friends* was the second-most watched programme among American subscribers.

The role of media technologies in reaching and identifying audiences, and in audience consumption and usage:
Changes and developments in technology have had an impact upon the way in which audiences' access, consume and respond to media products. Audiences now have a range of content to choose from on a range of different platforms to suit their needs and lifestyle.

When *Friends* was first broadcast it had a weekly scheduling slot when all audiences would be watching together, creating a watercooler TV moment. The programme is now available through streaming sites and modern audiences can choose how they watch it, for example, binge watching.

There are several fan sites dedicated to the programme illustrating its cult appeal and longevity. YouTube has a range of 'Best Moments' compilation videos dedicated to specific series, characters or events, for example 'Best Thanksgiving Moments'.
Theoretical perspectives on audience: Blumler and Katz's Uses and Gratifications theory:
There are several theories that have been written to explore the relationship between audiences and media products. The Uses and Gratifications theory was one of the first to suggest that

audiences can be active consumers of the media and seek out and use different media products in order to satisfy a need and to experience different pleasures including:

Entertainment/escapism: the programme offers diversion for audiences through its verbal and visual humour and creation of a pseudo reality. The laughter soundtrack encourages the audience at home to engage with the comic elements of the programme and offers escapism. The carefree life of the twenty somethings all living in New York also offered escapism for the Generation X audience. The New York setting offered escapism for the UK audience. Young people watching this programme today are similarly entertained.

Social Interaction: the programme had a cult following both during and after its broadcast. At the time of broadcast the programme steadily increased in popularity through word-of-mouth marketing. Nowadays the modern audience discuss the programme through social media platforms.

Personal Identity: audiences then and now engage and identify with the characters, their lives and the situations they find themselves in. The modern audience may not have been born when *Friends* was first broadcast, but the focus on relationships and friendship is still relatable to a young contemporary audience.
Information: the programme provides and insight into popular culture of the 1990s.

PART 5: STARTING POINTS – Media Contexts

The specification requires learners to develop their understanding of relevant contexts of media and their influence on the product.

Historical context
Friends constructs a positive representation of The American Dream with young, happy people living independently with few cares. It illustrates the cultural values of the time it was made.
The product was shaped by the technology of the time both then and now. Originally there was no 'catch-up TV', there was the FOMO effect.
The characters became cultural icons, for example, a popular haircut was 'The Rachel'.
The programme conforms to the genre codes and conventions of sitcoms that have been established over time, such as locations, narrative, characters, familiarity.
Friends has been criticised for not accurately reflecting the society at the time, for example, in terms of cultural diversity. However, it also was the first US sitcom to show a same sex wedding in Season 2.

Social and Cultural contexts
How *Friends* reflects the society and culture of the time in which it was made through its representations, themes, values and messages. Consider:

How the representation of women in *Friends* reflects a feminist perspective through the representation of the independent women and both subverts and reinforces typical representations of gender.

How the situation of young people living together as pseudo family unit reflects the cultural shift from young people staying at home to them moving away and delaying settling down to marriage and children. The programme made growing up and being adult fun without the responsibilities attached to being older.