

## **Jewish television: prospects and possibilities**

This paper makes a case for seriously considering television as a catalyst for reinvigorating contemporary Jewish culture.

It argues that changes in media technology provide a unique opportunity for creating a Jewish presence on television—a presence which should reflect, express and enhance Jewish culture as an active and creative force within society.

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### **Introduction**

In this paper a case is made for the serious consideration of creating a Jewish presence on British television. It argues that the conjunction of a number of factors, both cultural and technological, provide a unique opportunity for British Jewry to grasp the nettle of the electronic age. This is a case for a secular presence on British television, a presence which should reflect, express and enhance Jewish culture as an active and creative force within British society.

In a world of increasing cultural fragmentation and at the same time increasing visibility of minority groups, British Jews have tended to remain in the shadows, visible, mostly, only to themselves and then through a fractured lens. Yet there appears among many Jews, across the generations, a desire to stop the rot, to reclaim a Jewish identity, to reinvent Jewishness for the contemporary world.

That world, for better or worse, is a world in which meanings and images are constructed and communicated through the media. All of us learn from the media. We depend on the media for our information about the world. We are pleased, enchanted, dismayed by media representations and performances. Yet in this intensely pervasive media space Jews have no substantial or significant presence and few opportunities, other than in print, to appear on their own terms, in their own ways: wisdom, worries, warts and all.

This media space is itself changing. The arrival of digital television will increase the number of channels available for broadcasting, and as a result access will become easier and the cost of access will fall. Alongside the continuing domination of our airwaves by the major global broadcasters places will be claimed by and found for minority interests, groups and cultures. This is the space that Jews should be occupying—to speak to themselves and to speak to others.

The emergence recently of a number of initiatives around the world which involve

the establishment of Jewish television indicates that the time is right. But it is important that the distinct character and quality of British Jewry should find a presence on television, for it has much to offer and certainly, always, much to say. The number of British Jews may be small, but they are a significant minority audience likely to be attractive to advertisers in what will increasingly become a niche broadcasting market. There is an immensely strong tradition of professionalism within British television upon which to draw and from whose standards Jewish television should not depart. There is equally an immensely strong tradition of Jewish culture, both within the Diaspora and in Israel.

Nevertheless, as ever, making the case is only the beginning. Many challenges need to be faced before such a project can be realized, not least the recognition by the Jewish community itself that television, and other electronic media, can actually be a force for good, unifying and not dividing, liberating and not constraining, and at once both popular and challenging. There are also financial, technical and organizational challenges. However, none of these need prove insuperable. This paper will attempt to lay out the ground.

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## **1/ Is Jewish television needed? Will it work?**

This paper is an argument for seriously considering Jewish television as a project to reinvigorate contemporary Anglo-Jewish culture. It has argued that it is now high time that Jews were participating in electronic media space, for doing so will enable them to confront, and engage with, their distinctiveness and their differences; to recover their heritage, redefine their identity and their social and cultural contribution and make their presence felt in the wider public sphere. Television is hardly going to do this on its own, but without television it is unlikely to be possible at all. The paper has also argued that the timing is good. Changes in media technology which are about to change media culture radically will provide an opportunity for minority programming of the kind proposed in a way that is currently almost inconceivable.

Grasping the nettle will bring rewards as well as dangers. The rewards are in the enhanced visibility and presence of Jewish culture in the wider society. Some would argue that therein also lies its danger. Such visibility needs to be open and generous in its public face. It also needs to be intensely professional. It needs to break free of the nervous parochialism that has clouded the history of Anglo-Jewish culture throughout the century.

Jewish television in Britain, if it is to succeed, will also need substantial commitment from Jewish media professionals as well as Jewish financiers. Given the active involvement of both, there is every possibility that Jewish television could make a deep, lasting and continuous impression on the lives of hundreds of thousands of Jews and others both in Britain and elsewhere.

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## Report author

**Roger Silverstone** was educated at Oxford and at the London School of Economics, where he obtained a PhD in Sociology. After a brief career in publishing and in television he became an academic. He is currently Professor of Media Studies and Director of the Graduate Research Centre in Culture and Communication at the University of Sussex. On 1 May 1998 he becomes the first Professor of Media and Communication at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

He is the author of *The Message of Television: Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Culture* (1981), *Framing Science: the Making of a BBC Documentary* (1985) and *Television and Everyday Life* (1994). He has written widely on television, museums and new media as well as being editor of a number of books on media technologies, suburbia and contemporary media research. He is one of the founding editors of a new international journal, *New Media and Society* and is currently writing a book, *Why Study the Media?*, which will be published in 1999.